

LABOUR OF LOVE *'If you wanted to buy one, I'd sell, but I just like making them'*

NEWS



After switching from furniture to stringed instruments, Tom Ferguson hasn't looked back, producing more than 100 violins, among other instruments.

Photo: Jason South

Engineer with affinity for wood turns his hand, and lathe, to classic violins

BY LAWRENCE MONEY

Ask 83-year-old Tom Ferguson about the splice he puts in the neck of his violins and he will pick one up to show you. "If a musician drops a violin, the neck often comes off," he says, pointing to the "weak spot". But not with his design.

Crafted over 90 hours apiece in the small brick shed behind his Brighton home, his violins are almost as tough as the navigational instruments he used to make in England.

"Working as engineers," he recalls, "we used to apply the British standards test – weld pull, push, shove and throw. What I did with the violins at the start was drop the neck on the ground

to see how it reacted. From that, I asked: Why this shape? All these questions went through my head."

Ferguson was raised in Liverpool, started work in a mill at the age of 14, and migrated to Adelaide in the 1970s to work as a production engineer. Although he worked with metal, he had a flair with wood, making furniture of all sorts for his family.

His modest suburban house abounds with superbly crafted pieces, many bearing a yellow rosette with the initials of his late wife, Emma.

"She wanted a table so I made one," he says. "And the chairs. Eventually everyone in the family had chairs and tables and cupboards so I decided to make a violin."

Now Ferguson, a widower for the past 14 years, gets out of bed at 5.30am to read the paper, have breakfast and start work on the next violin, cello or viola. He is often out there until 6pm, working with a lathe he made himself.

He has produced more than 100 violins, 15 cellos and 15 violas.

"It keeps me sane – or insane, I'm not sure which. If you wanted to buy one, I'd sell, but I just like making them."

Ferguson's trade is self-taught and so rare, most people would not recognise its name – he is a luthier, a maker of stringed instruments.

He has made copies of many of the great violin models of the past – a 1716 Stradivari Messiah violin, a Giovanni Battista viola, a

1712 Davidoff cello – and scores of his own designs, all with subtle differences from the norm.

Ferguson says his violins' slimmer shape produces a louder sound. Violin master Richard Tognetti played one and liked it so much, he borrowed it for 12 months. During that time the violin appeared in an advertisement with Tognetti and Barry Humphries.

Ferguson makes his instruments using Australian wood that's up to 1500 years old. His mate Laurie owns a lumber yard and drops in every week.

"He brings me more wood than you'd ever believe," says Ferguson, who mixes the different timbers in the same instrument. He used stringy gum, cedar and alpine ash to make

one cello – the harder wood for the back, the softer for the front.

When he went into the Peter Mac for cancer surgery, the anaesthetist learnt of his skills and ordered a half-size cello for his granddaughter. Then Ferguson met a surgeon named Miklos Pohl who played violin. They became friends. Pohl introduced him to the Royal Melbourne Hospital's Corpus Medicorum orchestra, made up of medics who play music.

"Micky founded the Australian Doctor's Orchestra," says Ferguson, who doesn't play any of his instruments himself but used to play the piano.

"My mother thought I'd be a concert pianist," he says, adding he has no time to play now. "At my age, time is of the essence."

Critics accuse minister as food-rating website junked

BY AMY CORDEROY

The federal government has been accused of bowing to the junk-food industry after a new food-rating website was pulled down, allegedly at the behest of a senior minister.

The long-awaited "health star rating" website, on which food manufacturers were to label their products with easy-to-understand nutritional information, was launched at about midday on Wednesday only to be pulled down by 8 o'clock that night.

Fairfax Media has been given evidence that Assistant Health Minister Fiona Nash and her chief of staff, Alastair Furnival, personally intervened to have the site pulled down – despite it being approved through a Council of Australian Governments ministerial council.

After inquiries directed to Ms Nash on Thursday, a Health Department spokeswoman said the site was only a "draft" made live in "an inadvertent error" – a statement that has been rejected by two sitting state health ministers, as well as others familiar with the project.

Public health groups are furious that the site was taken down after two years in development and are questioning whether undue industry influence is to blame.

Public Health Association of Australia head Michael Moore said it was "inconceivable" that the website was only a draft.

"I looked at it very carefully, and there was nothing that struck me about it as being a draft," he said.

He said the system had been developed in conjunction with the food industry, which had rejected an earlier push for food "traffic lights". When it became clear that the Coalition would gain power, some began to back away from the project.

Mr Furnival last year acted as a spokesman for Kraft/Cadbury. He is also the former chairman of Australian Public Affairs, which is listed on the lobbyists register as representing the Australian Beverages Council and Mondelez Australia, which owns the Kraft peanut butter, Cadbury and Oreo brands, among others.

Asked on Friday about the website's removal, a spokeswoman said it would have been "confusing" for it to remain when the stars were not on products yet, and that the ministerial council had agreed she should conduct a broader cost-benefit analysis of it.

"A website at this stage would be premature," she said.

Choice campaigns manager Angela Cartwright said she feared there might have been a change of feeling at a federal level, despite support from the states in charge of the program.

"It became clear midway through last year that some in the food industry had objected to it, and that the Australian Food and Grocery Council was running a background campaign objecting to it," she said.

"We see this renewed push for assessment as very political and not based on need, given that it's a voluntary system."

Labor health spokeswoman Catherine King said: "We have got Minister [Peter] Dutton say-

ing parents need to take some responsibility for what they feed their children. Well, in order for parents to do that, they need more information about the foods they're buying.

"I would be concerned, given the extensive work that has been done on the health star rating system ... if there were any other influences involved."

A spokesman for the Australian Food and Grocery Council said the costs of a rating system should be analysed in line with best-practice guidelines so companies could make informed decisions.

"The full impact of the proposed scheme has not yet been fully assessed and we support the Assistant Health Minister Senator Nash's decision to implement a broader cost-benefit analysis," he said.

Spokesmen for the health ministers of both South Australia and Tasmania confirmed the website was approved and ready to be launched.

Tasmanian Health Minister Michelle O'Byrne said she had written to Ms Nash seeking clarification. "My understanding was that the health star rating website was to be available to the public."

Fairfax Media has obtained an email sent by the secretary for the Front-of-Pack Labelling project announcing the website's launch. The email says the site has been approved by the committee in charge of it.

"[The site] is now live and available for public viewing," it says. "Further information and resources will be uploaded ... as they become available."

Melbourne's unluckiest tram stop

BY DENHAM SADLER

Ascot Vale may well lay claim to having Melbourne's unluckiest tram stop.

At least 14 cars have crashed into stop 30's guard rail and buffer on route 57 outside Flemington Racecourse on Epsom Road since 2008.

Rail enthusiast and nearby resident Marcus Wong has documented seven of these accidents since 2012 on his blog.

"Every so often I'm heading to work past the stop and I'd noticed a piece of the fence missing or a car still stuck there after crashing into it," he said.

Of Melbourne's 1763 tram stops, about a third have a



Crash zone: The Ascot Vale stop.

"safety zone", a fenced area in the middle of the road.

Yarra Trams spokesman Simon Murphy conceded that the number of repairs at the stop was "higher than average".

He said there wasn't space to install a concrete "prow" to

divert traffic, because of the volumes of traffic going in and out of the racecourse.

"This stop is outside the entrance to Flemington Racecourse, presenting a challenge in terms of the space requirements available to install infrastructure," he said.

Passengers generally wait at the other end of the stop, and Yarra Trams had no reports of passenger injuries, Mr Murphy said. Yarra Trams is considering moving the stop.

Mr Wong believed the accidents were caused by confusing lanes and inattention. "The road starts off as one lane, goes to two lanes, then back to one lane. Drivers have to swerve ... to avoid the stop," he said.

Communities join to remember Black Saturday

BY DENHAM SADLER

For the Kinglake community, the fifth anniversary of Black Saturday was about looking to the future, while still acknowledging the past.

A minute's silence was observed at 7pm by families, friends and visitors during a remembrance service at Kinglake Memorial Reserve.

Kathy Stewart, who helped organise the service, said it achieved what she wanted it to.

Earlier in the day, Mrs Stewart said she had heard from more people planning to attend the

ceremony than she was expecting. "It's reaffirming to see a sense of community and what we can achieve together," she said.

A photographic exhibition called *Things of Fire and Ash: Remembering Black Saturday* displayed images of young people from the area with a special object chosen by them, along with their personal story.

The Kinglake Historical Society also put on a photographic display showing the area's bushfire history. These displays helped show locals how far they've come since the events of 2009, Mrs Stewart said. "When



The Black Saturday memorial.

people see it visually set out how we've progressed, it's a lot easier to see that we are improving."

Kinglake Ranges Foundation executive officer Sarah Matthews said the day was about "reflecting and remembering".

"It's about acknowledging the journey that everyone has been through. Everyone is still in a different stage of recovery," she said.

The community was trying to look at the positives in the lead-up to the anniversary, Mrs Stewart said.

Memorial services were held across the areas devastated by the 2009 fires.

A remembrance event was held at the Eltham Library Community Gallery, while concept

plans for the St Andrews Bushfire Memorial were available to be viewed at St Andrews Hall.

Whittlesea Community Gardens and Kinglake West Uniting Church also held events.

A public commemorative service will be held at Treetops at Melbourne Museum in Carlton on Sunday from 2pm.

The services are a chance to reflect on the events of Black Saturday, and to begin thinking about the future, Mrs Stewart said.

"We don't pretend it didn't happen, and there's still a long way to go. But the general feeling is a positive one."

HOSPITAL

Burnt officer recovers

A Melbourne policewoman who suffered severe burns in a massive gas explosion last month is walking, talking and undergoing physiotherapy on her "long road to recovery", her parents say.

Constable Emma Quick, 28, and two of her colleagues were engulfed in flames while responding to calls that a man was threatening suicide at a Middle Park unit on January 4.

Three police officers suffered burns during the blast caused by an exploding gas bottle, and were critically injured.

Two firefighters were also injured in the incident.

Constable Quick's parents said her surgeons had not given a time frame for her recovery yet, but she was "up and walking" and "determined to get back to the job that she loves".

CRIME

Heist at air force bank

Police are hunting for a gun-wielding, balaclava-wearing woman who held up one of the country's largest military bases on Friday afternoon.

The Royal Australian Air Force base at Richmond, on the outskirts of Sydney, was placed in lockdown on Friday evening after the woman robbed a bank within the heavily fortified base.

Richmond is the hub of logistics support for the Australian Defence Force and houses several of the force's biggest units, including C-130 Hercules aircraft and an intelligence squadron.

The woman, dressed in black, entered the bank just after 3.30pm and threatened a female employee. She then fled the scene with an undisclosed sum of cash.

RACHEL OLDING

FIRE

Threat to townships

An out-of-control grassfire threatened townships in the state's south-east on Friday night.

The Country Fire Authority issued an emergency warning for Hemes Oak, Newborough, Yalloum and Yalloum Heights about 5pm Friday, and advised residents to take shelter indoors.

The Newborough warning was downgraded to "watch and act" just after 7pm.

A State Control Centre spokeswoman said 24 trucks and eight aircraft were fighting the out-of-control blaze.

She said trucks had also been sent to Yalloum Power Station "as a precautionary measure, to be ready in case needed".

The grassfire broke-out at 3.20pm Friday, she said. CHRIS HINGSTON

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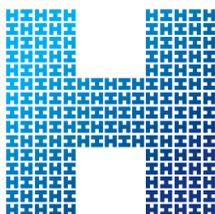
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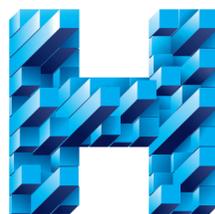
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