# Shaun Micallef *a* sobering thought

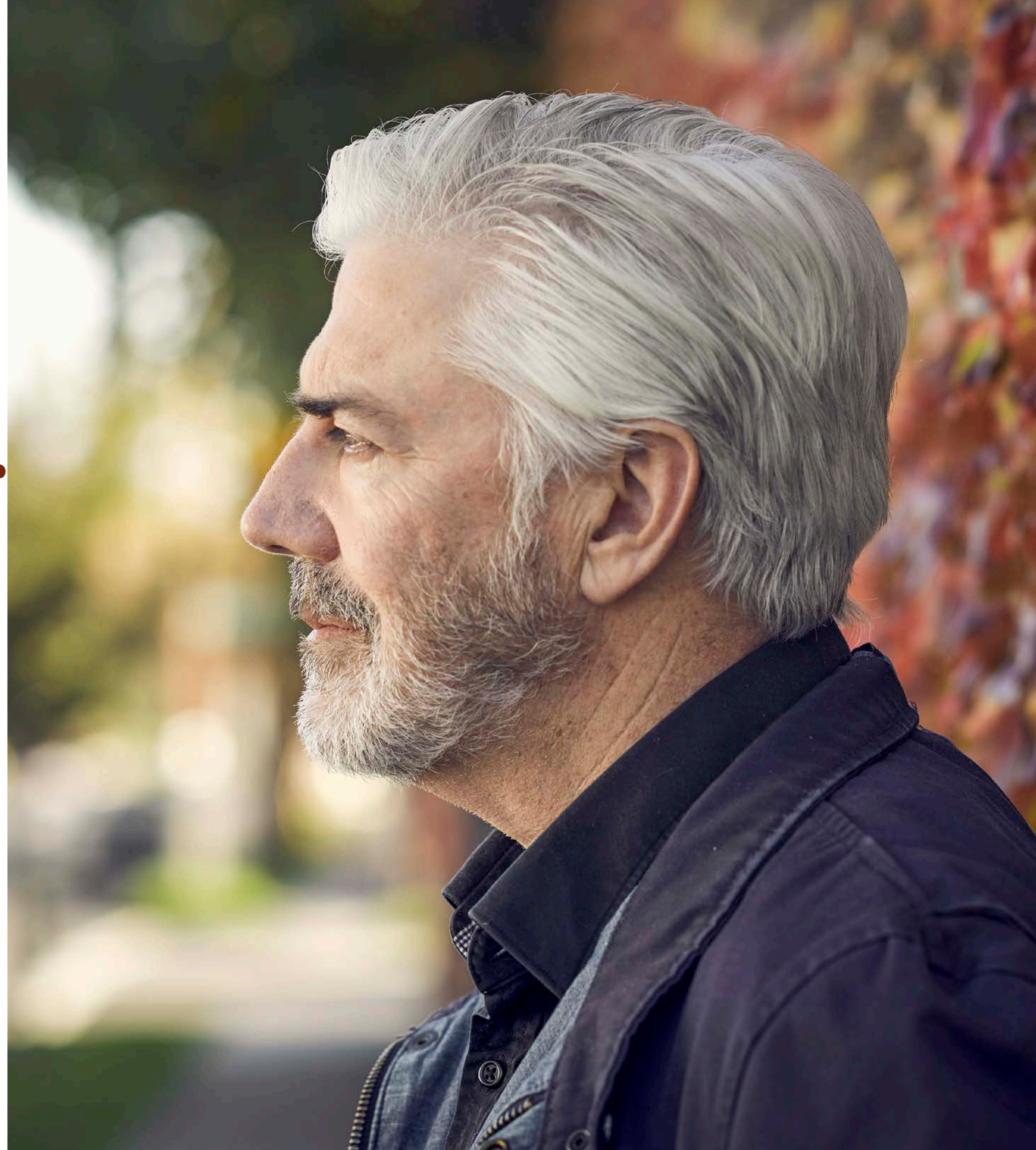
Shaun Micallef is shining a light on the dark side of drinking. Now, for the first time, he tells **Susan Horsburgh** about the tragedy that inspired him.

Shaun Micallef has had a chequered history with alcohol. The TV comedian and father of three hasn't touched a drop for more than three decades – ever since he stood up his then-fiancée, and she (and her mother) subsequently found him asleep outside an Adelaide bar.

The one-time two-pot-screamer says he just "wasn't very good at it", and perhaps it's genetic: his great-great-grandfather hit the headlines a century ago after accidentally setting himself alight on the way home from the pub.

So when his sons – Joseph, 22, Gabriel, 20, and Elias, 17 – started to edge towards legal drinking age, Shaun felt an increasing need to understand Australia's seeming obsession with alcohol. It's what he has publicly credited as inspiration for his new ABC documentary series, *Shaun Micallef's On the Sauce*.

But the true impetus for the passion project, he now exclusively reveals to *The Weekly*, is even more personal. Just on a year ago, Shaun's sister-in-law,



Julianne – the older sister of his wife, Leandra – died of organ failure at the age of 57, after struggling with alcoholism for two decades. And for her heartbroken family, she left a devastating trail of what-ifs in her wake.

"The stated reason for doing the doco, and it was true, was because I didn't have any advice for the boys, but I think the petrol for the entire thing was probably [Julianne's passing]," says Shaun. "It was always in the back of my head during the making of it."

Julianne died just a few months before filming began and the 58-year-old funnyman says he couldn't share Julianne's story on camera without breaking down. His interviews constantly called to mind her addiction and made him wonder if things could have turned out differently had Julianne heard these stories firsthand.

"You can get all the advice in the world from people who are experts, but there's something different about the weight of the advice coming from somebody who's experienced the same thing," reflects Shaun sadly.

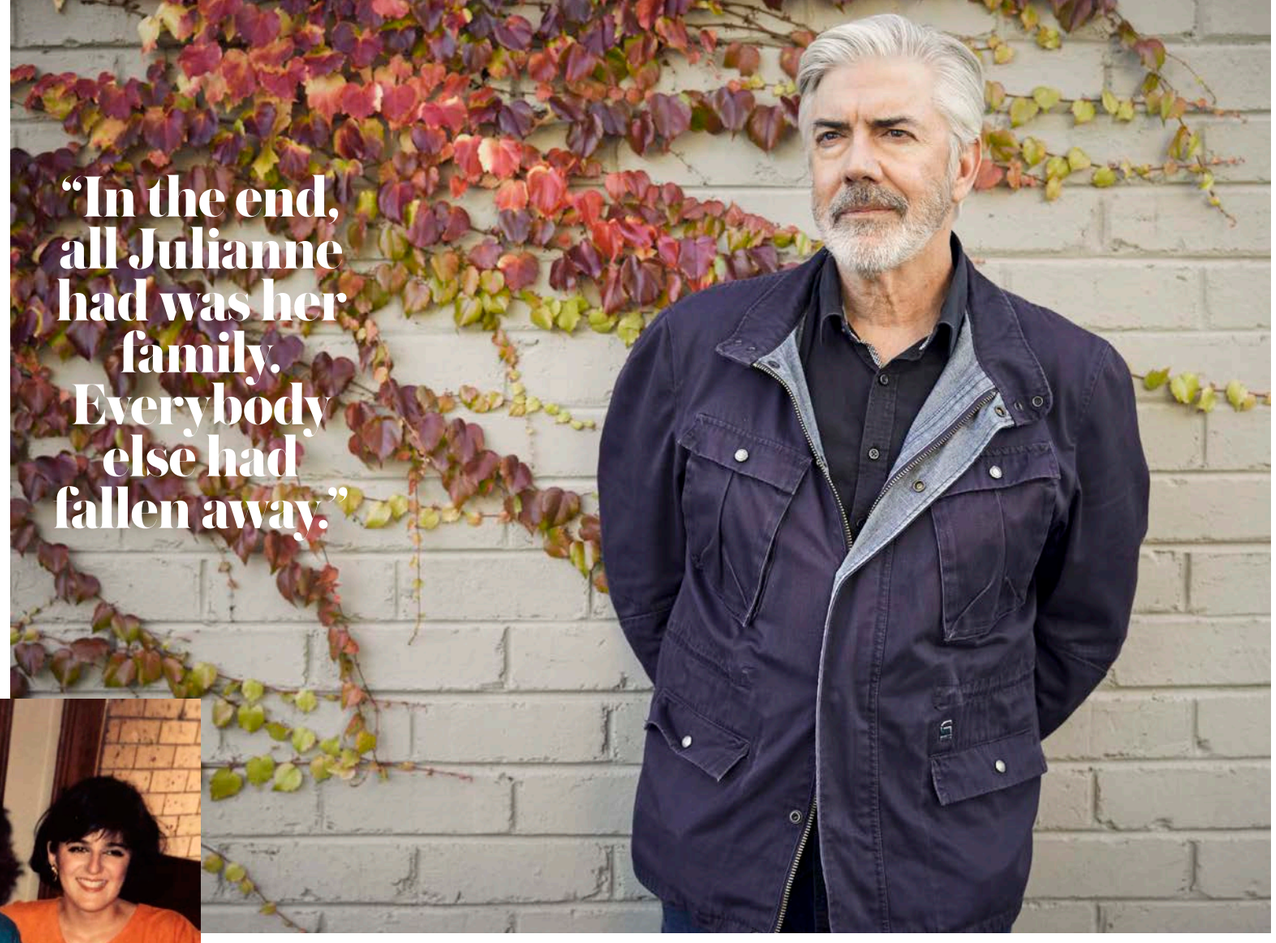
"In the end, all Julianne had was her family. All she had was Leandra to talk to and everybody else had understandably fallen away. I think that's the sad situation for a lot of people: they're just in their house by themselves and it's so easy to get the alcohol delivered now. You don't even have to put clothes on and go to the bottle shop to buy it. There's no human interaction at all."

When Shaun meets *The Weekly* for our interview in June, coronavirus restrictions are starting to ease in Melbourne, but it's still deserted in the ABC's Southbank headquarters. Sitting upstairs in the airy glass building, dressed down in jeans and riding boots, Shaun folds his 182cm frame into a chair positioned the requisite one-and-a-half metres away.

The *Mad as Hell* host is something of an enigma in showbiz circles. He rarely talks publicly about his private life – and his wife Leandra has never been interviewed for his projects – but the Micallefs have decided to make an exception this time in honour of Julianne and in the hope that her story might shift the dial for others facing a losing battle with the bottle.

Before Julianne died, it was even thought she'd take part in Shaun's documentary. "She was well aware of what had happened to her life and her health as a result of drinking," explains Shaun. "It was a realisation that she felt would help others."

For Julianne, alcohol wasn't always a problem. The way Leandra tells it, it sounds like drinking was, at least initially, a natural extension of her warm, gregarious personality. "She was wild," she tells *The Weekly* of her beloved older sister. "She had fabulous outfits, beat-up flash cars and a colourful, full life. She loved music and dancing and cooking … When I look back at photos, she nearly always had a drink in her hand."



**"In the end, all Julianne had was her family. Everybody else had fallen away."**







Clockwise from top: A young Shaun, with sisters Julianne and Leandra, celebrating with champagne; Julianne was always the life of the party; Leandra, Julianne and their brother Andrew as children.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BEN KING, OPPOSITE PAGE. PHOTOGRAPHS SUPPLIED AND USED WITH PERMISSION. PREVIOUS PAGE: BEN KING.

Growing up together in the 1970s, three years between them, Julianne and Leandra were close. The life of the party, Julianne had no shortage of friends, but loved to take her little sister out with her, to bars and the beach. "She was a feisty, protective older sister," recalls Leandra. "She would pursue anyone she thought was picking on me and do what you did in those days – bash them up. She had really poor impulse control … I was crazy about her."

Julianne went on to become a financial administrator, holding down impressive senior roles, but later traced the start of her alcohol dependence back to a job that involved almost-nightly drinks with clients. By the end of it, she was getting drunk every day and couldn't stop. "Over the next 20 years," says Leandra, "she lost relationships, clear thinking, reliability, health, cleanliness, decency and ultimately her life."

According to Shaun, Julianne was a "functioning alcoholic", which is not uncommon. "Your job is often the last thing to go," he says. "The shape of that convinces you that everything else is okay. Your job ends up defining your public face, and your private face no one else sees."

Over the years, worried loved ones reached out, but Julianne resented the intrusions. "As her life deteriorated, she fiercely refused to be helped, and became secretive then reclusive," says Leandra. "It was frustrating and terrifying to watch her destroy herself. When I could pin her down to meeting up, she was often drunk. Her communications were often vile. I can't lie – I would often feel really angry and disgusted … She could be truly awful."

Julianne didn't have children and was single when she died; romantic relationships couldn't survive her alcoholism, and no family member, it seems, was left unscathed. "She broke my mother's heart," says Leandra. "Our mother was passionately devoted to her, had tried to save her over and over, so her pain was and still is just awful. Our father adored her and gave her a safe place to be without judgment right to the end. She alienated my brother and over 20 years of really poor episodes she alienated everyone else who loved her."

Leandra tried hard to be there for her sister, to show her abiding love and support, without accepting Julianne's abuse. Eventually Julianne only made contact when she needed something. When her addiction did finally jeopardise her career, however, Julianne allowed her sister to help her get detox treatments. She stayed sober for a few months and Leandra felt, at least for a little while, like she had her sister back.

"All the foulness of addiction peeled away and there she was," remembers Leandra. "Decent and fun and loving. For the first time in a decade, she said, 'So sis, how are you?' … I cried when she next called me alcohol-affected. She said she drank again because being sober was 'so f**king boring'."

Mid last year, Julianne retired from the public service at 57 and was about to move into a flat Shaun and Leandra bought for her in the Adelaide beachside suburb of Glenelg. Things looked to be on the up: Julianne had plans to volunteer at the Hutt St Centre for people experiencing homelessness, and announced she wanted to have a serious go at rehab. Then, two days after Julianne retired, Leandra couldn't reach her on the phone.

"On a cold, clear winter night in Adelaide, I went to her and found her deceased, alone in her flat, in a carpet of empty wine bottles and filth," says Leandra. "I howled convulsively like an animal, at a volume I didn't know was possible."

The Micallefs have talked to their sons a lot about drinking over the years, and Julianne's alcoholism has always coloured those discussions. Last year, though, the boys were

confronted with the full horror of their aunt's addiction when they flew to Adelaide after her death and tackled the terrible scene in her flat. "They wanted to protect me from the trauma of cleaning up the sad misery she was living in," says Leandra. "So they had a very sudden and intimate education in the life of an alcoholic."

One year on, the grief is still raw. "Months after she died, leaving such a lonely gap, I realised that while I thought she had come to rely on me, it was actually me who needed her," says Leandra. "I miss her so."

Julianne's story seems especially relevant now, with dangerous drinking on the rise among middle-aged Australian women. For *On the Sauce*, Shaun met with a suburban book club of child-weary, wine-loving mums in their 40s. "There was a sense," says Shaun, "that [alcohol is] a reward or consolation or compensation, or maybe a combination of all three. But I think if you're looking at the clock, there's a problem brewing."

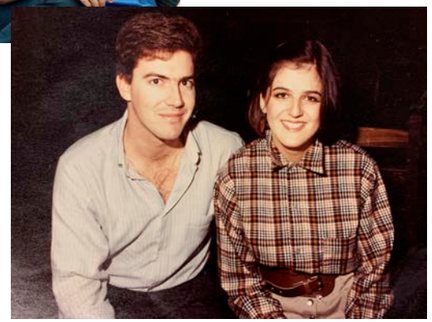
Australians are generally drinking less these days, but older women may be the hidden faces of alcoholism. Earlier this year, an Edith Cowan University study found that women in their 50s and 60s are more likely than younger ones to drink to a risky degree – and most of them think it's perfectly fine as long as they don't get visibly messy. They also viewed alcohol as an acceptable crutch, and drinking to cope seems to be a predictor of alcoholism.

For Shaun, the most shocking takeaway from his documentary was that alcohol is a class-one carcinogen, linked to breast, bowel, oesophageal and liver cancers. "I was surprised that I didn't know that," he says. "Shouldn't that be on the bottle?"

Apparently not in Australia, where alcohol abuse, he says, is too often trivialised. To make his three-part documentary, Shaun traversed the country to explore our drinking culture – from the Birchip B&S Ball and a suburban Sydney 18th birthday party, to a Sunshine Coast retirement village and remote Western Australian town. With his sports jacket and scholarly manner, Shaun gives the impression of a bemused outsider, casting a dispassionate eye over his compatriots' drinking habits, trying to unpack the seemingly irresistible pull of the bottle.







Clockwise from right: Shaun says the success of his 31-year marriage to Leandra is due to love; the young couple first met while studying law at the University of Adelaide; sons Elias, Joseph and Gabriel.

"I genuinely didn't get why people go for alcohol – for me it tastes kind of weird," he says. "Why do it? I found that people hadn't really thought about it … People just accept that that's what you do."

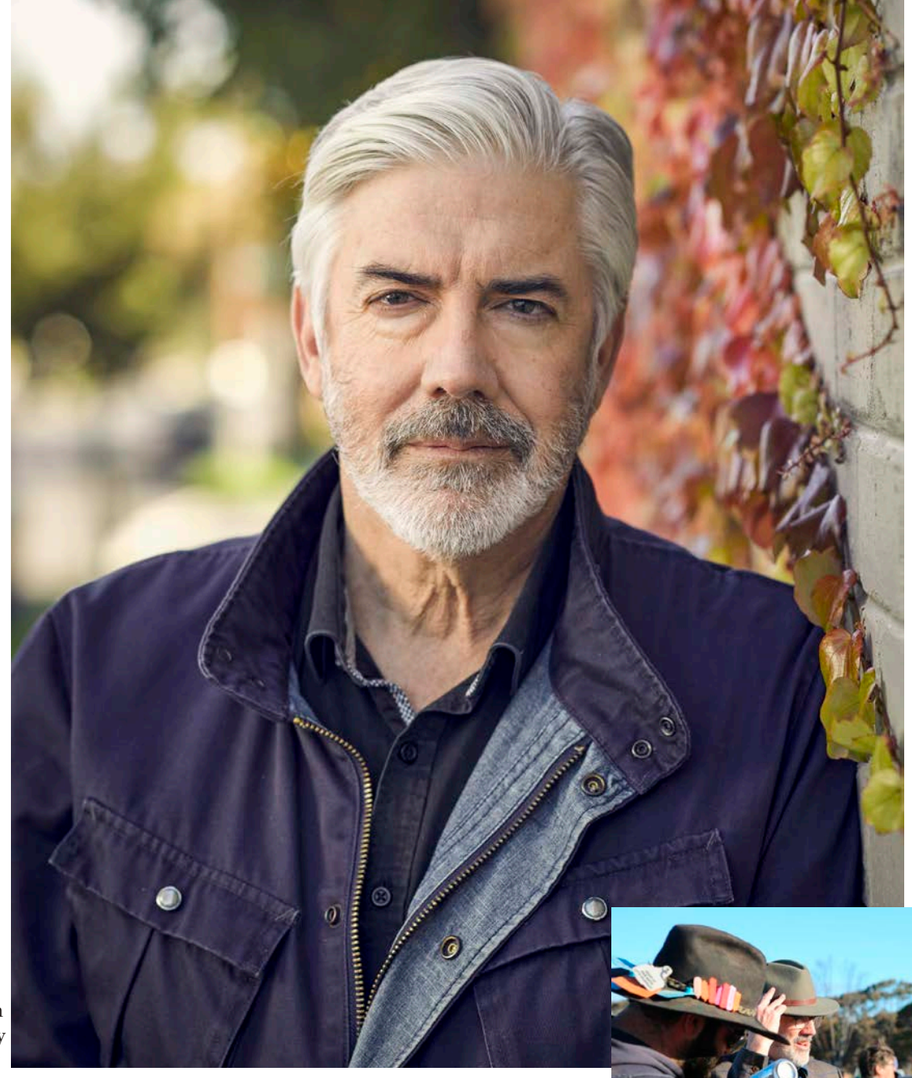
And if the drinking gets out of hand, it's just the Australian way to laugh it off. Indeed, even Shaun can see the absurdity in the demise of his great-great-grandfather, who sent himself up in flames in 1920, coming home from the Snowtown Hotel. Sloshed and slack-jawed, the 76-year-old passed out in his horse-drawn cart, his lit pipe falling from his lips. "There he is, reasonably flammable with a bit of spilled alcohol on him, and he just nods off," says Shaun. "That was it for him."

The local paper dubbed it a "grim tragedy", but it has since turned into a funny chapter of family folklore – and the opener for *On the Sauce*. "Do we drink too much?" Shaun asks viewers. "What about the grey area between the first glass and self-immolation?"

Despite his family history, Shaun didn't grow up around alcohol. His parents didn't drink and the only time he witnessed anyone drunk was on TV and in the movies. On his 18th birthday, though, he had his obligatory first glass, and it proved a handy way to loosen up and talk to girls.

In fact, he can thank alcohol (at least partly) for his 31-year marriage; Shaun met Leandra in his shy early 20s, when he was drunk and celebrating the end of his law exams. (Leandra was studying law, too, three years below him at the University of Adelaide.)

Back then, Shaun drank to get drunk and usually ended up dozing off. "I'd just go off and find a bit of grass somewhere," he says. "I'd go to a party and wake up at home in bed: what happened? I started losing memory." The turning point came when he was 25, working as a solicitor. He was supposed to meet Leandra, his then-fiancée, to buy a couch and, when he didn't turn up, she tracked him down to his law firm's bar (it was the '80s). "I was found [asleep] by Leandra and her mother and her mother's poodle," he says, laughing. "It was the poodle that did it."



In hindsight, it was the humiliation that scared him straight – and the fear of losing the love of his life: "I'd managed to fool this woman into thinking she was in love with me, so I didn't want to blow it." When asked why he and Leandra work so well, Shaun simply replies, "Love" – and says he'd like to explore the subject in another documentary. "That would be a beautiful thing to do," he says.

When he was a dissatisfied lawyer yearning to perform, it was Leandra who circled a date on the calendar and gave him a deadline to either give comedy a proper crack or stop complaining. He then moved to Melbourne in the mid-'90s and burst onto the TV comedy scene in *Full Frontal*. Says Shaun, "I never thought about doing this for a living until she said, 'It's clearly what you want to do – why don't you just do it?' No, she's great. She's a keeper."



In *On The Sauce*, Shaun attends a B&S Ball with a young farmer, and realises there are some positives to social drinking.

It's notable that Leandra (a handbag retailer) drinks, as do their older sons: law student Joe and Gabe, who studies film and television direction. Eli is yet to reach drinking age and still at school. "As they did explain to me, 'It's ridiculous for you to give us advice because you don't know what you're talking about,'" says Shaun. "That's absolutely fair. I was never dogmatic about it; I just said it wasn't right for me."

Drinking made a bit more sense to him, oddly enough, after a trip to the Birchip B&S Ball. Donning black tie and tagging along with a young farmer called "Cock", Shaun witnessed the alcohol-addled joys of the B&S, including ball goers skolling beer from muddy cowboy boots. He may have bailed at 10pm, but he realised alcohol could bring people together, and perhaps ease the loneliness of living in remote areas. "I did see the shared experience," he says. "I understand what good can come of it."

In the interests of science, Shaun even got drunk for the doco, for the first time in 32 years. Downing vodka from a clinical glass beaker, under the supervision of a researcher, he appears garrulous, if uncomfortable, then philosophical. "It doesn't feel like I'm at my best," he tells the camera. "If we have only one job in life, which is to make sense of the world, then rendering yourself insensible is kind of contrary to that objective."

If he sounds like a judgy killjoy, Shaun says that was never his intention. He simply wants to equip Australians with more information about alcohol – and if his documentary inspires family discussions, then his job is done.

"One thing I didn't want to do was be admonishing and go in already having a judgment in place," he says. "I genuinely went in going, 'I don't know. Tell me why drinking is a good idea.' What was interesting was that not a lot of people had thought about it. That's what I'd like the audience to do." **AWW**

Shaun Micallef's On The Sauce *premieres Tuesday 21 July at 8:30pm on ABC TV and iView.*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BEN KING, OTHER PHOTOGRAPHS SUPPLIED AND USED WITH PERMISSION.