

TOP OF THE WORLD: THE CONSISTENTLY STUNNING KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAYS

The recent vertical tasting at the offices of Farr Vintners in London of every dry white chardonnay that **Kumeu River** in Kumeu, New Zealand, has bottled since the 2006 vintage was a remarkable demonstration of the consistent high quality and striking cool-climate style of this producer. That **Kumeu River** produces some of the world's best chardonnays won't come as a surprise to their loyal followers around the world, but for a wider audience it's big news. It also affirms what we discovered in our **recently published, countrywide report of Kiwi wines**.

The reasons for the surprise begin with the widespread perception that New Zealand wine is all about crisp and aromatic sauvignon blanc. This grape variety now accounts for 61% of the nation's almost 38,000 hectares of vineyards, but due to the often rather high yields, this rises to 75% when considered in terms of actual production — on average, a quarter of a billion bottles of sauvignon blanc per year.

By contrast, chardonnay accounts for just over 8% of New Zealand's vineyards. Although globally chardonnay production has boomed during the first two decades of the 21st century, with the area planted increasing considerably in countries as diverse as France, Italy, the USA and Chile, in New Zealand the area planted with the grape has actually fallen from 3,911 hectares in 2009 to 3,163 hectares as it currently stands. No wonder the nation's chardonnays struggle for recognition around Planet Wine.

Counting 30 hectares of estate vineyards and 10 hectares worth of grapes supplied by local growers under long-term contracts, Kumeu River, situated just north of Auckland on the North Island, produces an average of 250,000 bottles per year, not one of which is sauvignon blanc. This is enough for global distribution, particularly with regards to the Estate Chardonnay, but they are spread quite thin, and pretty much wherever you live you'll need to make an effort to buy them. For this reason alone, Kumeu River is an exception to the NZ wine rule.

However, as the Farr Vintners tasting revealed, other more important things make the Kumeu River chardonnays truly exceptional, not least the way every vintage since 2006 produced only wines worthy of 90 points or more. The wines also mature beautifully, retaining their youthful freshness for at least five years, a slow aging curve that's assisted by the screw cap closure used for all of these wines.



Our Contributing Editor Stuart Pigott travelled to London for a Kumeu River tasting hosted by Farr Vintners in September 2018. We rated every chardonnay bottled by the famous New Zealand estate since 2006.

On that point, there's a striking contrast to the situation in chardonnay's home region of Burgundy. For more than a decade, producers there have been struggling with the "premoX" problem, aka premature oxidation. It results in the sudden and catastrophic development and deterioration of three- to six-year-old wines that a generation ago could age for one or more decades in bottle. So far, there is no scientific explanation for premoX, nor have non-scientific methods such as biodynamic cultivation of the vineyards solved the problem. Not one of the 48 Kumeu River chardonnays in the tasting was too mature; in the fact, all four 2006 wines were delicious! As Kumeu River Marketing Director **Paul Brajkovich** explained, "With age, they flesh out and you get a plush character." That's what high-end chardonnay should do.

Even so, it was among the vibrant young wines (the 2013-2017 vintages) where the unique style of Kumeu River was most strikingly apparent. These are cool-climate chardonnays with moderate alcohol and quite pronounced acidity, which accentuates the brightness of the aromas. Sliced pears, white peaches and various types of citrus fruit are the most pronounced aromas, the emphasis shifting from one of those to the other depending on the vintage. Many wines also have a mineral character reminiscent of wet stones.



In an average year at Kumeu, the summer highs only just top 30 degrees Celsius, with most warm days in the 26–30 range. Because they are slow to warm, the rather heavy clay soils accentuate the cool climate. Kumeu is quite a bit cooler than the famous vineyards of Burgundy's Cote d'Or and also has higher average rainfall, but it was Burgundy that supplied the model for the Brajkovich family's chardonnays.

The estate of Kumeu River shares its name with the river running through the small town of Kumeu, located a short drive north of Auckland. Compared to Burgundy's Cote d'Or, the climate is cooler and wetter.

spend 11 months on the full lees," he explains.

The latter two techniques are normal for high-end wines in chardonnay's homeland. However, whole-cluster pressing isn't common in Burgundy (unlike Champagne where it is standard) and this undoubtedly accentuates the sleek personality of the Kumeu River wines. At Kumeu River, 20% new oak is used for the **Estate Chardonnay** and just 25% for the three single-vineyard wines. That modest percentage means the terroir character comes through very strongly.

The 2.6-hectare Mate's Vineyard, named after Mate Brajkovich, the father of winemaker Michael and his brother Paul, is the oldest of Kumeu River's chardonnay plantings dating back to 1990. The first vintage of Mate's Vineyard was 1993, one year too late for its namesake to experience. Meanwhile, 2006 was the first vintage of the Coddington (a non-estate vineyard) and Hunting Hill (a three-hectare estate vineyard) bottlings, so the tasting included every vintage made of those two wines.

Mate's Vineyard gives the most concentrated and powerful wines, while Hunting Hill, which lies higher up on the same slope, produces more steely and mineral expressions with the best aging potential; Coddington is more generous and fleshy. "We've bought the Kumeu River chardonnays since 1989," says tasting organizer Stephen Browett, Chairman of Farr Vintners. "Hunting Hill is usually our favorite, but the Estate Chardonnay is great value for money." Compare the price of that wine with white Burgundies in your market, look at our ratings, and then you'll understand why we agree with him. — *Contributing Editor, Stuart Pigott*

TASTING NOTES

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU ESTATE 2006

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2006

Score

94

A great mature chardonnay. Still brimming with cooked grapefruit and ripe pears, this is rich, but still dances on your palate like a top quality young wine. The integration of fruit, acidity, oak and richness is now complete, so drink now. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU CODDINGTON 2006

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2006

Score

93

Rich but very subtle, this is a beautiful, mature chardonnay that is now very creamy and silky, the finish very long but slightly warm. Drink now. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU HUNTING HILL 2006

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2006

Score

95

Although this is now fully mature with great textural complexity, it still has the distinctive steely acidity of the site. Super long finish with whiplash acidity that could wake the dead! Drink now. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU MATE'S VINEYARD 2006

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2006

Score

95

Toasty with some peanut butter and a hint of caramel on the nose, this is rich and fleshy with a long, candied-citrus and mineral finish. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU ESTATE 2007

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2007

Score

91

Lots of dried citrus peel, some caramel and a hint of resin give this quite a mature flavor profile. Creamy and still quite lively on the palate, the finish rather delicate. Drink now. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU CODDINGTON 2007

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2007

Score

95

A fully mature chardonnay that's only moderately rich with lots of lemon-curd character. Long, very silky finish that doesn't want to let go. Drink now. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU HUNTING HILL 2007

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2007

Score

96

An extremely fresh chardonnay for more than a decade of age with stunning balance and a very long finish, the candied citrus and mineral character very intense and subtle. Delicious now, but where can you find chardonnays of this age that still have so much aging potential? Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU MATE'S VINEYARD 2007

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2007

Score

94

Rich, warm and sensual, this is now quite mature and rather gentle at the finish as a result. Long, supple and finely nuanced finish. Drink now. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU ESTATE 2008

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2008

Score

93

Intense grapefruit nose, then lots of ripeness and power on the palate. But the vibrant acidity is the most striking thing and it gives the wine lots of drive at the long finish. Drink now. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU CODDINGTON 2008

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2008

Score

95

What a beautiful, candied-citrus and cooked-peach nose! Rich and concentrated with easily enough acidity to carry this extravagance. Very long, bold finish. Drink now. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU HUNTING HILL 2008

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2008

Score

94

Very lively, but with some mature character, the delicacy of the candied-citrus character is impressive. Long, supple but very mineral finish. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU MATE'S VINEYARD 2008

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2008

Score

96

A rich, mature chardonnay that you could mistake for a top white burgundy, this is rich and fleshy, but also finely nuanced. The finish has striking freshness, leaping and bounding with youthful energy. Drink now. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU ESTATE 2009

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2009

Score

90

Still bright and lively for almost a decade of age, this rather light New Zealand chardonnay has nice apple freshness and a crisp finish that make it ideal for oysters. Drink now. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU CODDINGTON 2009

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2009

Score

91

Lots of caramel and dried citrus peel here, the palate atypically broad for Kumeu River. But the wine is polished and has good length. Drink now. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU HUNTING HILL 2009

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2009

Score

93

Cool and sleek, this is a remarkable chardonnay for the difficult vintage with quite a bit of hazelnut character, the finish long and mineral. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU MATE'S VINEYARD 2009

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2009

Score

92

This starts extremely well with lots of lime blossom and the racy acidity gives the finish substantial force. Not quite the ripeness of the best vintages. Drink now. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU ESTATE 2010

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2010

Score

94

Great toasty and nutty aromas, then a really exciting interplay of concentration and racy acidity, the long finish intensely mineral. Great now, but will hold for many years. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU CODDINGTON 2010

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2010

Score

95

A rich and mellow wine with tons of white-fruit character and a lot of liveliness and finesse. This is now at its pleasure peak. What makes it stand out in the global, high-end chardonnay pack is how the power and richness are tightly reined in. Great balance at the generous finish. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU HUNTING HILL 2010

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2010

Score

97

What a stunning combination of freshness and ripeness this wine has! Almost lush with very ripe pears and white peaches, yet so vibrant, thanks to the lemon and lime freshness. A joyful chardonnay that's deep and complex, but not difficult to understand. Savor the caressing finish as long as you can! Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU MATE'S VINEYARD 2010

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2010

Score

96

This mature, cool-climate chardonnay is a real beauty! So ripe and elegant, the finish super long and silky. Long and very refined finish. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU ESTATE 2011

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2011

Score

92

The youngest vintage of this wine, it's already showing some mature character. This has plenty of candied-lemon character and a good balance of ripeness and lively acidity, the finish long and finely chiseled. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU CODDINGTON 2011

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2011

Score

93

In a blind tasting, I'd confidently identify this as a white burgundy from a cool vintage at three to four years of age. Plenty of apples and pears, medium body and lively but by no means strident acidity, make this very appealing. Drink now. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU HUNTING HILL 2011

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2011

Score

94

The abundant fresh herbs and wet ferns on the nose take this a long way from this producer's burgundian model. Very elegant, medium-bodied palate, the limey acidity giving this a major lift at the long finish. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU MATE'S VINEYARD 2011

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2011

Score

93

Cool and delicate on the nose for a wine from Maté's Vineyard with plenty of herbal character. Powerful and crisp, this will give so much more pleasure with food than it does in the tasting room. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU ESTATE 2012

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2012

Score

93

Sweet honeysuckle nose with some vanilla showing. Quite a rich wine for this producer with a great, creamy texture, thanks to slightly less pronounced acidity than usual for this producer. Where is that piece of turbot? Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU CODDINGTON 2012

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2012

Score

94

In spite of the tropical-flower and vanilla aromas, and all the creaminess and concentration, this stays cool and clean. The long finish is so vibrant and expressive. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU HUNTING HILL 2012

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2012

Score

92

Cool but rather funky nose from reduction, this powerful, highly structured wine lacks some charm at this point, but has many years of life ahead of it. Bold but monolithic finish. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU MATE'S VINEYARD 2012

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2012

Score

94

This beautiful, creamy chardonnay has real elegance, in spite of the intense, lemony freshness at the finish and is screaming for you to order a great piece of fish in a rich sauce. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU ESTATE 2013

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2013

Score

94

Very delicate and complex nose of fresh herbs, limes and dried pears, then a palate that's both seriously concentrated and finely nuanced, the long mineral finish extremely fresh for five years of age. Which white burgundies offer that at an affordable price today? Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU CODDINGTON 2013

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2013

Score

95

Lots of candied lemon peel and some fresh lime zest on the nose, making a strikingly fresh first impression. This is a very concentrated chardonnay that's as sleek and energetic as a thoroughbred race horse, as it gallops across the palate! Stunning finish. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU HUNTING HILL 2013

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2013

Score

95

Quite a toasty nose, but with plenty of cool, herbal character and some lime zest. This is a compelling, cool-climate chardonnay that's at once sleek and racy, yet creamy and polished through the long, fine finish. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU MATE'S VINEYARD 2013

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2013

Score

97

Only just beginning to really open up, this is staggeringly concentrated, cool-climate chardonnay with great lemon and mineral freshness. The very long, powerful finish leaves you in no doubt of the world-class originality of this wine. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU ESTATE 2014

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2014

Score

93

The interplay of caramelized-pear flavor, toasty character and crisp acidity, makes this an exciting, maturing chardonnay. I love the long, creamy finish, too. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU CODDINGTON 2014

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2014

Score

94

Much fresher than the Estate chardonnay of this vintage, this has lots of ripe pear character and generous body, but remains restrained. The further you ride the graceful, long finish, the more complete the overall impression becomes. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU HUNTING HILL 2014

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2014

Score

96

Stunning nose of citrus blossom. Certainly not the most powerful or dramatic chardonnay out there, but there's great finesse here, the fruit and oak beautifully integrated through the very long finish that's as fresh as a mountain stream. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU MATE'S VINEYARD 2014

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2014

Score

95

Quite toasty nose with some hazelnuts and earthy funk, this is a powerful and impressively structured chardonnay that's anything but charming. Bold mineral finish. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU ESTATE 2015

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2015

Score

93

Ripe grapefruit with floral and nutty notes, this is a very elegant, cool-climate chardonnay that's just getting into its stride. A precise balance of richness and freshness extends through the long, subtle finish. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU CODDINGTON 2015

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2015

Score

95

Deep and rich candied-citrus nose with hints of hazelnuts and fresh herbs. Serious richness and concentration, yet so vibrant and crisp through the very long, mineral finish. Delicious now, but with a bright future ahead of it. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU HUNTING HILL 2015

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2015

Score

95

Rather closed on the nose and slightly funky from reduction, but very concentrated on the palate. This effortlessly marries power and freshness. The long finish is almost steely but enormously refreshing, too. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU MATE'S VINEYARD 2015

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2015

Score

98

Really seductive nose of candied lemons, honeysuckle and vanilla, then stunning concentration and elegance on the medium to full palate, the finish very ripe and polished. Delicious now, but with a great future ahead of it. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU ESTATE 2016

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2016

Score

91

Quite a rich and creamy wine for this producer, but with the usual polished texture and long finish. A little bit closed on the nose right now, although some gardenia and peach notes are showing. But this is just a phase it's going through. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU CODDINGTON 2016

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2016

Score

94

Quite a rich wine with some caramel and plenty of dried-pear character. At once creamy and well-structured, this is pretty concentrated chardonnay that can easily stand next to burgundian Premier Crus from top producers. Long, citrusy finish that makes a bold statement. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU HUNTING HILL 2016

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2016

Score

94

Ample smoke on the nose. Yet, behind that there's plenty of sliced pears and some white peaches. Very lively and energetic, the long, crisp finish seriously minerally. Delicious now, but also has considerable aging potential. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU MATE'S VINEYARD 2016

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2016

Score

95

This great chardonnay is just beginning to give its best. Cool and very fresh with lemon-blossom and lemon-curd character, married to considerable richness and animating acidity, this proves that New Zealand can play in the global chardonnay first league. Super fresh finish. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU ESTATE 2017

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2017

Score

93

Enticing and very fresh nose of sliced pears and flowers with hints of almonds and vanilla. A great combination of vibrant fruit and silky texture, this tightly wound, medium-bodied chardonnay is just beginning to unfurl its long banner. Great mineral freshness at the pristine finish. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU CODDINGTON 2017

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2017

Score

95

Very cool and delicate. Yet, in spite of the peach and honeysuckle aromas already showing, this is still quite tight. Precisely delineated, medium to full palate with a lot of minerality, the finish very long and precise. Better from 2019 or 2020. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU HUNTING HILL 2017

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2017

Score

95

Very floral and quite toasty in the nose, this is already very attractive, in spite of its youth. Sleek yet polished with stunning concentration and vibrant acidity driving the very long, tight finish. Drink or hold. Screw cap.

KUMEU RIVER CHARDONNAY KUMEU MATE'S VINEYARD 2017

Country New Zealand

Region North Island

Vintage 2017

Score

97

The mineral character of this wine is currently so pronounced and the fruit so closed that it's not easy, also because of the slight funk from reduction, to identify the grape variety. On the palate, this marathon-runner chardonnay is very clean and highly structured with lots of drive, the finish very long and complex. Drink or hold. Screw cap.
