

## North Island Nocturne

A vinicultural desert just 40 years ago, New Zealand's Auckland region now produces outstanding wines. GERRIE LIM visits some of its leading producers

THE DRIVE OUT to Matua Valley takes a mere 20 minutes from Auckland and the scenery proves pleasantly bucolic – vast expanses of rolling hills etched with endless rows of vines – yet I'm well aware that this is no ordinary ride. For behind the wheel is Bill Spence himself, the very first man to plant Sauvignon Blanc in New Zealand back in 1971. It was the first step of a crucial journey, one that would eventually put his country on the world wine map.

"To think that we began with the distress of trying to convince discerning wine drinkers that New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc was a taste experience to be had," he tells me. Spence now roams the globe as brand ambassador for Matua Valley Wines, the company he officially founded in 1974 with his brother Ross, literally operating out of an old tin shed in West Auckland ("Not exactly salubrious," as he recalls). Now, almost 40 years later, the metaphor isn't lost on anyone who learns that *matua* (pronounced mah-too-ah) is the Maori word for head of the family. By the end of 2011, the company had for the first time surpassed production of a million cases, mostly exported to Australia and the UK, and had also entered 12 international competitions, winning 19 gold medals.

Three of those golds went to a new Sauvignon Blanc with an unusual name: Squealing Pig – a moniker running in sharp contrast to the usual image of Matua Valley, now a subsidiary of Treasury Wine Estates (formerly, until May 2011, the wine adjunct of the Australian beer behemoth Foster's Group). Its most critically lauded wine for some years now has been a Sauvignon Blanc called Shingle Peak, so I can't help but wonder: does a name like Squealing Pig mean that the company has now shed that classical veneer for something that seems

more akin to punk rock?

I find the answer inside the winery, after Bill Spence introduces me to his senior winemaker, Nikolai St George, who promptly pours me a glass of Squealing Pig as well as another new Sauvignon Blanc with an equally odd name: 900 Grapes. "Because it took 900 grapes to make up this one bottle," he explains. "It's a bit of fun."

"We haven't had this release for very long, only two or three months now, and this is the first vintage. It's from grapes grown in the Wairau Valley, so it's sort of more linear and restrained compared to Squealing Pig, which is from the Awatere Valley and is more pungent, fruit-forward and punchy, with some nettle in the bouquet." Although the Awatere and Wairau valleys are located in South Island's Marlborough region, all the grapes are vinified here in this Auckland winery.

Those new wines with their curious names represent, in my mind, a bold new phase for an otherwise conservative company. I also see them as emblematic of this trip, for I've come to seek new wine experiences to rival the famous ones found elsewhere in New Zealand, most notably the Bordeaux blends of the Hawke's Bay Gimblett Gravels and the Pinot Noirs of Central Otago. In particular, I'm intrigued by Kumeu River, a 30-hectare estate that specialises in my favourite varietal (but one highly unusual for New Zealand), Chardonnay.

And so, a 10-minute drive from Matua Valley and here I am, face to face with winemaker Michael Brajkovich, who owns a distinction almost matching Bill Spence as a pioneer – back in 1989, Brajkovich became New Zealand's first-ever Master of Wine. Of Dalmatian ethnicity (typical of many in these parts, descended from Croatian immigrants who'd planted the first



vines), he now runs Kumeu River Wines with his brothers Paul and Milan, and sister Marijana. They make about 30,000 cases a year of mostly Chardonnay. And, even stranger for New Zealand, absolutely no Sauvignon Blanc at all.

"We've grown Sauvignon Blanc here but we stopped in 1999," Michael tells me. "Chardonnay has been growing here for a long time and it's just very well adapted. The key is always to find something that thrives in a particular situation."

Kumeu River began in 1944 as the dream of his grandparents, Mick and Kate Brajkovich, whose son Maté (pronounced Mah-tay) then took over in 1949 (and for whom their Maté's Vineyard Chardonnay has been named) until his own passing in 1992, aged 66. The four

kids then shared ownership, supervised by their mother Melba (after whom they named their Melba's Vineyard Merlot).

There's a current 2009 Pinot Gris that sells well, but it's the core group of Chardonnays that I get to taste in the company of Michael and his brother Paul: the Estate Chardonnay, Coddington, Hunting Hill and Maté's Vineyard. "The Estate Chardonnay has that lovely, lemony freshness about it and it is our most famous wine, the one that has made our reputation internationally," says Paul, the company's marketing director. "We've been making it since 1985 and it's been in the *Wine Spectator* Top 100 on several occasions." In the UK, he adds, it has often been blind-tasted and mistaken for premier cru white Burgundy.

Aptly so, since the Brajkovich approach mirrors that of traditional French winemaking: let the land do its bidding. "If you look at traditional European wine areas, the grape varieties have all evolved with the area," Michael says, "so they've been able to choose and change over a long period of time. Here in New Zealand, being a very young industry, we've had to try a few things and fail a few times. Like with Cabernet Sauvignon and also Cabernet Franc, they ripen far too late here so we can't get the ripeness and you end up with green, herbaceous wines." His own methods are highly artisanal; all grapes are hand-harvested and all bottling is done on the premises. "We have a picking team of about 70 people. Hand-picking is very critical,

because it means we can do triage in the vineyard – we can leave behind anything that's not quite right, under-ripe or whatever – so the fruit arrives at the winery intact."

A similarly boutique-style outlook informs production at Providence Wines, comprising just two hectares, resulting in some 800 cases a year – around 9,000 bottles – but none at all if the harvest is poor (as was the case in 2011, when absolutely no wine was bottled). Providence has a breathtaking location an hour's drive from Kumeu, an area called Makatana, all meandering river valleys and visually stunning coastlines. Most visitors explore the main town of Warkworth, canoe on the Puhoi River, or head-bang to rock gigs at Ascension (arguably the area's most famous wine estate



MATUA VALLEY'S NIKOLAI ST GEORGE;  
RIGHT: JUDY FOWLER AND PHIL  
NUNWEEK OF PURIRI HILLS ESTATE



– Village People play there in December). But hardly anyone ever goes to Providence.

Why? Because owner James Vuletic, also descended from Slavic stock, actually likes it that way. His estate is neither open to the public nor mentioned in the tourist brochures (or located on any of the local wine maps) and most of his wine isn't even drunk in New Zealand – it's mainly consumed in Europe (Germany, Switzerland and Belgium) and Asia (Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Macau and Singapore), usually by direct sale to private customers. He has never sold in the UK, "because the English have decided I'm too expensive."

The latest vintage of his flagship wine, priced at NZ\$120 a bottle, is the 2006 Providence Private Reserve – a sinewy blend of 45 percent Cabernet Franc, 45 percent Merlot and 10 percent Malbec – which I taste with him and find rapturously good. In November 2011, he received his only review thus far in Robert Parker's *The Wine Advocate*, scoring a respectable 94 points for this wine, this same vintage. The only other wine he makes is a Syrah, so don't start him on the trendy view of Sauvignon Blanc as New Zealand's best wine, blah, blah, blah.

"I don't make white wine, and I don't know why," he shrugs, "I've just never really tried

growing any white grapes. If I was younger, I might have – if I was 37 now and not 67 – but, really, I can't be bothered." Call him eccentric, but wine is an expression of what he loves and that, for him, is the style of the Bordeaux right bank; hence his focus on the king grape of that region, Cabernet Franc. "You have to have the right bit of land," he asserts. "I planted this vineyard in 1990 and my first vintage was 1993. Before that, I had another vineyard in the area, where we grew Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Malbec. That vineyard showed me that Merlot and Malbec were excellent for the area while Cabernet Sauvignon was not. Then I left that vineyard, that partnership, and decided to grow Cabernet Franc, not really knowing what it would be like."

"It was a risk for me, and I think it's paid off," he says. "I do what I consider is best for the property here, to make a wine with elegance and finesse, with a length on the palate." Simultaneous with Providence, he was also a lawyer and finally retired from his practice in 2010, buoyed by how often people mistook his wine for Bordeaux. "Everybody says that – no one says it's a New World wine. There's still a lot of prejudice but it will be broken down, and it unfortunately takes time. For me, there is no schism because it's like a bridge – I like Old World wines and I like making wine in the New World."

Walking that same tightrope is his American-born friend Judy Fowler, a Virginia native (but for 12 years now, a New Zealand citizen), who runs her Puriri Hills Vineyard in Clevedon, a 40-minute drive south of Auckland. She first planted the vines herself in 1996, on land where none previously existed. "European wines have thousands of years of history behind them



FROM ABOVE: KUMEU RIVER'S BRAJKOVICH FAMILY (MICHAEL AT CENTRE AND PAUL AT FAR RIGHT); PROVIDENCE VINEYARD; PROVIDENCE'S JAMES VULETIC



and our goal is to use that very tradition," she explains, "to do as little to the wine as possible, to make the wine in the vineyard and not kill it at any stage by adding substances or heat or filtration. We allow the strength and natural behaviour of the vines to thrive."

Her newest release is 2,000 bottles of the 2008 Puriri Hills Estate (53 percent Merlot, 25 percent Cabernet Sauvignon, 16 percent Malbec, six percent Carmenere), priced at NZ\$45 each at her cellar door. There's also a Reserve, at NZ\$85, and a premium wine, the Puriri Hills Pope, at NZ\$140. Her most expensive wine to date is the 2005 Pope, at NZ\$225. With her estate being 2.2 hectares of actual vines, she seems to have adopted the small-plot Burgundian model to produce Bordeaux-style wines.

"Yes, what we do is dictated by the *terroir*, and this environment is very Bordeaux right bank," she agrees. "The left bank is Cabernet Sauvignon, which needs harder, drier, gravelly soils and needs heat to develop to its right potential. But I don't think, initially, I would have understood that if I hadn't seen what Jim Vuletic was doing," she admits. She now runs the estate with her partner, Phil Nunweek, a former Air New Zealand pilot-turned-viticulturist ("cellar rat," he jokes, is his preferred title), and she's almost as uncompromising as her Providence mentor. Her cellar door opens on appointment, and she sells only to collectors and top-end

restaurants.

"And to hotels, if they have good restaurants," she discloses. "It's the sort of wine that needs a good sommelier. A wine made like this is for people who know what they're doing and it's really important to see how it ages – these wines need to be cellared." Well, I assure her, that 2008 of what I'd call Chateau Puriri already tasted pretty good to me. "There's no point doing this if you don't aim higher and higher," she gently avers. "The inspiration to do this, for me, came from the poet Robert Browning, who said, 'a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?' To me, that's what this is all about."

Her sanguine remark takes me back to how this trip had begun, with that voluptuously porcine Squealing Pig and those elegantly exquisite Kumeu River Chardonnays, how this North Island outpost had sprung surprises on a been-there, drunk-that wine wonk like me. To paraphrase Bill Spence, all wine from New Zealand, not merely Sauvignon Blanc, commands a compelling taste experience, and one has to admire this unfettered optimism. "There are plenty of people who make good wine," Judy Fowler reminds me as I take my leave, "and there is no point in our adding our little thousand cases to the great volume of good wine that's already available. We have to do something that makes an effort at being great." ■