

## How Kate and Max came to own Pukeora Estate

### The Pukeora Purchase Story – March 2000.

While on a cycling trip through Chablis and Burgundy, France (the home of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir wines) we hatched the dream of growing grapes on limestone hills. Moving back to New Zealand in 2000 provided a dilemma – stick with the safety of office jobs or head off into unfamiliar pastures and try growing grapes. Adventure won out and thus began our weeks long search driving our Kombi through the hills from Martinborough to Napier in the hope of finding that perfect hillside block. The shopping list was: at least 20 acres of warm (ie hot), sunny, north facing, gently sloping, free draining limestone ideally with a touch of embedded clay, frost free, hail free – and with a reliable water supply. Finding the right block proved tricky - too steep, too gentle, too small or developed for lifestylers (expensive), too windy, too cold, or no water.

Eventually we decided it was too hard – maybe we should head for Nelson? Then the mobile rang – it was Pat – *“Think I might have found you something – but you’ll need to see it – a bit of a complex –hard to explain !”* We just happened to be in Waipukurau on our way South and were immediately intrigued. We turned up in our Kombi to meet the Property Brokers agents; Pat the land agent and Dave the commercial agent dressed in their auction suits. We probably seemed unconvincing potential purchasers: tanned, very casually dressed, adorned in cheap bracelets from our recent 10 weeks in India, topped off with arriving in a Kombi. Although the windscreen shielded some facial expressions we were pretty sure we saw Dave’s eyeballs roll upwards and thought we could imagine the muttered exchanges along the lines of *“What have you have you brought along now ?”*. After introductions we followed their car up the steep Pukeora Hill covered in large craggy chunks of outcropping limestone interspersed with long dry near-dead grass wilting in the heat. Driving along the wide tarmac driveway an endless expanse of buildings emerged from extensive landscaped gardens. We pulled up beside one of the giant buildings and Dave hauled out a wheelbarrow sized keyring. We were quickly led through endless vinyl corridors linking cavernous rooms and eventually emerged in an older wooden part of the building lined with a wall of windows.

While scraping our jaws off the native wood floors our eyes were drawn past the windows to an amazing view – a gently sloping north facing hillside covered in acres of parched brown pasture. Just beyond the hill was a rippling river meandering through grassy plains leading the eye to a backbone of stunning mountains framing the horizon. We looked at each other and pinched ourselves – maybe our quest was over – could this be it ? It was definitely love at first sight ! One thing remained to clinch it - Pat grabbed a spade from the boot and we dug a hole in a dry section of the paddock – after a few strokes, some porous yellowy stones were unearthed – *“gold”* no but limestone YES – Eureka !

From that moment in the afternoon, our hearts were pounding, heads were spinning – wow – what had we stumbled upon. Eased by a few measures of wine in the van that night, we made the decision – yes – *“it’s meant to be”* – we’ll make an offer. After a restless night we rocked up at the PB office and announced we’d like to buy Pukeora. Stunned rather than surprised to see us again, Pat and Dave whisked us to off to the lawyers’ office to spend the day perusing volumes of documents and discussing details with lawyers, agents and an accountant. By 7pm that night the last fax came through from Health Care Hawke’s Bay – Congratulations – we were now members of the Hospital Owner’s Club !

### **How we settled in to owning hospital....**

Our previous home being a one bedroom flat in London with a small roof terrace, Pukeora was a tad overwhelming. Where on the 86 acre property would we set up house ? Would it be one of the 5 tenanted houses or one of the two 3 bedroom flats or the 16 bedroom apartment or one of the 2 adjoining 3 bedroom houses (ex-isolation ward) or maybe we could make a zany open plan home in one of the monstrous warehouse sized rooms in the old hospital ? We settled for the 3 bedroom house tucked into one end of the ex-isolation ward.

Getting used to owning a disused hospital takes some time. Weeks ? Months ? A Year ? Not sure really – it's a matter of transition - once you get used to walking around without getting lost, things seem less crazy. The first weekend we were there, the drought broke. Attention turned to the gutters – where does one start to clean them out ? How many hectares of roof ? Which part of the property do we need to get our heads around first ? The well and pump-house, water tower, the coal fired boiler, the electrical “substation” in the basement, the village sized sewerage ponds, the fire protection system, the lawns - oh my - they are growing fast ! Over a few weeks with help from some ex-staff, we gradually gathered enough gems of knowledge to begin to feel we had some sort of control over the place.

If at times it all seemed too daunting after a day's toil – a great fix was to grab a bottle of wine, wander around to the best viewpoint and with glass in hand watch the light changing across the hills, plains and mountains and try to imagine just how those grapes may eventually add to it all.

### **The lifestyle change .....**

Based in London, Kate was a lawyer and Max was an analyst-programmer. Joining a winter wine class seemed like the perfect way to break the dreariness – jump off the tube and roll up to a classroom where a selection of lovely wines were poured for us. Enthusiastic tutors steered us through wines of various countries, styles and varieties. Quite quickly the wine bug drew us in and we found ourselves vying for holidays cycling through delightful European wine regions including France, Italy and Spain. The thought of such a magic lifestyle was luring us towards that “something else”.

On our balcony we grew a couple of tomato plants and a tub of rocket so we figured grapes couldn't be that hard. Ha Ha !

The rest is a gradual process of shedding blood, sweat, tears and money in transforming Pukeora from a hospital into a vineyard, winery, venue, and accommodation facility. And that's another story !