



Spike Dessert.
Picture: Sean McGee



Vale, spirit of the Kimberley

■ Peter de Kruijff

Father, farmer and hooch-maker Raymond Bernard Dessert III died last week, aged 73.

To all who crossed the Kununurra farming pioneer's path, he was known as Spike — a nickname given to him at birth by two uncles who thought he looked like the bulldog in Tom and Jerry.

The call of the west and dreams of frostless plains brought the young Californian across the ocean to Western Australia and the Ord Valley in 1972.

His family, who ran a multi-national seed company with land stretching from the Canadian Border to Mexico, sent the 28-year-old Down Under at a time when political uncertainty for corporate farming and irrigation loomed over the US industry.

"They'd heard about the clean air and the clean soil, the lack of pests and the good water, but none of them wanted to come all the way out here," Spike told *The West Australian* in 1997.

"So they looked at me and said: 'It's a good idea, you're the youngest, you're going!'"

The top dam opened at Lake Argyle the same year Spike toured the East Kimberley.

The third-generation seed grower saw potential and came back the next year to open the Australian branch of Dessert Seeds, establishing a foothold and a family with wife Kae on the developing farm lands.

After moving back and forth between the two countries, Spike set up his own venture, R.B. Dessert Seed Co in 1986, about a year after the family's US company was sold.

In the early 1990s, a time when sugar was booming in the valley, Spike was trying to see if the region's first failed industry could be revitalised.

Nearly 30 years after the cotton collapse in the Ord, because of pest problems, Spike became the first farmer in Australia to grow genetically modified cotton in a field outside of a glasshouse.

In 1995, Spike's innovative mind fostered a seed of an idea which would grow into one of Kununurra's biggest man-made tourism drawcards.

Taking inspiration from the fields of sugar cane and the readily avail-

able molasses by-product coming out of Kununurra's processing mill, he figured WA's first rum would hit the spot.

He engineered and built a small pot still and in 1999 bottled the first saleable batches of what would be labelled Ord River Rum made in the Kimberley with Kimberley products and rainwater.

The rum would be aged in oak barrels for two years and had a taste which would delight locals and world experts alike. Around the distillery grew the cellar door tourism experience under the banner The Hoochery.

The flagship Ord River Rum is still the crowning jewel and was included on the menu of the revered two-Michelin star Denmark restaurant NOMA.

It is delicious in a cake, perfect neat or with ice.

Spike drew the logo on the bottles himself, depicting an Ord crocodile from above, which was a nice bit of marketing as he could ask punters to try a "croc on the rocks" with him.

It wasn't an easy feat to make The

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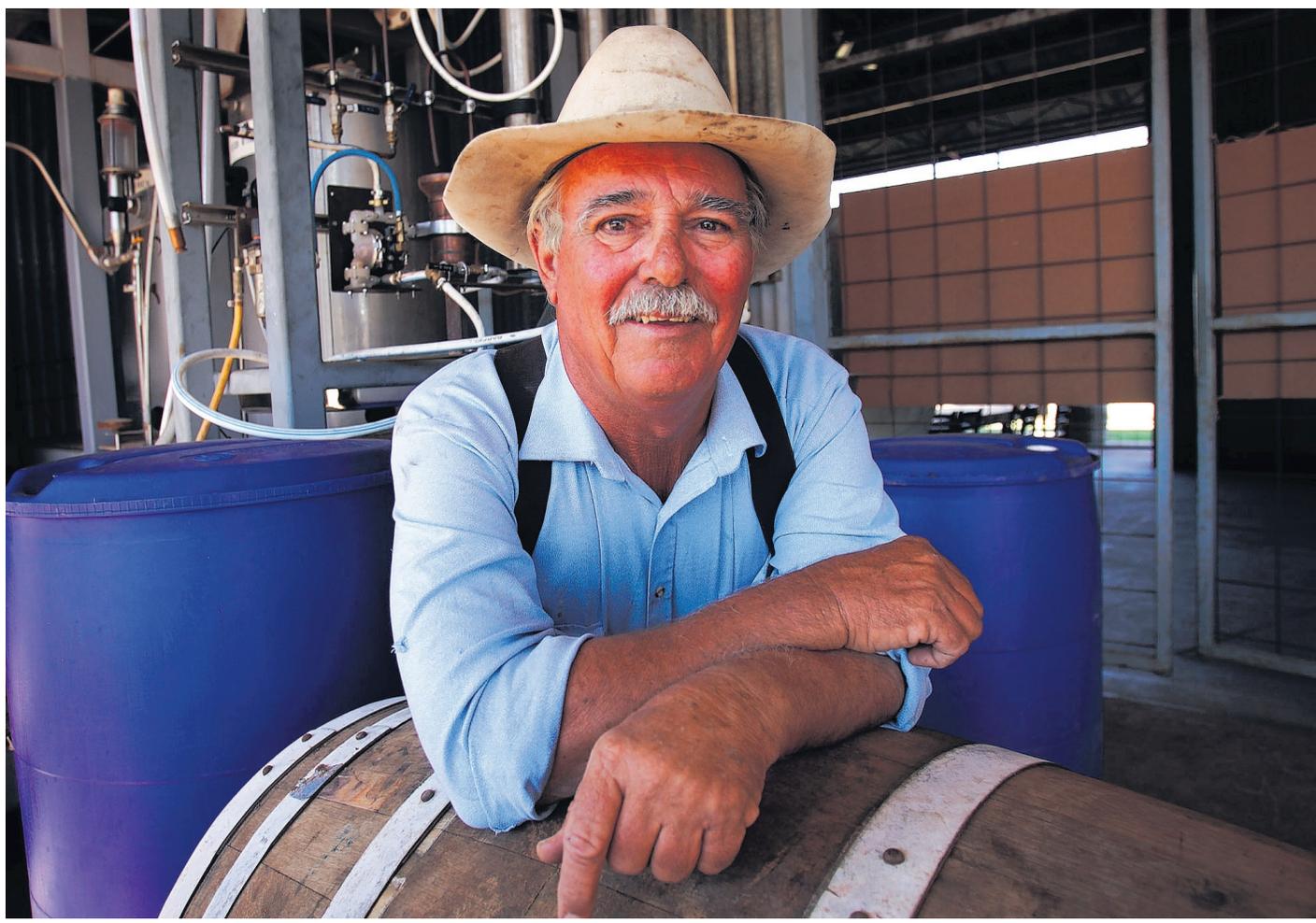
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"But as many as received Him,
to them He gave power to
become the sons of God,
even to them that
believe on His name."
(John 1:12)

Gill Lefmann, retired minister from the Salvation Army.



Raymond Bernard Dessert III, otherwise known as Spike, has died aged 73. Picture: Trevor Collens

Icon leaves lasting legacy

◀ FROM PAGE 1

Hoochery WA's longest, legal, continually running distillery with some of the most prestigious international spirit award ribbons.

Government also provided plenty of red tape for Spike to cut through with his sugar machete. As he repeated on many occasions "let people have a go, it is OK to go broke". Railing against regulation was as big of a sport for Spike as lawn bowls.

His friend and fellow farmer Robert Boshammer told *The Echo* his mate wasn't a fan of regulation getting in the way of people trying to do something. "When the Ord Irrigation Scheme was being privatised, sometimes it was hard to get different government departments to listen to us and be practical," he said.

"One meeting got heated, Spike stood up, pulled off his old hat, this stetson (actually Resistol) thing, and stamped on it before walking out."

Mr Boshammer, who met Spike around 1985, said the greatest thing about him was how he would have a go at anything and everything.

"He had a lot of failures there, but a lot of successes too, the failures didn't stop him from keeping going," he said.

The two became firm friends flipping burgers in the Rotary

Club of Kununurra, which Spike was a charter member of.

Decades of farming experience meant many of his peers and upstart producers would seek his advice.

Current Shire president and irrigator David Menzel, who arrived in the valley in 1992, said what he loved most about Spike was his character and commitment to the community as a councillor, SES volunteer and Rotarian.

"The time he always made available to me as a young farmer, I could find out what I could and then go to Spike to fill in the gaps, even though he had better things to do," he said.

"The wisdom of all his life experiences, that's what we'll really miss."

Spike's effort to diversify his business to make a crust also helped strengthened tourism in Kununurra.

Spike refused to buy anything online and was a firm believer in shopping locally instead of seeing others being undercut.

Every day for 35 years he would hop in the car at 2pm and drive around town running errands and chatting to

shop owners from the post office to the pie shop until about 4pm.

His Hoochery was recognised this year as Australia's best distillery alongside fledgling WA outfit Old Young's.

Spike stood up for his industries, whether it be on agriculture boards or as a founding member of the Australian Distillers Association which now has more than 100 members.

Fellow founder and current ADA vice-president Cameron Syme first met Spike as a consultant for the Kimberley Land Council when he began his own whiskey distillery.

About 14 years after his first sit-down with Spike, Mr Syme's business Limeburners operates three distilleries in southern WA and has earned its own industry accolades.

"He was one of the first two people in the country to apply for a distilling licence," he said.

"To me he was ahead of the curve. An inspirational guy doing things from the grass roots up.

"We're looking to name the trophy for Australian Cham-

pion Rum as the Spike Dessert Memorial Rum trophy. As an industry we want to honour him as well."

Spike put his hand up for community organisations and, keeping in line with his wish for people to not bring flowers to his wake, his family have asked people make a donation to Kununurra Neighbourhood House in his name.

At the start of the year the labels on The Hoochery products were updated.

The crocodile seal was kept subtly, but replaced in prominence by a silhouette of Spike.

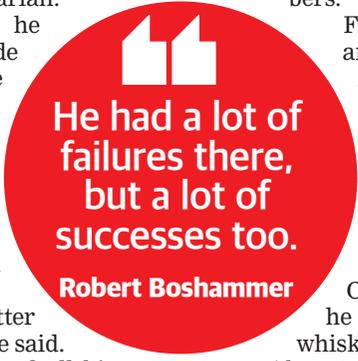
The bottles conjure an image of Spike wearing a blue or faded red shirt, a pair of suspenders, a Resistol or Akubra hat and those gold rimmed glasses behind which a pair of eyes twinkled with another grand idea.

The greatest testament, however, to Spike and the life and legacy he built with Kae is how their values and approach to life meant their family stayed close to home.

Their four children still live and work in the region and many of Spike and Kae's grandchildren still call the Kimberley home.

A memorial was held yesterday at the place Spike made the spirit from the Kimberley.

In how he lived, Spike was the spirit of the Kimberley.



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THURSDAY
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KUNUNURRA	36 24
Possible Thunderstorm	70%
HALLS CREEK	35 25
Thunderstorms	80%
WYNDHAM	36 26
Thunderstorms	60%

FRIDAY
Sunrise 0451 Sunset 1755

KUNUNURRA	37 24
Clearing Shower	30%
HALLS CREEK	36 24
Possible Thunderstorm	30%
WYNDHAM	36 26
Thunderstorms	20%

SATURDAY
Sunrise 0452 Sunset 1756

KUNUNURRA	37 24
Late Shower	40%
HALLS CREEK	39 25
Possible Thunderstorm	30%
WYNDHAM	37 26
Possible Thunderstorm	50%

SUNDAY
Sunrise 0452 Sunset 1756

KUNUNURRA	37 25
Shower Increasing	60%
HALLS CREEK	39 25
Possible Thunderstorm	40%
WYNDHAM	37 26
Possible Thunderstorm	70%

MONDAY
Sunrise 0453 Sunset 1757

KUNUNURRA	37 24
Thunderstorms	90%
HALLS CREEK	39 25
Possible Thunderstorm	70%
WYNDHAM	36 26
Possible Thunderstorm	90%