

# FOOD & WINE

## This Private Island in Fiji Is One of the Dreamiest Destinations for Wine

Cellar Master Lily Puamau has helped build a travel-worthy wine collection in one of the world's most remote locations.

By **Alexandra Owens** | Published on August 12, 2022



PHOTO: COURTESY OF KOKOMO PRIVATE ISLAND

Imagine yourself, for a moment, indulging in some of the world's most impressive wines. Perhaps you're touring Champagne's historic caves or exploring underground vaults tucked beneath vineyard-dotted hills in the north of Italy. Maybe you're asking a sommelier to pick a bottle for you in Capetown or Sydney. Or you could be sipping a glass of Château Margaux on the beach in the South Pacific. In 2022, good wine – and a passion for it – isn't restricted by borders.

Nowhere is that more evident, perhaps, than at Kokomo Private Island Fiji, where a noteworthy new wine collection featuring varietals from Europe, Australia, and California has been quietly growing over the last several years. Found in one of earth's most remote destinations – Fiji lies more than 1,000 miles away from New Zealand, its closest neighbor – Kokomo opened in 2017 to near immediate critical acclaim. Yet like all other properties in the country, the ultra luxurious resort was soon required to close its doors due to COVID-19, welcoming guests again only in December 2021.

During a period of refresh and reinvention, Kokomo took time to quietly build its wine collection – currently standing at nearly 3,000 bottles – a cellar worthy of storage, entertaining, and private dinners. Stocked with mature vintages like a 2004 Henschke Hill of Grace Shiraz from Australia as well as crowd favorites like Château d'Esclans Whispering Angel Rosé (credited by some experts as starting the rosé boom in the US), Kokomo's selection matches the room's lowkey but sumptuous atmosphere.

With western windows facing the sprawling ocean, pre-dinner tastings are accompanied by the unmistakably brilliant colors of a South Pacific sunset. Afterward, guests can amble out onto the resort's central, open-air deck to linger with a glass in hand. The wines may have traveled a long way from home, but when you're breathing in the salty air and taking in panoramic views of the water, you'll be challenged to think of a more pleasant way to drink them.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF KOKOMO PRIVATE ISLAND

Since early on, the soul of Kokomo's wine program has been Cellar Master Lily Puamau. Born in the capital of Suva, Puamau originally came to the resort to work in housekeeping – a position she left just four months in to join the food and beverage team. After discovering an abiding fascination for wine, Puamau started the process of formalizing her education, receiving her WSET (Wine & Spirit Education Trust) Level 1 and 2 Awards, and becoming the property's go-to wine expert. Currently studying to complete her level WSET Level 3 and Level 4, she'll be the first fully certified sommelier in Fiji once she receives her diploma

Granted, you can't teach raw talent – something Puamau has in spades. These instincts come in especially handy at mealtime, when guests are served a constantly rotating menu of seafood from the only dock-to-dish sustainable fishing program in the South Pacific and fresh fruits and vegetables from the island's 5.5-acre farm.

"We're armed with information about the menu every night at the briefing," says Puamau. "We go through every detail, every ingredient that's been picked that day, every fish that's been caught. Right away I'm looking at the guests and thinking if they order lobster pasta and don't enjoy white wine, what kind of lighter red will be best for them. It's always a dialogue about finding what the guest likes and something in their price range."



PHOTO: COURTESY OF KOKOMO PRIVATE ISLAND

While Kokomo offers plenty of celebrated prestige wines, including all five first growth Bordeaux, Puamau and the wine team has found that a bold, velvety red isn't always the best choice to complement, say, lemon butter prawns on a warm tropical night. That's why, since reopening, the wine list has evolved to include more options, such as White Burgundy, Red Burgundy, and Pinot Noir, that suit Fiji's climate and cuisine. Puamau's all-time favorite Champagne, Ruinart Blanc de Blancs, also features on the menu."

We can tell everybody we've got Château Mouton Rothschild, but the reality is, people are drinking lighter," says Kelley Schaefer, Kokomo Food & Beverage Manager. "So we've revamped the program to be really well-balanced and diverse. We've got something for everyone. They could be the richest guy in the world who has a 10,000-bottle cellar at home or someone who just wants a nice rosé on their picnic – we can take care of them."

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