

Michael Brajkovich Celebrates 40th Vintage at Kumeu River

2021 was Michael's 40th vintage. We asked him some questions about Kumeu River – where we've come from, where we're heading, and where he would still like to complete a vintage overseas.

Looking at where Kumeu River is today compared to your first vintage 40 years ago: Did you have any idea back then just how well the wines would be decades later? Is there anything you would have done differently?

It was the early hours of March 10th that the last of the 2021 vintage grapes were pressed at the winery in Kumeu. I had the honour of tipping in the last grapes, which happened to be Chardonnay from our Rays Road Vineyard in Hawkes Bay. Very appropriate too because this vineyard represents an exciting new opportunity for our company, and the wines coming from this limestone site are very inspirational for an old dog like me to get enthused about in my 40th vintage at Kumeu River.

1982 was my first full-time vintage at home, and I was very fortunate to have older and wiser heads around me to help in the new direction the company was taking even back then. My father Maté Brajkovich had been in charge since 1944, and Nigel Tibbits had been with us since the 1974 vintage. Dad passed away in 1992, but Nigel and I are still here, and Nigel continues to do the sterling work he has always done. We have grown together in our roles over the ensuing 40 years and the evolution of the Kumeu River style has continued steadily over that time. Nigel has played a huge role in that and 2023 will be his 50th vintage with us. Our collective experience here is what makes for the great consistency of the wines, and our shared pursuit of quality has led the continued improvement.

Maté always had tremendous faith that we could make great wine here, given some time and experience, and a fair dose of well-educated knowledge. Dad was always keen on education, and to that end me and my siblings have been fortunate to have had access to excellent educational opportunities. My own path leading me to Roseworthy Agricultural College to study Oenology in the early 1980's. By the time I came home at the end of 1981, Dad had already started replanting vineyards to better varieties such as Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet Franc. We managed to purchase an existing Merlot vineyard in 1983 and we thought that Merlot was going to be our vehicle to success. It started very well.

I then had the chance to work the vintage in Bordeaux later that year in Pomerol and St Emilion, learning so much more about this great red wine variety. Subsequent years, however, proved Merlot fickle to our changeable and marginal conditions, and that Chardonnay was of much more consistently high quality. We experimented with traditional Burgundian techniques such as whole-cluster pressing, barrel fermentation and malolactic fermentation, all of which were quite foreign to New Zealand at the time, but now have become *de rigueur* for quality New Zealand Chardonnay. We also introduced wild yeast fermentations, which to many winemakers was sacrilegious in what was supposed to be a technologically advanced wine industry. The rest is history. The vineyards have continued to improve with age and Milan's immaculate management. The wines just keep getting better.

Change happened very quickly for us and if something wasn't working we had no hesitation in making drastic improvements. We were not tied to tradition. The move to 100% screwcaps in 2001 was a great example of such a change, and it has been a huge success despite the dire predictions of misinformed naysayers at the time. Replanting, and the development of new vineyard sites with improved clones and rootstocks, has continued apace, and the fruit quality we have now is streets ahead of what it was in the past.

Would we have done anything differently? Probably, but at the speed we were going I can't see how we could have fitted it in. I have no regrets about how we did it, and the proof is in the range of wines we have today.

Does any particular vintage stand out above all the rest? (for better or worse)

Vintages come and go, and each one is unique. There have been some 'difficult' ones, but even then we have managed to make decent wine. The only exception to that rule was 1988, when we were hit by the remnants of Cyclone Bola. Some of the outstanding older vintages that come to mind are 1989, 2000, 2004, 2010, 2013, and 2014, all for different reasons. In more recent times, we had the magnificent 2019, which I regarded at the time as the best vintage ever. Then 2020 came along and it was even better! Now we have 2021, which was amazingly early, and a little smaller, but very much in the same league as the previous two. I have never seen a triple vintage run like it before.

If you could go and do a vintage anywhere else in the world where would you go – and why?

I have been fortunate to do two overseas vintages: 1981 in Coonawarra with Mildara Wines, and in 1983 in St Emilion at Chateau Magdeleine with Jean-Pierre Moueix. Both were pivotal experiences, but working with Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot rather than our beloved Chardonnay. I always felt I had unfinished business in Coonawarra, and I retain a great fondness for the region and its people, and for the wines which I regard as Australia's best reds. It's a pity their harvest clashes with our own, otherwise I would love to be involved in another vintage there sometime.

Another European harvest is certainly on the cards though, and I would love to get the chance to make wine in a traditional area that is making a modern comeback. I am thinking particularly of the Dalmatian coast of Croatia, or Andalusia in Spain (or anywhere in Spain, for that matter), in fact anywhere in France or Italy too. I am now a Croatian citizen and passport holder, so that should make it easier!

2019 and 2020 have both been great vintages resulting in demand exceeding supply. How do you manage that?

The greatest reward for making the kind of wines that we do is the happiness that these wines give to people, and the feedback we get from our customers is very gratifying. Demand is now outstripping supply, so we have to be very careful about our distribution and getting the wine to the people who will appreciate it and enjoy it the most. That is where Marijana and Paul play their roles in making sure the wine gets to our many and varied customers in New Zealand and around the world. This is not easy. There will unfortunately be some disappointments with allocations, but we cannot simply increase supply because we are first and foremost committed to quality.