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# Q&A: Alla Wolf-Tasker AM, hospitality pioneer, 70



Challenges: Alla Wolf-Tasker. Picture: Julian Kingma

By **JOHN LETHLEAN**, FOOD WRITER

THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN MAGAZINE

11:00PM OCTOBER 16, 2020 •  7 COMMENTS

**Your life's work has been Lake House in Daylesford, Victoria, and you were just about to open a new luxury lodge when Covid hit. But you're now also dealing with something far more serious...** It's something I wasn't prepared to talk about for quite some time – not wanting to be seen as a victim, I guess. I was diagnosed with stage IV ovarian cancer towards the end of November. Everything was shut down as a response to the pandemic in March and by then I was into my fourth and fifth cycles of intensive chemo.

**Have you had to step back from the business?** It's difficult to reconcile the recommended quiet, introspective “me time” of a cancer diagnosis while facing the possibility of losing our life's work... to be honest, I haven't had the time or the energy to dwell on the Big C beyond questioning the efficacy of treatments and attempting to mitigate their side effects. I've been told I'm not the ideal cancer patient.

**Social distancing means you've been able to seat less than 20 per cent of capacity in your award-winning restaurant. Is the bottom line the hardest part?**

The human factor far outweighs anything else. Maintaining morale among a team who are more like extended family; dealing with the effects of isolation among young people; speaking to people with broken dreams, facing a very uncertain future; late-night telephone conversations with isolated people needing to download but with nowhere to go... I seem to have become a Mother Wolf to many in our industry.

**What does the big picture look like?** I've always been immersed in helping tourism and the hospitality industry, particularly in the regions. I've been involved in think-tanks, councils and boards. And now we're a whisper away from losing it all, in an industry that was already frail. It's the walk-out by career professionals, chefs and owner-operators that we'll really come to lament. So many are saying it's just too hard.

**You've been a champion of small growers/producers since opening Lake House in 1984 – long before “local food” was a thing. How are they faring?** One of the few silver linings is that it's been wonderful to see a return to so much home

cooking during iso. Farmers' markets are booming, and a lot of people are developing their own vegetable gardens. Seed suppliers are actually reporting a shortage. We have a real opportunity to be nailing this now.

**Your husband Allan, a painter, has his art; what have you turned to for therapy?** I've been practising anger management, and I'm learning that anger is not an inherently bad thing. It's storing it up that's not recommended. I've developed a forest yell; I do no harm other than scare a few birds. The kangaroos – the big greys, anyhow – stand still and watch. It's a great release. It also gives me a laugh later: an elderly bald lady (if it's a wig-off day) in the middle of the forest, yelling...

**Has your vision of retirement changed?** I'm not sure I ever thought about retirement in any true sense of the word; I have no sense of being done yet. I'd always hoped for a long, productive and relevant life with plenty of mental agility, slowing down a little physically, of course. I'd sort of hoped for an eventual *Godfather*-type exit – you know, falling over in a very prolific tomato patch, with a grandchild or two nearby. I think that's probably still the option I'd go for, if I'm given it.

## [John Lethlean](#)

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John Lethlean is Australia's only national restaurant critic. A journalist by trade, food and wine lover by disposition, John has written full-time about restaurants, food and the people involved with this exci... [Read more](#)

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