

KUMEU RIVER

Kumeu River: White Burgundy in Kiwi Clothing

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by Neal Martin

“ . . . When I was covering the country for The Wine Advocate between 2008 and 2010, there was one estate that represented the pinnacle of New Zealand Chardonnay: Kumeu River. I regularly applauded their wines in my reports and Lisa Perrotti-Brown continued clapping after taking over reviewing duties. At that time I didn't feel that Kumeu River's Chardonnays were some of the best in New Zealand. No, they were some of the best in the world.

“ . . . Kumeu River is one of New Zealand's forefathers, even though the maiden vintage was only in 1985. The family that founded the winery emigrated from the Croatian town of Živogoš e (no, don't even try pronouncing that) in 1937: Mick, Katé and their son Maté purchased a property with a few vines in 1944. Maté married Melba and had four children: Michael, Marijana, Milan and Paul. During the 1980s the children became more involved in the running of the estate, inspired by the wines of Burgundy. Michael went on to become the country's first Master of Wine and one of the most important figures in the New Zealand wine industry. . . I first encountered the wines back in 1999 at a retrospective held by Farr Vintners, who have been importing the wines from their first vintages. I absolutely loved the wines and sung their praises when they were still relatively unknown on my fledgling website.

“Fast forward 16 years and I am back at Farr Vintners sitting at the same table as Paul Brajkovich and a gaggle of UK wine writers. How time flies. This time however, they have elected to serve them blind against a range of white Burgundy village and premier crus from the same vintages, a stern test of their quality. . .

“The wines were arranged in four flights, the vintages 2012, 2010, 2009 and 2007. . .
So how did the Kumeu River wines stack up?

“Well, their wine achieved the highest average score in all but one of the flights, when it came in second.

Flight 1: 2012 Vintage

Highest Average Score:

- 1) Estate Chardonnay - Kumeu River
- 2) Puligny-Montrachet - Etienne Sauzet
- 3) Meursault Clos du Cromin - Patrick Javillier
- 4) Puligny-Montrachet - Anne-Claude Leflaive
- 5) Chassagne-Montrachet - Michel Niellon (corked)

““The 2012 was a tricky vintage,” Paul Brajkovich said. “It was rainy in the early part of summer and so harvesting was important. The wines showed a fine leesy character after settling. The wines go through 100% malolactic, otherwise the acidity would be too high and it remains on the lees until February, around 12 months in barrel. We use all French oak with around 20% new from three or four different coopers. Each of our vineyards is vinified separately and the Estate can include deselected fruit from the other vineyards. The Estate Chardonnay represents around 25% to 33% of the total production and in 2012 there are 5,000 cases.””



Flight 2: 2010 Vintage

Highest Average Score:

- 1) **Coddington Vineyard Chardonnay - Kumeu River**
- 2) Chassagne-Montrachet 1er Cru Vergers - Fontaine-Gagnard
- 3) Chassagne-Montrachet 1er Cru Morgeots - Marquis de Laguiche
- 4) Chassagne-Montrachet 1er Cru Boudriottes - Jean-Noël Gagnard
- 5) Chassagne-Montrachet 1er Cru Champs Gain - Michel Niellon

"It was a great vintage," Paul said. "We were affected by frost this year. We tried to move the air using a helicopter but it just pushed down cold air because that's all there was. This is always the most forward of the vineyards: heavy clay and north facing, the wines prone to a peachy lusciousness. It went into the Estate Chardonnay until the 2000. It's a nice counterpoint to Hunting Hill vineyard."

Flight 3 - 2009 Vintage

Highest Average Score:

- 1) Meursault Village - Domaine des Comtes-Lafon
- 2) **Maté's Vineyard Chardonnay - Kumeu River**
- 3) Meursault 1er Cru Perrières - Boucharde
- 4) Meursault 1er Cru Perrières - Drouhin
- 5) Meursault Narvaux - Girardin (oxidized)

"The 2009 was quite a big vintage but we got good ripeness levels," Paul explained. "There was fine acidity in the wines, especially in Hunting Hill. This vineyard was planted in 1990 using the Mendoza clone and it often produces the most mineral-rich Chardonnay. It does have a mild form of leaf-roll that can cause some hens and chickens (millerandage). It tends to produce a preserved peach like aroma."

Flight 4 - 2007 Vintage

Highest Average Score:

- 1) **Hunting Hill Chardonnay - Kumeu River**
- 2) Puligny-Montrachet Hameau de Blagny - Etienne Sauzet
- 3) Puligny-Montrachet 1er Cru les Referts - Jean-Philippe Fichet
- 4) Puligny-Montrachet 1er Cru Champ Canet - Louis Carillon
- 5) Puligny-Montrachet 1er Cru Pucelles - Drouhin
- 6) Puligny-Montrachet 1er Cru Clavoillon - Leflaive (oxidized)

"There is an iron pan below the surface of the Hunting Hill Vineyard. The 2007 vintage was a cooler year that produced more citrus than peachy wines. It's one of my favorite vintages. It was a lower than usual crop because of flowering, but the late summer was terrific. All the 2007s are beginning to look really good now. The vineyard itself sits above Maté's Vineyard, replanted with Clone 15 in the late 1990s. It always produces fragrant Chardonnay with lime blossom, almost Riesling-like characters, and the wine tends to be a bit lighter on its feet."

<http://www.erobertparker.com/members/winedata/articles/article1050.asp>

