



Neal Martin's
Wine Journal



For all my sins the soles of my shoes have never dirtied the Shamrock Isle. The pleasures of Guinness passed me by and I found Riverdance nauseating in extremis – just prancing from the waist down. Granted their music can be marvellous: The Pogues, Van Morrison and their ilk, but the country also subjected us to Westlife, winners of Wine-Journal's "Worst Single of the Year" every year since inception. However during my vinous adventures in New Zealand, currently being made into a film by Peter Jackson no less, I undertook many a vertical tasting and the one that made an impression more than any other had Irish blood in its name. Given the quality of this wine, I almost forgave Ireland for inflicting Westlife onto popular culture... but not quite.

Te Mata Estate is the oldest winery in New Zealand, born from a pastoral station over-shadowed by Te Mata peak that was founded by John Chambers in 1842. When Bernard Chambers inherited the land from his father, he planted the first vines in 1892 so that by 1909, not only was the 17-hectare vineyard the largest in the country, but perhaps more significantly, it focused upon dry table wines rather than diesel-fuel fortifieds. Chambers sold the estate in 1919 after which it passed through the hands of itinerant owners until 1974, when it was purchased by John Buck, though he had to wait another four years for the tenancy to expire before handed keys to the door. I met him briefly in New Zealand and then again in London in May, a lively, feisty man, his ginger hair betraying his Irish roots, a witty raconteur surfeit with energy. He told me that he had lived in London during the 1960s.

"I lived just off Kings Road – it was an amazing time, all these crazy people, London was really the centre of the world at that time and here was I, this little New Zealand guy far from home. I did a vintage down in Bordeaux. Unfortunately it was the 1965 vintage and it rained the whole time. Rot was just everywhere."

(From the left: Nick Buck, Peter Cowley and proprietor John Buck.)

A decade later and John's clothes had dried out but Te Mata was long overdue some tender loving care. "It was unbelievable. The whole place was a mess by the time we could start work on it. They stripped everything out – even the light switches were ripped out from the walls!"

How about the vineyard?

"Again it was a mess, lots of Palomino, hybrids. There was a small parcel of Cabernet so we could make a tiny bit of wine but the rest of the vineyard needed to be replanted. There was also some Furmint, which we bottled up to 1982 or 1983." John's son Nick mentions that he still has a customer who phones up and asks where he can buy their Furmint and apparently on the odd occasions they pull an old bottle out from the bin, it tastes respectable (although I don't expect a rebirth.) A long-term rebuilding and expansion program thus ensued, including the construction of a Napa-style winery, its limewash walls coruscating in the New Zealand sunlight surrounded by ornamental bridges, reeds and ponds that lend it a tranquil atmosphere.

Of course, "Coleraine" is named after the city in Northern Ireland, the home of John Buck's late grandfather. The debut vintage was the 1982, a wine that did much to put New Zealand on the international map. "In the early days it was made as a straight Cabernet," Peter Cowley explained in New Zealand. "It was made as a Bordeaux blend along similar proportions as Château Latour. Then Merlot became of more of an interest through the 1980's and early 1990's." The figures I possess show that the debut '82 consisted of 94% Cabernet Sauvignon, dropping to 75% by 1988 and then a major decrease to 54% with the '89 Coleraine.

Between 1982 and 1988 Coleraine was sourced from the eponymous vineyard, the home of John Buck and his family, but from 1989 it became a selection of the best blends. Nick summarized the blending: *"We usually have a total of 45 batches of which we consider around 15 for Coleraine and usually whittle it down to just ten. We blind taste different microblends the following November and December after malolactic and so we never know the constitution until we have decided on the final blend. We aim for about 13.5% alcohol: any higher than that and you start losing the aromatics."*

Te Mata use a wide range of fermenters with a high surface area to promote extraction with the cap plunged three or four times per day. "We used to do the pigeage by hand," Cowley explained, "but now we have a pneumatic plunging system." John Buck continues in London: "We are very conscious of the wines going in barrel stable. It is crucial to look for a molecular weight in the tannins before transferring the wine into barrel so we complete the malolactic in tank." The wine spends between 18- to 20-months in French oak (Demtos and Tarançeau with 75% new), egg fining practiced at the end of the second winter. Quantity varies between 700 and 4,000 case depending upon the vintage.

The Wines: Coleraine 1991-2006

The following notes are amalgamated from two highly impressive verticals, the first with Peter Cowley in Hawkes Bay, and the second in London with John and Nick Buck courtesy of Linden Wilkie, as part of his Classic Series for www.finewineexperience.com The Fine Wine Experience.

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The **Te Mata Coleraine 1991** was the oldest that I tasted both in Hawkes Bay and London, a blend of 59% Cabernet Sauvignon, 29% Merlot and 12% Cabernet Franc and at release regarded the best to date, the harvest completed under clear skies save for rainfall on 9th and 10th April (picking commenced the following day.) This was a New Zealand wine that had not only survived, but has evolved into something intellectual with an almost Graves-like nose, the palate blessed with Coleraine's typical smooth harmonious texture and an elegant finish inflected with leather and mocha. Perhaps this is now just a year or two over the hill, but I doubt you will find a '91 claret that offers so much pleasure (with the exception of Latour appropriately enough.) However, no Coleraine was none declared in either 1992 or 1993 as sunlight was obscured by smoke and ash from the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo on the Philippines. The 1994 vintage was omitted from both verticals although I am led to believe it has a "modest" reputation.

Both the **Te Mata Coleraine 1995** and the **Te Mata Coleraine 1996** are showing brilliantly well. John Buck suggested that at that time they were experimenting with a little malolactic in barrel and you can just detect that on the lactic nose of the 1995. Both these wines have developed that engaging Graves-like bouquet with a leafy, savoury palate that is very Old World in style although the 1996 has an ounce more vitality. Both are at their apex but they should last beautifully for another 5-8 years. The Te Mata Coleraine 1997 is fleshier and lacked the structure as the 1995 and 1996, lacking the same generosity and should be drunk before those aforementioned wines although it makes an agreeable nod to the Loire thanks to the higher percentage of Cabernet Franc. John mentioned that he had to replant some Cabernet Franc because the original clones were very poor and that unlike Cabernet and Merlot, the vines need to be aged 25-30 years before they can yield sufficient quality fruit.

"The 1998 was a very hot, very dry year, an El Nino year, with the same heat summation as the Barossa Valley," recalled John and indeed, the rainfall figures show that in March only 6mm fell compared to 110mm in 1997. "The concern was that it was so dry that you had to make sure the plants did not get stressed. Pete Cowley said that he could tell by the way the grass looks that we should make sure the vines have plenty of water otherwise they just shut down," explained John Buck.

Tasted twice in New Zealand and in London the **Te Mata Coleraine 1998** is a great success: floral on the nose, almost Margaux-like with a silky smooth texture on the palate belying the intensity underneath and tangible succulence on the finish. You could easily drink it now but I think another 3-4 years will be worth the wait. The **Te Mata Coleraine 1999** was the first relative disappointment of the flight, an earlier harvest rendering the nose more straightforward than previous vintages and bereft of that Graves-like trait I find so appealing.

"In 2003 we went to Vinexpo," John recount, "the year the air conditioning broke down. They had a strange tasting done by a jury of sommeliers and we got invited to this prize giving. I went with Chester Osborne and none of the awards were going to French wines. In that year the Te Mata Coleraine 2000 won an award but I remember at the end, the chairman exclaimed: "Ah, the French have finally won an award for Perrin". He then realized it was for their Californian wine."

Order is restored for the **Te Mata Coleraine 2000**: a more complex nose from a season noticeable for its dryness (in fact they recorded not a single drop in February.) A very complex, sorry to be repetitive, with a Graves-like nose with touches of leather and espresso, the palate leafy with sous-bois characteristics although it does not quite have the crescendo of flavours on the finish to merit a higher score. The **Te Mata Coleraine 2001** has a gorgeous eucalyptus tinged nose and a vibrant palate, which again, unlike more recent vintage, is just a little linear towards the finish although I have a feeling this will improve with another 3-5 years in bottle.

The **Te Mata Coleraine 2002** has a whopping 36% Cabernet Franc in the blend thanks to the exceptionally long harvest that finished on 22nd April, allowing the grape to fully ripen. Tar, leather and black tea on the nose, a beautifully structure palate with superb balance make this a wonderful wine that will blossom over the next decade. Sorry to stab them in the back again, but it would embarrass a whole swathe of clarets convinced that they rule the Cabernet roost. The **Te Mata Coleraine 2003** has a more exotic nose with hints of Turkish Delight, bright cherry and raspberry fruit on the palate that goes to form a more approachable Coleraine to be consumed in the next 5-10 years. With no Cabernet Franc in the blend, I think it just lacks a little dimension.

Just when you think Coleraine has been driving in fifth gear, you meet the **Te Mata Coleraine 2004**. Participants in the London tasting were amazed by the quality of both these wines, divided between which was the better. The '04 has a very complex nose with hints of musk, dried orange peel and wild heather lacing those leafy black fruits, whilst the palate is full-bodied, very concentrated with an ethereal sense of balance and harmony. It is a 15-20 year wine. The last two vintages...well, I have babbled on long enough and I already covered them in the WA - both fabulous wines up there with some of the best Bordeaux (and this comes from someone who tasted over fifty vintages of La Mission the week before.)

After completing two verticals of Coleraine, witnessing a couple of tasters undergo their Te Mata epiphany, I conjectured whether this is New Zealand's greatest wine? Well, let me put it this way, it is the frontrunner although I am first to suggest that despite fulfilling my quota of New Zealand wines for the next twenty years, there is still much to discover. During the London tasting, John commented: *"When we made our first wine I thought, "I hope this will be all right" because there were no comparative yardsticks."* One could argue that the scenario has little changed for after so many years there are still very few Bordeaux blends that hold a light to Coleraine. This is the only one that not just survives, but evolves into a complex, intellectual entity that rewards long-term cellaring year after year. Moreover, tasting over a dozen vintages, there are the ups and downs, the variations in style that make Bordeaux so compelling. Over dinner, I suggest to John Buck about performing a blind tasting: Coleraine vs. Pessac-Léognan? I think it would be an intriguing comparison but for now, I am more than satisfied relishing their performance in two verticals at opposite ends of the world.

Now, if a few Bordeaux châteaux could taste Coleraine, perhaps they would be enlightened about the apathy towards their 2007s because great Cabernet extends further than the boundaries of the Left Bank. A long way further.

Thanks to Nick and John Buck for their time in both Hawkes Bay and London and also to Linden Wilkie for organizing the latter.

Tasting Notes

1991 Te Mata Coleraine Cabernet/Merlot 90

Just showing signs of maturity on the thin tawny rim. A very Graves-like nose with good definition: cigar box, gravel, a touch of black olive and leather and after five minutes in glass, a touch of wild mint. Very good definition and vigour. Similar bouquet in London with perhaps a little more exoticism. The palate is medium-bodied, very smooth in texture, certainly developing a meaty, savoury mid-palate. Very elegant and well balanced, leading towards an autumnal finish: cooked meats, a touch of mocha, spice and leather. Moderate to long length. Probably

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just past its peak but a lovely wine to savour – very mellow and sedate. Tasted March 2008.

1995 Te Mata Coleraine Cabernet/Merlot 92

A blend of 59% Cabernet, 34% Merlot and 7% Cabernet Franc. A deep garnet core with a dark brick rim. The nose is more focused but has more vigour and lift than the 1991 with bright red-berried fruit. Wild mint develops with aeration, dried blood, a touch of dried leaves and just a hint of capsicum. The palate is medium-bodied, very well-balanced, cohesive with dense, slightly chewy tannins. Good grip. Notes of mocha, leather, a touch of chestnut and dark chocolate. Very elegant. A lovely dry, savoury finish that begs another sip. Excellent. Tasted May 2008.

1996 Te Mata Coleraine Cabernet/Merlot 93

A blend of 53% Cabernet, 33% Merlot and 14% Cabernet Franc. A garnet core with thin tawny rim. The nose is impressive, gently wafting from the glass, again adopting those Graves-like overtones with roasted herbs, hot bricks and autumn leaves. Superb delineation. The palate is medium-bodied with very fine tannins and excellent acidity. Notes of blackberry, espresso, smoke and a touch of cooked meats. This has great tension and poise, leaving the tongue tingling with joy. Very focused and quite youthful on the finish. Give this more time – it will be worth it. Tasted May 2008.

1997 Te Mata Coleraine Cabernet/Merlot 89

A blend of 55% Cabernet, 30% Merlot and 15% Cabernet Franc. This has a deeper colour than the 1996 Coleraine. A very autumnal nose, very savoury, nutty, with scents of bitumen, roasted herbs, tobacco and straw. Redolent of a Loire thanks to the higher proportion of Cabernet Franc. The palate is medium-bodied, fleshy with good acidity, nice balance with a ripe, cranberry, chestnut and green-tinged finish where the Cabernet Franc just exerts its authority. Drink now. Tasted May 2008.

1998 Te Mata Coleraine Cabernet/Merlot 91

A blend of 60% Cabernet, 32% Merlot and 8% Cabernet Franc. A deep garnet core with marginal aging on the rim. The nose is completely different to the Coleraine 1995: much more vigour and freshness. Very pure, beautifully defined bouquet of damson, wild hedgerow, mint and a Margaux-like floral scent of violets. Much more feminine than the 1991 or the 1995. The palate is medium-bodied, very well balanced, natural with fine acidity. Silky tannin, elegant with sour cherry, a touch of pomegranate, leather and a touch of brett towards the finish? It has great succulence than older vintages but is still very refined and certainly has many years ahead of it. Tasted January 2008.

1999 Te Mata Coleraine Cabernet/Merlot 88

Showing some maturity on the deep amber rim, this has a comparatively simple nose with damson, tar, a hint of prune and just lacking that Graves-like quality

from the great Coleraine's such as the 1995 and 1996. The palate is medium-bodied, high-toned with notes of sour cherry, tar and leather, although the finish takes its foot off the pedal and fades away rather. Drink now. Tasted May 2008.

2000 Te Mata Coleraine Cabernet/Merlot 90

A deeper colour compared to the Coleraine 1998. A captivating, Graves-like nose with blackberry, espresso, leather and cedar with the bottle in London showing just a touch of nougat. Very well defined and focused. The palate is medium-bodied, very well balanced with fine, slightly chewy tannins. A little more weight than older vintages but with very good acidity balancing the wine up perfectly. The finish is very refined, quite leafy, autumnal with roasted herbs, sous-bois, saddle-leather and a touch of mocha. Good length, not quite as persistent as the 1998 but more feminine and lithe – particularly in London. Dry aftertaste. Superb. Tasted January 2008.

2001 Te Mata Coleraine Cabernet/Merlot 89+

A very deep garnet core. The nose is very intense, this time inflected with a touch of eucalyptus – certainly a more ostentatious nose with blackberry, a touch of tar, macerated black cherries, smoke and leather. The palate has a lively, sweet entry, tarry black fruits, leather just developing although for me; it does not quite fan out towards the finish. Still very tight, very fine tannins and an attractive dry, tarry finish. It needs much more time. Tasted May 2008.

2002 Te Mata Coleraine Cabernet/Merlot 92

The highest percentage of Cabernet Franc in Coleraine at 36%. A dark garnet core with youthful rim. The leafy nose is very tight but with great delineation, blackberry, black tea, tar and leather – very intense and exuberant. The palate is medium-bodied, supremely well balanced with superb acidity, a natural elegance and charm. Tobacco, damson, boysenberry with a touch of graphite with great tension on the off-dry finish. This is a top-notch Coleraine with a great future. Tasted May 2008.

2003 Te Mata Coleraine Cabernet/Merlot 90

Frost reduced the quantity of Coleraine to 20% from vines higher up the hill. A deep garnet core with brick rim. The nose is very lifted, more minerally than expected with notes of redcurrant, red cherry, wild strawberry and with aeration, hints of something more exotic: peach and a touch of Turkish Delight. The palate is medium-bodied, very well balanced, natural and elegant with vibrant acidity lending this Coleraine much life and vigour. A little sharper than other vintages, bright cherry and wild strawberry leading the charge towards the finish with a slight tart red-berried finish. Good length. A lighter, perhaps more approachable style of Coleraine for medium-term drinking but a great success considering the difficulty of the vintage. Tasted May 2008.

2004 Te Mata Coleraine Cabernet/Merlot 95

This is much deeper in colour than the 2003. The nose is divine: captivating and complex with scents of cherry, wild strawberry, heather, a touch of musk and dried orange peel. Mercurial: one of those wines where you have to keep dipping your nose into the glass to witness its change. The palate is medium-bodied with an ethereal balance, perfect acidity and complete harmony. Cherry, wild strawberry, dried apricot and a touch of leather on the finish. Very long. Exceptional. Tasted January 2008.

2005 Te Mata Coleraine Cabernet/Merlot 93

Lowest berry weights. The exquisite 2005 Coleraine (37% Cabernet Sauvignon, 18% Cabernet Franc and 45% Merlot) exhibits a more straightforward bouquet than the 2004, but more floral with violets and a touch of rose petals inflecting the bouquet of dark cherry, strawberry and spice. The palate is very well-balanced, perhaps a little more weighty than the 2004, perhaps prettier and more feminine with more floral overtones. Very elegant, with silky, filigree tannins and a sensuous, almost understated finish with supreme delineation and natural balance. A really beautiful wine to savor over the next decade. Both wines confirm Coleraine's reputation as New Zealand's benchmark Bordeaux-blend wine and in terms of quality, I would have no hesitation placing it within the class of Bordeaux Second Growths. Tasted January 2008.

2006 Te Mata Coleraine Cabernet/Merlot 94

The magnificent 2006 Coleraine (43% Cabernet Sauvignon, 8% Cabernet Franc and 43% Merlot) is blessed with a complex nose of macerated cherries, wild strawberry with touches of hung game and leather developing with aeration, the palate full-bodied with an irresistible cashmere texture, a wine that will age effortlessly over 10-15 years. Tasted January 2008.