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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](#)

Food Writer
Melbourne

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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