

## Kumeu River 2023 vintage tasting; Jancis Robinson MW, September 2024



*As Kumeu River's 2023 Chardonnays hit the market this week, we report on two recent tastings in London of wines from this exceptional New Zealand family estate.*

Two separate tastings this month confirmed Kumeu River's extraordinary prowess with that less-fashionable-than-it-once-was varietal, Chardonnay.

On 5 September Paul Brajkovich, the family member responsible for sales and marketing since 1990, came to our flat to show me their latest releases, mainly Chardonnays from [the nightmare vintage of 2023](#). The quality of these wines proved that Paul's brother Michael, a Master of Wine who was one of the earliest winemakers to switch exclusively to screwcaps, is well capable of making great wines even in the most challenging vintage.

Then, less than a week later, Paul hosted the tasting shown above for nearly two dozen media and trade customers at Farr Vintners in London of some of their finest vintages of Chardonnay back as far as 2002. (The female quotient among tasters was noticeably higher than the average at Farr events such as the annual [Southwold tastings of bordeaux](#).) This retrospective tasting of a further 30 wines demonstrated the extraordinary consistency and ageability of Kumeu River Chardonnays. What was also clear was that, a bit like that other famed Chardonnay exponent Domaine Jean-François Coche-Dury, the quality gap between their most basic wine (Kumeu River Village Chardonnay and Bourgogne Aligoté respectively) is much narrower than the difference in price suggests.

The Village bottling, originally called Brajkovich, is now made up of fruit from both Kumeu in the suburbs of Auckland (some bought in) and their newish Rays Road vineyard in Hawke's Bay. It's a little less impressive, and certainly faster-maturing, than the stunning Estate bottling that is a blend of Kumeu fruit from vineyards managed, if not owned, by the Brajkovich family. What the second, retrospective tasting suggested was that the gap in quality and ageability between Estate bottlings and the single-vineyard bottlings from Kumeu – Coddington, Hunting Hill and Maté's – is so narrow that, as I pointed out in our [Members' forum](#), the Estate wine is the real

bargain in the portfolio. In 25 years it has risen in price from £110 a case to £180 a dozen in bond!

At the second, retrospective tasting someone asked a question I was dying to ask: ‘how come the Brajkoviches are the sole producers of such top-quality Chardonnay in the suburbs of Auckland?’ (I should point out that the Kumeu River Pinot Noirs have never reached the heights of the Chardonnays.)

He laughed, mentioned the fact that they have no shortage of sunshine but hardly ever see temperatures above 30 °C (86 °F), and of all the varieties they originally planted, Chardonnay was the one that always ripened satisfactorily. But he also suggested another crucial ingredient: ‘we stayed’. In the mid to late 20th century the northern and western suburbs of Auckland such as Kumeu and Henderson saw a host of immigrants from the Dalmatian coast of Croatia settle there, many of them growing and making wine as they did back home. Their produce was known locally as ‘Dally plonk’.

But gradually most of these families were tempted by the prices offered by developers for land so close to the city, and Paul and Michael’s father Maté (pronounced ‘mat-ay’) became the exception. He was thoroughly embraced by New Zealand society, and was awarded an OBE in 1985. When Nick and I visited Kumeu River in 1988, Maté encouraged us to emigrate and offered to organise NZ citizenship for us and our growing family. I don’t think it was a complete joke either.

For more on the history of this remarkable family, see the introduction to the retrospective tasting below.

## **2024 releases**

Everything was going splendidly until 27 January when Auckland (not the rest of the country) was hit by rains that were so heavy that an Elton John concert had to be cancelled. The city was hit by 260 mm (10 in) of rain in just 12 hours with considerable flash flooding. Water invaded the Kumeu River cellar and all that rain in such a short time, just four weeks from harvest, too close to allow spraying, left the vines prone to serious [downy mildew](#) attack.

Then came [Cyclone Gabrielle](#) that swept through New Zealand in February 2023 when I was there. Its effects in Auckland were chiefly winds so powerful that by the time the Brajkoviches came to pick the grapes, there were hardly any leaves left on the vines in some vineyards, but at least the winds dried the grapes, the healthy ones of which were picked earlier than usual.

At 180 m (590 ft) in elevation, the Rays Road vineyard in Hawke’s Bay is higher than the Kumeu vineyards so didn’t suffer any flooding, and had escaped the 27 January downpour, only to see unparalleled rainfall associated with the cyclone. As a result, Rays Road was also picked earlier than usual (alcohols of the 2023 Chardonnays are closer to 12.5% than the usual 13.5%) but the Brajkoviches see 2023 as the best vintage yet of their Rays Road Chardonnay. They bought the vineyard from Trinity Hill in 2017 and are in the process of transforming it from Sauvignon Blanc and other varieties to a Chardonnay-dominant site.

The fact that all Kumeu River Chardonnay is picked by hand (although in 2024 they bought a bit of fruit from a machine-harvested vineyard), albeit by a non-permanent crew, means that they were able to ensure that only the best fruit made it to the presses. I don’t see this vintage as being any less successful than usual – in fact it is arguably more in tune with today’s trend

towards lower alcohols. And the characters of each vineyard have certainly survived their ordeal.

Unusually, Michael decided to use no new oak at all on the 2023s, rather than the usual 20–25%, conscious that the fruit was a bit more delicate than usual. Quantities, of course, are much reduced.

As a result, prices are a bit higher than last year, although they haven't risen by as much as they did for the 2020 vintage which was regarded as the best-ever. Also for the 2020, the price of the Hunting Hill bottling, the subtlest, most burgundian of the three single-vineyard bottlings, was moved closer to that of Maté's vineyard whose exuberant wines were a fit with tastes 20 years ago or so, but perhaps are less so today.

The most accessible, ripest fruit, originally blended into the Estate bottling, comes from the leased Coddington vineyard in Kumeu, planted in 1994 by the then-owners the Coddingtons with Clone 15 Chardonnay almost at sea level on heavy clay. Paul described it as 'a sheltered north-facing suntrap'. It's now farmed by his viticulturist brother Milan. Relatively toasty barrels from Claude Gillet are typically chosen for Coddington's 11 months' ageing in barrel (all the single-vineyard wines are made similarly).

Hunting Hill vineyard, most recently planted in 2001 with Clone 15, is just above Maté's and faces north plus a bit towards the south-west where breezes reliably blow in from the ocean. It's therefore their coolest site – and the wines taste like it. Michael generally uses the François Frères barrels they buy for Hunting Hill. I wonder whether that's a factor in Hunting Hill's seeming the most burgundian of the Kumeu River Chardonnays.

Maté's is also on clay but is distinctly warmer and yields the most concentrated of the wines. This 34-year-old vineyard is always the last to be picked but the wine is usually a little lower in alcohol because ripening of its Mendoza-clone vines is delayed by [leafroll virus](#). Seguin Moreau is typically the cooper chosen for Maté's.

### **Kumeu River, Kumeu Village Chardonnay 2023 North Island**

*A little less than 20% Kumeu fruit and just over 80% from Hawke's Bay, the vineyard area covering a total of 14 hectares planted between 1989 and 2016. Hand-picked. Spontaneous fermentation. 100% malo. 84% fermented in French oak barriques at least five years old and 16% in tank.*

Fresh, citrus nose. Delicate and lively but slightly thin. Not long but fine for a refreshing, early-drinking Chardonnay. Drying finish. (JR) **16**

### **Kumeu River, Estate Chardonnay 2023 Kumeu**

*A blend of six different sites in Kumeu on clay with 60% owned by the Brajkoviches but all farmed by Milan B. All dry-farmed. Lots of different clones: 15, 6, 95, 54 and 1066. Hand-harvested. Whole-bunch pressed. Spontaneous fermentation in used French oak barrels (usually 20% new but not for this lighter vintage). 100% malo. 11 months' maturation in barrel. Distinctly lemon nose and mouth-filling. Good substance on the palate and definition. Great drink for the near term! Quite a step up from the Village. Athletic. I asked about ageability and was assured by Paul Brajkovich that the 2019 is looking very good now. Neat finish. (JR) **16.5 +***

### **Kumeu River, Rays Road Chardonnay 2023 Hawke's Bay**

*Hand-harvested in this Raukawa vineyard acquired in late 2017 from Trinity Hill as a joint project with Pascal Jolivet of the Loire. Whole-bunch pressed Spontaneous fermentation and 100% barrel-fermentation in used French oak. 100% malo and 11 months' maturation in barrel. The first Kumeu River vintage was 2018 but they reckon this is the best so far. Since acquiring the vineyard in 2018 they have been systematically replacing the Sauvignon Blanc vines, whose fruit is sold off, with Chardonnay. (Trinity Hill's clone 95 Chardonnay planted in early 2005 is reckoned a bit too austere for the Rays Road bottling so goes into the Village bottling.) They may eventually release single-block Chardonnays.*

Quite intense, bright fruit. Excellently aromatic. Almost pungent with a hint of putty. Lots of punchy fruit. Very complete with an appetising dry finish. (JR) **17**

#### **Kumeu River, Coddington Chardonnay 2023 Kumeu**

*This leased 1.8-ha vineyard, all clone 15, was planted 1994. There are another two years to run on the current lease but the Brajkoviches are hoping to renew it and are heartened by the fact that, although Kumeu is prime redevelopment area, there has been no change in planning permissions for the moment. Malan Brajkovich has been completely in charge of viticulture there since 2017 and reckons the vineyard has improved as a result. Paul B: 'the fruit looked the best ever before the deluge of 27 January. We were able to go in and hand-pick the clean stuff by hand.' Whole-bunch pressed. Spontaneous fermentation. 100% barrel-fermented in used French oak. 100% malo and 11 months' maturation in barrel. According to Paul B, the 2008, opened fairly recently in a search for a wine to add to their Crémant at disgorgement stage, was looking surprisingly good.*

Sturdy, dry, burgundian nose. Very textural start with very slight oiliness towards the end. Already very broachable with a tiny hint of lemon cough sweets on the finish. Will surely develop more creaminess and less of a grainy texture. Still some tannins evident. (JR) **17 +**

#### **Kumeu River, Hunting Hill Chardonnay 2023 Kumeu**

*The Brajkoviches' 3.37-ha vineyard was replanted in 2001 with clone 15. Made in the same way as Coddington and hand-picked over the Feb/Mar bridge. Whole-bunch pressed. Spontaneous fermentation. 100% barrel-fermented in used French oak. 100% malo and 11 months' maturation in barrel.*

Very 'settled', complex nose. Savoury finish and probably the most burgundian of these Chardonnays. Lemon syrup (not sweet) impression with a light blossomy top note. Real substance and build. It certainly doesn't seem skinny, despite the lower-than-usual alcohol and has a mineral chewiness on the finish. More elegant, and more citrus, than the Maté's. (JR) **17.5**

#### **Kumeu River, Maté's Vineyard Chardonnay 2023 Kumeu**

*A 2.49-ha vineyard planted in 1990 with Mendoza clone. There is some leafroll which delays ripening a little. Hand-picked. Whole-bunch pressed. Spontaneous fermentation. 100% barrel-fermented in used French oak. 100% malo and 11 months' maturation in barrel.*

Bigger in dimension than the others. Sweeter on the initial impression and then it tightens up. Less obviously rich than some previous vintages, presumably because of the wetter vintage. Still quite closed but with great density and a savoury finish. You can almost taste little particles in it! Should last extremely well. (JR) **17.5**

## The retrospective tasting

This tasting of the Estate bottling and all three single-vineyard bottlings from vintages 2020, 2019, 2014, 2013, 2010 and 2007 as well as some 2004s and 2002s was held to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the arrival of the Brajkoviches in Kumeu. They came, via a stint working in the Auckland suburb of Henderson, from the Kauri gum fields in the north of the North Island to which Maté's father Mick had emigrated in 1937. Maté's parents had saved up enough to buy the Kumeu property that was to become Kumeu River, a mixed farm that included an established vineyard, in 1944. (There will be a celebration of the anniversary in New Zealand on 27 November, Maté's birthday. And Paul, who looks after the US market, will be conducting a similar tasting there.)

Initially, Maté worked for and stayed, during the week, with the Soljans family, then making wine in Henderson before they, too, moved to Kumeu. He built the original Kumeu cellar in 1948 and started to make wine under the name San Marino Vineyards but didn't, according to Paul, start making enough money from it to consider leaving the Soljans job until the mid 1950s. In 1958 Maté married another Croatian descendant, Melba, who ran Kumeu River with immense charm from Maté's death in 1993 until a recent series of strokes.

According to Paul, 'when Dad ran out of his own wine, he'd buy some from the Soljans, put his own label on it and, much to the exasperation of the Soljans, sell it quite successfully for more than Soljans' own wine.' The family have always been popular.

The site of Maté's vineyard was part of the original purchase in 1944. It had all sorts of varieties planted on it including Palomino, Pinotage and various hybrids, as was common in New Zealand then. It was finally pulled out in the late 1970s, when the family started to focus on the well-known international *vinifera* varieties, and left fallow.

Fortunately for Maté and Melba, their eldest child Michael showed early interest in wine and studied at [Roseworthy](#) in Australia from 1979 to 1981, making a fateful trip to Europe in 1983 which inspired him to make Chardonnay the way it was made in Burgundy.

They changed the name of the enterprise to Kumeu River in 1986 just after making their first, 1985, vintage of Chardonnay, although according to Paul at the tasting, their first wine was, unexpectedly, a Merlot.

Maté had bought the Hunting Hill site in the 1960s and planted it originally in 1980 with red and white bordeaux varieties. But it was virused, hence the replanting in 2001.

The success of Kumeu River Chardonnay (the first vintage to be exported was 1987) encouraged them to replant the Maté's vineyard site with the best, Mendoza, clone in the late 1980s. Maté died in 1992 so didn't live to see the first, 1993, vintage.

Michael has been in situ in the Kumeu cellar for more than 40 years, and recently made a trip to his roots in Croatia where he was impressed by some of the wine producers he encountered there. Nigel Tibbits, 'Michael's right arm', has been in the cellar even longer, however, since 1974. His barrel-aligning skill has amazed generations of interns from all over the world according to Paul.

Milan Brajkovich trained initially as an engineer (which has occasionally proved useful in the winery) but eventually turned to viticulture and has been looking after Kumeu River's vineyards since 1986. Sister Marijana majored in accountancy, was director of sales at the Regent hotel in

Auckland, but has been with Kumeu River for 25 years and looks after the finances. Her son Scott, 29, is currently doing the vintage with Vincent Girardin and hoping to do the 2025 vintage at Kumeu River. He has no shortage of cousins.

As for the vintages we tasted, they had been hand-picked as some of the best.

- **2020** Everything went perfectly; it was nice and dry. Perhaps just a little more nerve than the 2019.
- **2019** Another first-class vintage.
- **2014** A bit like 2020 and 2019, generous and approachable young and has remained so. Paul was looking forward to seeing the wines with a bit more bottle age than he had previously encountered.
- **2013** Very good and very concentrated but tiny quantity because of spring frost in September 2012. They used to use helicopters against frost but now Hunting Hill has frost fans. In 2012 there was no inversion layer so ‘helicopters were useless because they were just stirring up cold air’. They made just 300 cases of Coddington and only about 400 cases of Hunting Hill and Maté’s – only about a third of the usual quantity. A very good summer concentrated both fruit and acid so the wines were rather tough to taste when young.
- **2010** Like 2013, 2010 was frosted so there was a very small crop, only about half the usual size and no new oak. Warm summer.
- **2007** A cooler vintage. Always fresher than average – ‘in the citrus rather than peachy spectrum’, according to Paul.
- **2004** Very good vintage with a bit of rain in early summer. The Estate wine included some Coddington and Hunters Hill then.
- **2002** More consistent than 2004, a bit like 2014. The Estate wines then included some Coddington and Hunters Hill.

2001 was the first year they went 100% commercially to screwcap. In the late 1990s they were seeing 20–30% cork taint. They opened the Maté’s 1999 they had bottled under cork with a view to recorking them and ended up throwing away 30% of the wine because of cork taint. It’s difficult to see the Brajkoviches returning to natural cork when they report a ‘seal failure rate’ as low as 1 in 3,000 with screwcaps, and seem pretty happy with the slow evolution under screwcap that this tasting demonstrated. (Incidentally, I’ve been invited to a blind tasting comparing screwcapped and cork-stoppered versions of the same wine later this year and much look forward to it.)

I tasted the 2017 and 2016 Maté’s in isolation and a hurry at the end of the retrospective tasting. Paul wondered aloud whether he should have included them in the formal tasting as he feels they are drinking especially well now.

The London retrospective was held at Farr Vintners’ HQ because Farr have bought (and sold) every vintage of Kumeu River since owner Stephen Browett first visited the winery, on honeymoon, in 1990 and tasted the 1989s in barrel. Browett, whose favourite vineyard is clearly Hunting Hill, likens it to Puligny-Montrachet while maintaining that Coddington is the Meursault

and Maté's the Corton-Charlemagne. Burgundians may bridle at these comparisons, but they can surely learn from Kumeu River pricing.

Farr is currently offering Coddington 2023 for £300 a dozen in bond, Hunting Hill for £380 and Maté's is £400. The Estate 2023 is just £180 and Ray's Road another bargain at £190.

We're lucky that Kumeu River export 70% of their production. Wilson Daniels and, after 35 years with Boxford Wine, New Generation are their US and UK importers respectively.

The 32 wines below are presented in the order they were tasted, except for the 2017 and 2016 that were tasted at the end of the tasting but have been insert in chronological vintage order.

#### [Kumeu River, Estate Chardonnay 2020 Kumeu](#)

Refined and lightly leesy nose. Quite perfumed. Citrus, lemon cream, not unlike one of the richer Pulignys. Chalky, long finish. Showing very well now! (JR) **17**

#### [Kumeu River, Coddington Chardonnay 2020 Kumeu](#)

Very pale. Actually quite a savoury nose, even though it's supposed to be the most flamboyant of the range. Passion fruit in abundance on the palate, however, and some lime-syrup character. Quite big. Not better or worse than the Estate blend, just different – a bit more opulent. (JR) **17**

#### [Kumeu River, Hunting Hill Chardonnay 2020 Kumeu](#)

Definitely more restrained on the nose than the Coddington. Then on the palate it's more savoury and more burgundian, with admirable precision. Still quite youthful. Very finely etched. Lemon flavours. A bit more depth than the Coddington. Long. (JR) **17.5**

#### [Kumeu River, Maté's Vineyard Chardonnay 2020 Kumeu](#)

*This is usually the lowest alcohol because it ripens late because of virus and is therefore picked late.*

Quite a deep straw colour. Spicy, exotic nose – is this the Mendoza character? Big and bold – even quite muscular. Then a dry, chalky finish. Really rolls around the palate after being tasted. Even a hint of that old-fashioned Chardonnay flavour, pineapple! Still slightly astringent. (JR) **17**

#### [Kumeu River, Estate Chardonnay 2019 Kumeu](#)

A little less tense than the 2020 Estate. Even verging on blowsy? The fruit and acidity are not quite as seamlessly integrated as on the 2020. If I hadn't got the 2020 to compare it with, I would probably have been even more enthusiastic! (JR) **16.5**

#### [Kumeu River, Coddington Chardonnay 2019 Kumeu](#)

Much more intense straw colour than the 2020 Coddington. Rich and racy on the nose. Very easy to like. Then real tension on the palate. Almost slightly spritz! Very impressive at this stage. A spine of lime with some passion fruit wrapped around it. (JR) **17.5**

#### [Kumeu River, Hunting Hill Chardonnay 2019 Kumeu](#)

Bright pale straw colour. Refined and creamy-textured. Very lively and burgundian – because of the preponderance François Frères barrels? Good tension. (JR) **17.5 +**

[Kumeu River, Maté's Vineyard Chardonnay 2019 Kumeu](#)

Fragrant, even quite floral on the nose. Creamy, racy and opulent but with a bit more tension than the 2020 Maté's, unexpectedly. Attractive dry finish. Very long. Quite complex. (JR) **18**

[Kumeu River, Maté's Vineyard Chardonnay 2017 Kumeu](#)

Much more complex and well balanced than the 2016 Maté's. Exciting tension and still quite youthful. (JR) **17**

[Kumeu River, Maté's Vineyard Chardonnay 2016 Kumeu](#)

Rich but with an undertow of lively acidity. Just a little sourness on the end. (JR) **16.5**

[Kumeu River, Estate Chardonnay 2014 Kumeu](#)

Quite creamy and sweet on the nose. Tastes fully mature with the ripe fruit just starting to separate itself from the acidity and a slight mealiness creeping in. The finish is not as refreshing as on earlier vintages. (JR) **16.5**

[Kumeu River, Coddington Chardonnay 2014 Kumeu](#)

Fresh, with green fruits on the nose. Very racy and lively. Rather sleek and polished. Great balance. Just a little grip on the long finish. (JR) **17**

[Kumeu River, Hunting Hill Chardonnay 2014 Kumeu](#)

Round and quite complex on the nose. Lots of spine and tension still. Very burgundian. Really complete. Still drinking beautifully. Very persistent. Everything is in perfect alignment. (JR) **18**

[Kumeu River, Maté's Vineyard Chardonnay 2014 Kumeu](#)

Neat and actually less flamboyant than the Hunting Hill. Lime-syrup flavours and just a little less focus than the Hunting Hill. A very fine drink but it suffers from being served just after the 2014 Hunting Hill. (JR) **17.5**

[Kumeu River, Estate Chardonnay 2013 Kumeu](#)

Quite a deep straw colour. High-toned nose. Just very slightly oily and less focused than the single-vineyard bottlings but it's still giving pleasure. (JR)