

Producer profile

Kumeu River

It's 110 years since the early pioneers of the Brajkovich family arrived in New Zealand from Croatia. Peter Richards MW spent some time with the family to uncover the secrets of growing world-class Chardonnay

WE ARE STANDING overlooking the iconic Maté's and Hunting Hill vineyards under a scented, sultry Auckland sky. Milan Brajkovich muses: 'We've always just made wines we like to drink. New World wines with an Old World twist, for a fair price. We focus on what we do best: Chardonnay. Then we've gone out and found enough people who share our view. It's taken a while, but it's worked.'

It's a wonderfully understated summary. Kumeu River is one of New Zealand's most celebrated producers: wine nobility renowned primarily for world-class, Burgundian-style Chardonnay. Over the years, the winery has built up an enviable distribution network on the basis of personal relationships; about half of sales are domestic. It's business on a human scale, within which the family ethos is all-important. Many wine producers the world over make a fuss of family ownership, yet here you get the sense that the personal touch is pervasive to a rare extent.

The Brajkovich family originally came to New Zealand from Dalmatia (Croatia) in 1907

'Chardonnay is not a blank canvas to be painted on. Terroir and variety come through strongly'

Michael Brajkovich MW

to dig Kauri gum (fossilised resin) – gruelling but profitable work. They later moved into agriculture, buying an estate with a small vineyard in 1944 that was developed by Maté Brajkovich, subsequently supported by his wife Melba and four children Michael, Marijana, Milan and Paul.

Though Maté died in 1992, the clan has continued his work in unison, with all four children involved in the estate and Melba as matriarch, often to be found holding court at the cellar door at the weekend. 'Sometimes I feel outnumbered by my kids,' grumbles a smiling Melba, as her tall progeny loom over her. 'She loves it,' whispers Milan, with a grin.

Surely 72 years of family business can make life difficult at times? 'Not really,' reflects Milan. 'Mum's a great mediator, and we have meetings at the lunch table every day. It works.' Melba recounts how an earnest six-year-old Michael used to draw precise wine diagrams at the family table to instruct his then headmaster in how to make wine properly.

When I probe Milan about the family's winemaking inspirations, he reveals how it's family tradition to open special bottles from their private cellar on Friday lunchtimes. 'That's how our Pinot Gris came about,' he smiles, as Michael cites the family's admiration for fine examples from Alsace, from the likes of Domaine Weinbach, Marcel Deiss, Trimbach and Zind-Humbrecht.

Food is also a recurring theme when discussing wine with the Brajkovichs. The full

Kumeu River at a glance

Location

Kumeu, Auckland, New Zealand; founded in 1944

Owners

Brajkovich family

Area

30ha own vineyards plus 10ha contract

Soils

Mainly clay over a sandstone base

Production

250,000 bottles

Chardonnay cuvées

Village, Estate, Coddington, Hunting Hill, Maté's Vineyard

Pronunciation

Br-eye-ko-vitch (Brajkovich), Cue-Mew (Kumeu), Matty (Maté)

complement of family members were around dinner table when I visited, enjoying a simple but tasty steak with salad, and wines clearly designed with a gastronome's sensibility.

'Chardonnay chose us'

So what's the key to Kumeu's remarkable success with its wines, particularly its distinctively savoury, elegantly proportioned Chardonnay? After all, Auckland's sub-tropical climate, despite being where the New Zealand wine industry has its earliest roots, is hardly where you'd expect to find this kind of wine.

And yet, as Milan memorably quips when noting the string of varieties that have been tried and discarded at Kumeu River: 'We didn't choose Chardonnay – it chose us.' The estate is now 80% planted to Chardonnay; the likes of Pinotage, Palomino, Müller-Thurgau and, more recently, Merlot are no longer.

As it turns out, both climate and soil are deemed of vital importance. Milan points to the proximity of both the Tasman Sea and Pacific Ocean as moderating influences, generating cloud to temper the summer heat,

which rarely exceeds 30°C. 'The soils are key too,' he adds. 'They're clay-based, mineral-laden and, crucially, non-irrigated, so the vine roots dig deep. We do have to keep an eye on disease given the humidity, but we use a split canopy and hand-harvest.' He notes how Maté's vineyard is 'heavy and dense – like the wine', while Hunting Hill has a hard iron pan that helps create 'a lean style'.

In the cellar, Michael backs up Milan's message with a statement to challenge many a prejudice. 'Chardonnay is not a blank canvas to be painted on,' he asserts. 'Terroir and variety come through strongly. You need a cool climate to ripen Chardonnay properly yet also retain acidity. If not, you miss out on the textural qualities and complexity the variety can give when grown in the right place.'

He goes on to criticise the latest New World trend to harvest Chardonnay 'too early' in warm climates in a bid to retain acidity, then overload the wines with 'struck match' character – resulting in lean, unsatisfying wines. 'People have got the wrong end of the stick', he shrugs. ➤

Above: Kumeu River's 30ha of Auckland estate vineyards are now 80% planted to Chardonnay





Left, from left: Milan, Melba, Michael, Marijana and Paul Brajkovich in the family’s Kumeu River barrel room

I ask about the tendency for Kumeu River’s Chardonnays to have that distinctly toasty, struck match character, often termed reductive, and found in many white Burgundies. Michael speculates that, while the science behind how these characters are formed remains poorly understood, it may have a link to elemental sulphur being used in the vineyards (to combat powdery mildew), which is then transferred via the fine lees into tank and then barrel, and acts as precursor to the reductive character being generated. ‘But reduction is just a by-product,’ he insists. ‘The reason I use the lees – just as I use the barrels – is to build the wine’s structure.’

Michael is a rare winemaker who wears his


considerable learning lightly. But glimpses of his profound understanding of the whole winemaking process and keen, questioning mind continually emerge. For example, how he learned from Burgundy about the intricacies of barrels and malolactic fermentation, and how Jean-Pierre Moueix at St-Emilion’s Château Magdelaine gave him the courage to abandon cultured yeasts and pursue wild ferments in the mid-1980s. ‘With wild yeast, something happens early in the fermentation, before it gets to 3% alcohol, and it’s crucial to the style at the end,’ he enthuses, before adding: ‘It gives mouthfeel and texture, though we don’t really know how.’

As for the question of ageability, Michael ➤


Kumeu River – a timeline



Richards’ five to try



Kumeu River, Maté’s Vineyard Chardonnay 2010 97
£35 Lay & Wheeler, The New Zealand Cellar
The 2014 Maté’s is sensational but young. This 2010, a vintage that’s tasting beautifully, is packed full of hazelnuts and roasted lemon complexity. Just wonderful, and will improve further. **Drink** 2017-2023 **Alc** 13.5%



Kumeu River, Estate Pinot Gris 2013 90
£13 Armit, Majestic, The New Zealand Cellar
Succulent and beautifully resonant, full of baked pear and honeyed quince flavours. Has a lovely freshness on the finish. Ideal for aromatic Asian dishes. **Drink** 2017-2019 **Alc** 13.5%

Kumeu River, Hunting Hill Chardonnay 2014 95
£24.50-£28.95 Farr Vintners, Haynes Hanson & Clark, Lay & Wheeler, Lea & Sandeman, Tanners, The Wine Society, Vin Cognito, Z&B
A bundle of deliciously nervous energy, driven by compelling juicy acidity. The toasty, nutty overlay is beautifully complex. Young, focused, tense and utterly winning. **Drink** 2017-2024 **Alc** 13.5%

Kumeu River, Coddington Chardonnay 2014 93
£22-£26 Bon Coeur, Farr Vintners, Lea & Sandeman, Tanners, The Wine Society
One for the hedonists. Still well

Kumeu River, Village Chardonnay 2014 87
£9.95-£12.50 Booths, Burns & German, Haynes Hanson & Clark, Lea & Sandeman, Tanners, The New Zealand Cellar, The Wine Society
If Kumeu’s single vineyards are Côte d’Or, then this is Chablis. Crisp and chalky, with a hint of blanched nuts over its green apple freshness. Great value. **Drink** 2017-2018 **Alc** 13.5%

For full UK stockist details, see p97

‘Of course, we benchmark all the time and try to keep ahead of the game. But we’ve been doing this for a while’
Michael Brajkovich MW

is ambitious. ‘If we are interested in producing high-quality Chardonnay, we have to be serious about how it ages over a number of years,’ he asserts. For Kumeu River, the answer was not only in using the correct amount of sulphur and the right bottles, but also to use screwcaps. The winery changed wholesale to screwcap in 2001 after a batch of cork-sealed wines was returned from the US and, on tasting, the family deemed only about 5% to be in ideal condition. Recent tastings of vintages back to 2003 clearly show how the wines retain a notable brightness and freshness as they elegantly mature.

Healthy competition
Global experience, attention to detail and a strong family ethos are the foundations on which Kumeu River has been built. But what of the future?
New Zealand, long the land of Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir (see p15), is seeing a surge in quality Chardonnay all over the country. Where Kumeu River once ploughed a relatively lonely furrow, it now has serious competition from Bell Hill, Giesen, Neudorf, Vidal and many others. At a Chardonnay conference in

Gisborne, I asked Michael whether he felt threatened or weakened by this. ‘Strengthened!’ he retorts. ‘It means more people are getting interested in Kiwi Chardonnay as a category.’
‘There’s a resurgence of interest. Of course, we benchmark all the time and try to keep ahead of the game. But we’ve been doing this for a while, our vines are established, as are our wines. It’s good to see really classy Chardonnay being made all over the country.’
Urban sprawl is another threat, as Auckland suburbs mean land around Kumeu is now at a premium for housing development. Milan notes soberly how land prices have shot up and traffic intensified markedly in recent years. ‘We’re actively looking for land to buy now,’ he says. ‘You need to plan 20-30 years ahead in our line of work.’
Planning ahead has also seen Kumeu River introduce a fizz into its range to complement the other minority productions of Pinot Gris, Pinot Noir and Gewurztraminer. The debut release of Kumeu Crémant is a blend of 60% Chardonnay and 40% Pinot Noir; tasted pre-dosage on the lees in the cellar in early 2016, it showed impressive depth, elegance and vigour (£26.95 www.thevinorium.co.uk).
I ask Milan what sparkling wines the family cellar contains. ‘Ah, Taittinger, Gimonnet...’ he trails off, eyes on the vineyard. But it must have been challenging making a new fizz, in addition to all his other duties. A smile plays over his lips. ‘You’ve got to keep life interesting, haven’t you?’
Peter Richards MW is a wine writer, broadcaster, author and consultant who, with his wife Susie Barrie MW, runs Wine Festival Winchester

Kumeu River – a timeline (cont)

