



Vale Brother John May SJ

Br John May SJ AM, the long-serving winemaker at Sevenhill Cellars in the Clare Valley, died on 18 August 2021 aged 92.

John was the seventh Jesuit Winemaker at Sevenhill, a position he held from 1972 until his retirement from full-time work in 2003. The winery was established in 1851 by the Society of Jesus, a Catholic religious order commonly known as the Jesuits.

“John’s engagement across the cellars, St Aloysius’ Church, and in later years the on-site retreat centre characterised Br John’s deep commitment to an active, but contemplative and devotional, faith,” says Jesuit Provincial, Fr Quyen Vu SJ.

“John was so committed as a Jesuit to his mission in winemaking, which was unexpectedly entrusted to him.”

His ministry was very much as a Jesuit, offered to God with his Jesuit companions and friends. Fr Quyen recalls arriving at Sevenhill with a group of young Jesuits at the conclusion of a pilgrimage.

“We were all tired and weary, Br John was there to welcome us and took care of us like younger brothers in a family.”

Born in Sydney in 1929, as a child John was an altar boy at the Jesuit-run St Mary’s Church, North Sydney. After finishing school, he took up a carpentry and joinery apprenticeship. Following work in the building industry, he joined the Jesuits in 1949 at Loyola College, Watsonia in Victoria. He spent the next fourteen years there, performing various tasks and learning new skills through the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT).

His first assignment to the Jesuit winery at Sevenhill began in 1963, when he was sent to work with Br John Hanlon SJ. He was there for seven years.

It was Br Hanlon’s sudden death in 1972 that led to Br John’s recall to Sevenhill. After arriving, he asked that the interim appointment be made permanent to ensure the winery would survive. Returning to Sevenhill as Winemaker, without qualifications, he relied on his gifts with his hands and the fact that, in his words, he had spent his previous period there “with eyes and ears open.”

Over time he took courses in laboratory and cellar procedures at winemaking schools and was generously assisted by the local community of winemakers in the Clare Valley as he honed the craft.

Br John led the expansion of the Sevenhill vineyards, using the best clones of varieties suitable to the Clare Valley, and production grew from 80 tonnes to 500 tonnes per year by 1990.

Sevenhill's Sacramental wine distribution expanded across Australia to countries throughout South-East Asia. The range of table wines was developed, and a Cellar Door established, attracting up to 40,000 visitors per year.

Br John's passion for the Clare Valley was evident in his role as a founding member of the Clare Valley Vine Improvement Society and inaugural President of the Clare Valley Tourist Association, as well as memberships of a range of industry and community groups, including the Clare Valley Winemakers Association.

"This service to winemaking and the local community has been widely recognised," says Jonathan O'Neill, the General Manager of Sevenhill Cellars.

"Brother John was inducted into the Clare Valley Hall of Fame in 2014 and received a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 2016 and became a lifetime member of the Wine Makers Federation in 2004, which is now called Australian Grape and Wine."

After retiring from full time winemaking, Br John could be relied upon to prepare morning tea for the winery staff, to continue his care for St Aloysius' Church, which is on the Sevenhill site, and to offer tours to visitors around the property.

Fr Quyen notes Br John's vocation was, in his own words, "to offer my gifts and talents; my hands are to serve the Lord through the Society of Jesus".

"Along with his deep faith, it was his engagement with community that was most important to him," according to Mr O'Neill.

"What he would have been most proud of is what he did for the local community," he says. "John May was a great man, one of the truly great gentlemen of the Australian wine industry and community, who will be sorely missed."

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