

Jancis Robinson.com –28th May 2015

Kumeu River Chardonnays triumph



We have long been fans of Kumeu River's New Zealand Chardonnays, as witness [Kumeu River – an Auckland pearl](#) written in 2013 by Julia, republished today as part of our Throwback Thursday series. Nick and I visited this family-run enterprise on our first trip to New Zealand in 1988 and Nick remembers Maté, then head of the Brajkovich family and recently retired as chairman of the NZ Wine Institute, assuring us that if we decided to emigrate he would smooth our path. Maté was only 66 when he died in 1992 having transformed the business from its modest beginnings as San Marino Vineyards. It was renamed Kumeu River in 1986, four years after Maté's eldest son Michael (the tallest one) joined the company on graduating from Roseworthy in Australia with a

degree in oenology. But it was Michael's travels in Bordeaux and Burgundy, and his viticulturist brother Milan's along much the same route, that were really instrumental in refining Kumeu River's wines.

Cellarmaster Nigel Tibbits has been at Kumeu River since it was called San Marino and he was 16. Michael and Milan's sister Marijana and youngest brother Paul (the middle brother in our picture) are responsible for sales and marketing, with their mother Melba still decidedly hands-on and a firm favourite in certain markets. A pattern of continuity and family pride can be seen here and the wines seem to go from strength to strength, while continuing to be available at relatively modest prices. Wilson Daniels have long been the US importers while Hugh Phillips at Boxford Wine has been the principal UK importer for years, supplemented by fine-wine trader Farr Vintners' unparalleled enthusiasm for Kumeu River over the last 26 years.

It was Farr that organised a revealing blind tasting comparison of Kumeu River Chardonnays with some top white burgundies (including those from Comtes Lafon and Domaine Leflaive) to coincide with Paul Brajkovich's recent visit to London. See the pretty staggering results below and a fuller description of this blind tasting in [Top Kiwi v white burgundy](#). We tasted in four flights: 2012s of their Estate bottling and four village burgundies; 2010s of their Coddington Vineyard and Chassagne premiers crus; 2009s of their Maté's Vineyard and Meursaults, including two Perrières; and 2007s of their Hunting Hill Vineyard and Puligny premiers crus. These were thoughtful pairings. The **Coddington** vineyard, owned by filmmaker Tim Coddington (*Chronicles of Narnia*)

and his wife Angela, produces the earliest-maturing of Kumeu River's three single-vineyard Chardonnays. On a north-facing suntrap based on clay, it was planted in 1994 and its produce was blended into the Estate Chardonnay until 2006. It was seeing how a small experimental lot of the 2000 matured in bottle that convinced the Brajkoviches that it was a worthy candidate for its own bottling. At the other end of the scale in approachability is the **Hunting Hill** vineyard close to the winery on the outskirts of Kumeu in the encroaching Auckland suburbs. The vineyard was originally planted with several different varieties but in 2000 was replanted with the single clone 15 Chardonnay. Although it too faces north, and therefore the equator, it is particularly exposed to cool maritime breezes and produces Kumeu River's steeliest Chardonnays. Paul claimed that they sometimes have an almost Riesling-like character, so marked is the acidity. The most concentrated Chardonnays tend to come from **Maté's Vineyard**, also close to the winery in Kumeu. This, the oldest vineyard, was planted with the old Mendoza clone in 1990 (two years after our visit) and has some leafroll virus, so flowering tends to result in berries of very varied sizes with the smaller berries producing particularly ripe, concentrated flavours. I loved the 2012 tasted in the various verticals we essayed after the blind tasting, and the 2013 was impressive in the horizontal tasting of all Kumeu River Chardonnays in that vintage, but I found the 2009 still introvert – not a bad quality in a Chardonnay, and one shared by the Comtes Lafon Meursault 2009 in fact.

I subsequently tasted the current, 2013 vintage of a special bottling that Kumeu River reserve for The Wine Society in the UK, labelled The Society's Exhibition New Zealand

Chardonnay. It's based on clone 95 Chardonnay grown close to Maté's vineyard, barrel-fermented and aged in mainly old oak. It is a steal at £13.50 a bottle and exhibits the trademark crystalline quality of all Kumeu River Chardonnays .

Thanks to the cooling influence of the Pacific to the east and the Tasman Sea to the west, acidity in Kumeu River's Chardonnays is naturally so high that all the wines have to go through complete conversion of malic to lactic acid to reduce the total acidity and bring the wines into balance. This so-called malolactic fermentation can result in some rather unsubtle flavours if done carelessly but as Michael Brajkovich explains, and Julia alludes to in her article, 'these days none show overt butteriness because we keep the wine for an extended (11 months) period on yeast lees, which does actively reduce the levels of diacetyl'. These wines really should be on the radar of any value-conscious white burgundy lover.

The 45 wines below are in the flights and order tasted, supplemented by the Wine Society's own bottling tasted later.

FLIGHT ONE – 2012 VILLAGE BURGUNDIES

- **Dom Patrick Javillier, Clos du Cromin 2012 Meursault**
Pale straw. Sweet and heady with a hint of oak on the nose. Less tense than the rest – just a bit ho hum. Workmanlike. Bone dry with lots of acidity and not much follow-through. A bit dilute.

Drink 2015-2018

15.5

- **Étienne Sauzet 2012 Puligny-Montrachet**

Strongly reductive nose. Lots of wet stones, struck matches and energy in this wine.

Drink 2016-2020

16.5

- **Kumeu River, Estate Chardonnay 2012 Kumeu**
Extremely well-mannered, discreet nose with nothing out of place. Lots of crystalline precision and refinement. Excellent balance. Good presence in the mouth. Exciting and tense. Readier than the others.

Drink 2014-2019

17

- **Dom Leflaive 2012 Puligny-Montrachet**
The palest of the flight. Notably savoury nose. Though less intensely aromatic than the rest. Though it is slightly duller and hotter on the finish than number 3, the Kumeu River.

Drink 2014-2018

16

- **Dom Michel Niellon 2012 Chassagne-Montrachet**
TCA ruined.

Drink ??

10

FLIGHT TWO - 2010 CHASSAGNES

- **Dom Michel Niellon, Les Champs Gains Premier Cru 2010 Chassagne-Montrachet**

Pale gold. Quite broad and evolved on the nose. Some hint of butterscotch and acidity but not quite knitted together. Quite chewy on the finish. Chunky rather than refined. Lightly chalky notes.

Drink 2014-2019

16.5

- **Dom Jean-Noël Gagnard, La Boudriotte Premier Cru 2010 Chassagne-Montrachet**

One of the palest. Low key with wet-stone notes and then a hint of sherry. Refined and polished – with some similarities with the Kumeu Estate 2012. Remarkably similar in fact – as though real care had gone into this. Lip smacking. Quite long.

Drink 2014-2019

17

- **Dom Fontaine-Gagnard, Les Vergers Premier Cru 2010 Chassagne-Montrachet**

Definite sweetness – hint of botrytis? - on the nose. Good balance and something a little like damp hemp. I'd say this was definite burgundy funk but attractively so. Real lift to this wine that finishes bone dry. Not quite ready. A laster.

Drink 2016-2022

17

- **Kumeu River, Coddington Chardonnay 2010 Kumeu**

Limpid pale greenish gold. Hint of reduction on the nose. Already quite open and friendly with a slight floral note. Really racy and interesting. Makes you want to drink it this minute. Long. Just the ticket!

Drink 2014-2019

17.5

- **Marquis de Laguiche Joseph Drouhin, Morgeot Premier Cru 2010 Chassagne-Montrachet**

Pale gold. Not very expressive on the nose though there is a touch of botrytis – just a hint of sweaty socks. Then sweetness. Not very refined. The building blocks are there but there is no edifice yet.

Drink 2017-2020

16

FLIGHT THREE - 2009 MEURSAULTS

- **Dom des Comtes Lafon 2009 Meursault**

Very pale straw. Nervy nose. Very fine and tight. Absolutely not like the supposed archetype of Meursault. Introvert and tense. Not that long but pretty impressive. Doesn't taste like a rich 2009 burgundy... Lots of wet stones on the end. Just a tad austere.

Drink 2015-2020

17

- **Kumeu River, Maté's Vineyard Chardonnay 2009 Kumeu**

Mid greenish straw. Nervy, savoury nose and pretty stolid on the palate. Lots of palate presence and a bit of sweet heat on the end so surely burgundy? Good balance and with weight but slightly sour on the end. Not quite as refined as some of the other Kumeu River Chardonnays.

Drink 2013-2019

16.5

- **Dom Bouchard Père et Fils, Perrières Premier Cru 2009 Meursault**

Pale, almost colourless. Merest hint of reduction. Some sweetness on the front palate. Hint of cheesiness and grip. Light burgundy funk. Then heat. Sweet at the beginning and end – not particularly fine. Hot finish.

Drink 2013-2018

16.5

- **Vincent Girardin, Les Narvaux 2009 Meursault**

Darker than most. Oaky funk on the nose. Rather severe acidity – was this acidified? It does not sit well integrated in the whole. The opposite of sophisticated. Old-fashioned. Oxidised in the glass.

Drink 2014-2017

14.5

- **Dom Joseph Drouhin, Perrières Premier Cru 2009 Meursault**
Fresh, floral nose. Compact, very integrated nose doing valiant battle with the ripeness. Rich and sleek and very satisfying for current drinking. Solid stuff with a little more chew than the Lafon Meursault.

Drink 2013-2018

17

FLIGHT FOUR - 2007 PULIGNYS

- **Jean-Philippe Fichet, Les Referts Premier Cru 2007 Puligny-Montrachet**

Quite a lot of evolution on the nose. Very firm and fine with excellent structure and acidity. Like fermented lemon throat

lozenges. Long. Good balance and structure. But it rather fell apart in the glass...

Drink 2013-2019

17

- Étienne Sauzet, Hameau de Blagny Premier Cru 2007 Puligny-Montrachet

Greenish gold. A bit stinky and sulphidey on the nose. Mid palate weight and competent without being thrilling. Just a tad dirty. Hot end.

Drink 2012-2017

16

- Kumeu River, Hunting Hill Chardonnay 2007 Kumeu

Sweet, floral and developed on the nose. Tight and fresh. Really tense. Lots of virtue and density. Masses of acidity suggests this could be the Kumeu River in this blind tasting. Lots of tension. But at its peak.

Drink 2013-2018

17

- Dom Leflaive, Clavoillon Premier Cru 2007 Puligny-Montrachet

Oxidised nose. Loose and flabby. Past it.

Drink 2010-2013

12

- Joseph Drouhin, Les Pucelles Premier Cru 2007 Puligny-Montrachet

Darker gold than most. Very light nose. Ticks boxes rather than delights with an integrated whole. The fruit is fading while the acid imposes itself.

Drink 2011-2015

15

- **Dom Louis Carillon, Champ Canet Premier Cru 2007 Puligny-Montrachet**

Greenish gold. This is fresh and has a note of sweetness. But it is at the peak of its powers. A little sour on the finish. Not beautifully integrated.

Drink 2010-2015

16

KUMEU RIVER ESTATE VERTICAL

- **Kumeu River, Estate Chardonnay 2010 Kumeu**

Pale straw with a greenish tinge. Very tense and youthful. Lightly reductive. Great but very youthful vintage. Great sculpted precise fruit, not yet ready. Excellent value. No new oak but lots of second-year oak. **VGV**

Drink 2016-2020

17

- **Kumeu River, Estate Chardonnay 2006 Kumeu**

Everything went right. Sweet and round and fully evolved. Nothing to object to! But perhaps on the way down.

Drink 2010-2015

16.5

- **Kumeu River, Estate Chardonnay 1999 Kumeu**
They rejected 30% of the wine and threw it away. TCA bottle.

Drink ??

10

- **Kumeu River, Estate Chardonnay 1998 Kumeu**
They had a big TCA problem with their 1998s, had to recall 600 cases from the US. Insurers decided only 25% of wines were as they should be. Low yields and very rich wines.
Big and muscular. Old but not dead.

Drink 1994-2002

16

- **Kumeu River, Estate Chardonnay 1989 Kumeu**
This bottle has been in five different UK cellars. Excellent vintage a bit like 2010. Most of the fruit came from Hunting Hill, last vintage made with old Willmes press.
Very old but there is a bleat of life there...

Drink 1994-2000

15.5

CODDINGTON VERTICAL

- **Kumeu River, Coddington Chardonnay 2012 Kumeu**
Pale straw. Restrained and wet-stony on the nose. Cool and dense.
Very lively and sleek. Refined.

Drink 2015-2020

17.5

- **Kumeu River, Coddington Chardonnay 2011 Kumeu**

Pale greenish gold. A bit more open and slacker than the 2012.

Drink 2013-2017

16.5

- **Kumeu River, Coddington Chardonnay 2009 Kumeu**
Very tense and still in great shape. Really fine and complete and zappy. Long.

Drink 2013-2019

17.5

- **Kumeu River, Coddington Chardonnay 2006 Kumeu**
First vintage to be bottled as a single-vineyard wine.
Pure gold! Losing focus a bit but very competently made. Sweetness left. Impressive cleanliness and persistence.

Drink 2010-2015

16.5

HUNTING HILL VERTICAL

- **Kumeu River, Hunting Hill Chardonnay 2012 Kumeu**
Very pale. A bit sulphidey and 'hot' on the nose. But very cool and precise on the palate. Very embryonic. But dense.

Drink 2018-2024

17+

- **Kumeu River, Hunting Hill Chardonnay 2010 Kumeu**
Pale greenish gold. Hint of veginess on the nose. Round and appealing. Precise yet with lots of fruit and freshness. Complete and absolutely not a hint of obvious 'New World'iness.

Drink 2015-2022

17.5

- Kumeu River, Hunting Hill Chardonnay 2009 Kumeu
Pale straw. Very lively and well sculpted with lime notes.

Drink 2013-2019

17

- Kumeu River, Hunting Hill Chardonnay 2006 Kumeu
Vibrant and fresh with lots of lemon and lime. Chewy finish. Long.

Drink 2010-2016

17

MATÉ'S VINEYARD VERTICAL

- Kumeu River, Maté's Vineyard Chardonnay 2012 Kumeu
Very pale straw. Precise. More open than the Hunting Hill 2012.
Already very delicious. Great combo of fruit and crystalline
precision.

Drink 2016-2022

17.5

- Kumeu River, Maté's Vineyard Chardonnay 2010 Kumeu
Pale gold. A little loose, hot and less precise than the 2012.

Drink 2014-2018

17

- Kumeu River, Maté's Vineyard Chardonnay 2000 Kumeu
TCA cursed.

Drink ??

10

- **Kumeu River, Maté's Vineyard Chardonnay 1996 Kumeu**
Deep gold. Quite old and oxidised. Losing fruit. Sour. Hanging in there but there's a certain butterscotch aged character here.

Drink 2001-2012

15.5

- **Kumeu River, Maté's Vineyard Chardonnay 1994 Kumeu**
Orangey gold. Much livelier than the 1996. This has survived very well. The vines were only four years old.

Drink 2000-2014

16.5

2013s

- **Kumeu River, The Society's Exhibition New Zealand Chardonnay 2013 Auckland**
From Clone 95 in a vineyard next to the famous Maté's Vineyard specially made for The Wine Society in the UK. Fermented and aged in old oak. Smoky, very 'burgundian' nose. Ridiculous value. No hurry to drink this. Great freshness and texture. Strong lime streak.

13.5%

Drink 2015-2019

£13.50 The Wine Society

16.5

- **Kumeu River, Village Chardonnay 2013 Kumeu**

It was all barrel fermented in 2013.

Pale straw. Some peachiness. Great precision. Etched. Easy to like. Long.

Drink 2015-2018

16.5

- **Kumeu River, Estate Chardonnay 2013 Kumeu**

Always all barrel fermented.

Edgy and tight – for the future.

Drink 2016-2020

16.5+

- **Kumeu River, Coddington Chardonnay 2013 Kumeu**

Pale greenish straw. Peachy but not there yet. Seems just a tad simple but certainly opulent and fun. Rather hot finish.

Drink 2017-2023

16.5++

- **Kumeu River, Hunting Hill Chardonnay 2013 Kumeu**

Very pale. Wet stones! Edgy and precise. Cool passion-fruit flavours.

Drink 2017-2025

17.5

- **Kumeu River, Maté's Vineyard Chardonnay 2013 Kumeu**

Michael B has been working on the tannins in white wine and Paul says this is the small berries of the Mendoza clone asserting itself.

Just 300 cases made.

Pale straw. Almost metallic undertow – slightly bitter? I would have showed this before the Hunting Hill.

Drink 2017-2023

17

- **Kumeu River, Hunting Hill Pinot Noir 2013 Kumeu**
Debut vintage. Light crimson. Light, pretty and sweet. But pretty simple. A tad awkward.

Drink 2016-2020