

Beaujolais: revival of the fittest

From St-Amour in the north to Brouilly in the south, the 10 crus of Beaujolais suffered in the past from a lack of investment and poor winemaking, not to mention the glut of Nouveau. But things have changed, says James Lawther MW

Photograph: Hemis/Alamy

THERE'S A SHAKE-UP going on in Beaujolais that wine lovers should heed. The Beaujolais crus, in particular, are demonstrating that there's more to the Gamay grape than just Nouveau. A series of successful vintages, including the exceptional 2009, are part of the reason but old vines, a unique terroir and a growing band of diligent and determined producers are also vital factors.

Trying to convince consumers that Beaujolais can be serious is not an easy task. Beaujolais Nouveau has held such a stranglehold on taste and communication since the 1970s that it's difficult to believe the region produces anything other than this light, fruity and rather standardised libation. Indeed, at the height of its success in the late 1980s, Nouveau accounted for more than half of the



region's production. This has now been throttled back to about a third (30 million bottles in 2013) but continues to have an impact on perception.

So why get excited about what's going on in the region? Well, on the grand scale, and mainly due to a downturn in demand, the total vineyard area has been reduced to 16,571 hectares (2013) from a high of 23,000ha in the late 1980s. Consequently, production has been curbed in an bid to assuage the crisis. Of most interest, though, is what's happening in the 6,191ha that constitute the 10 Beaujolais crus (see box p51).

These are located in the north of the region, just south of the Mâconnais, in a strikingly hilly terrain composed predominantly of granite and schist soils. Moulin-à-Vent, Fleurie, St-Amour and the others all have individual identities but their common factor is that they represent the quality end of Beaujolais. This has been somewhat hidden in the past by the influence of Nouveau, a lack of investment and, if truth be told, not enough decent winemaking. But things are changing.

On the political and administrative front, the crus have just quit (in December 2014) the body that promotes and manages all the appellations of the region. Under their own banner, the ODG, and

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led by their spirited president from Fleurie, Audrey Charton, they are taking their destiny in their own hands. 'We want to have a stronger presence so we can raise the standard of wine throughout the region,' she says. Locally, this is seen as a seismic decision and could have further ramifications.

Personality and terroir

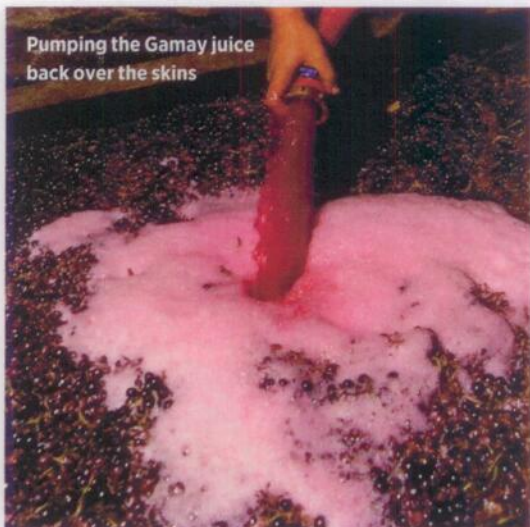
Of more interest to consumers, though, is what's different in the glass. What do you get that is above and beyond regular Beaujolais? Well, at their best, these are wines of real personality and character that speak of soil and climate. The grape may be Gamay, but the crus find some resonance with the wines of their Burgundian neighbours to the >



Above: Audrey Charton, president of the ODG, a group representing the Beaujolais crus

Below: the rolling, verdant vineyards of Fleurie, one of the 10 crus of Beaujolais





Pumping the Gamay juice back over the skins

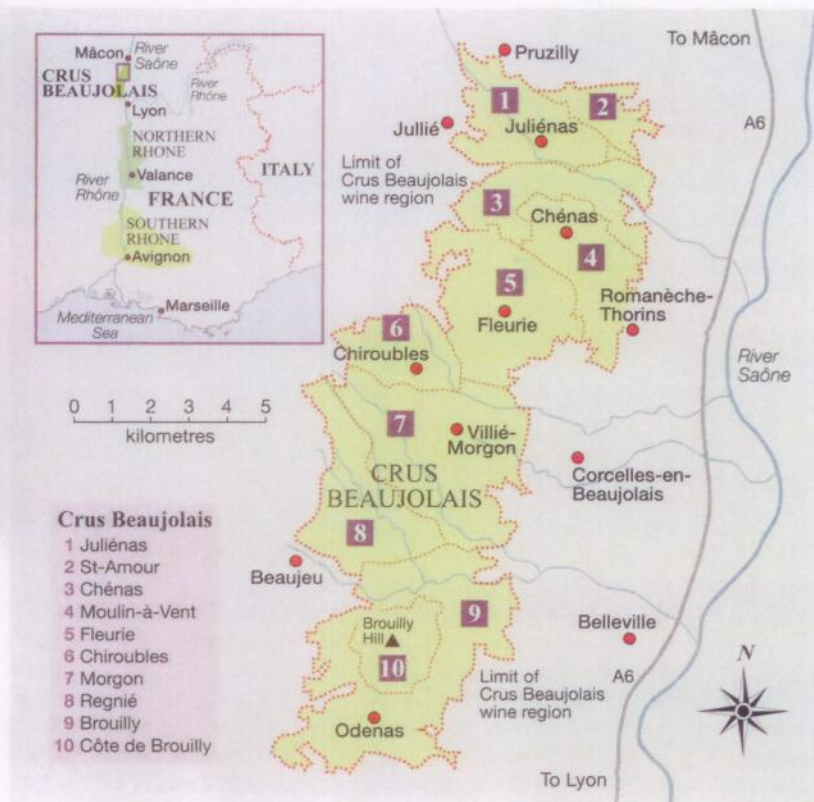
*'The most contentious technique in Beaujolais is not carbonic maceration, but thermo-
vinification, which most growers in the crus abhor'*

north and those from the northern Rhône some 70km south. A semi-continental climate and poor, granite-based soils (those in southern Beaujolais are richer and produce lighter wines) provide freshness and structure, the acidity and supple tannins contributing a linear precision and firmness ideally enjoyed with food. Alcohol levels are a reasonable 12.5% to 13%.

Aromatically, one can find minerality, for want of a better word, with often a hint of the pepper and spice associated with the northern Rhône. The fruit expression can be red or dark depending on the style of the vintage, the crus with their southerly and easterly hillside exposures ripening earlier than vineyards at the southern end of the region. In short the crus have a delicious smack of fruit but also the structure to age, some resembling a mature Pinot Noir with a few years in bottle.

Individual nuances found among the 10 crus is dependent on elevation, exposure and soil profile. Since 2009 a detailed study of the soils has been underway, the results now in the public domain. What has proved to be staggering is the diversity even over a short distance, but in essence the principal soil types are granite, a 'blue stone' slate and diorite mix, ancient alluvial stones and limestone. Each cru finds its personality via the mix of these elements, the growers now with a clearer idea of what each parcel contains.

The official density of planting for the crus is 6,000 vines/hectare, but in reality the top growers often work with 10,000 to 12,000 vines/hectare, pruned in the traditional, yield-curbing gobelet fashion. The other surprise is the age of the vines. I was amazed to learn the advanced age of many of



Above: the unique 'blue stone' slate is one of the soil types found across the Beaujolais crus

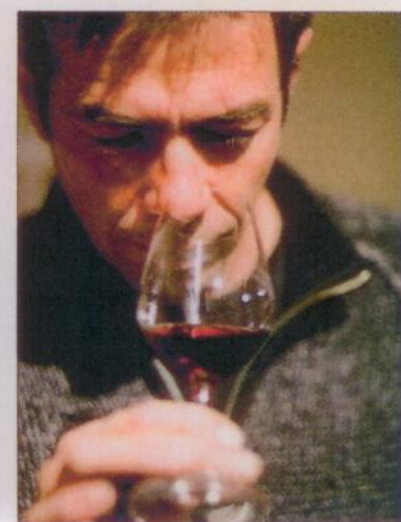
the vineyards – parcels at Domaine Louis-Claude Desvignes in Morgon range from 60 to 100 years, for instance, while Thibault Liger-Belair quoted 50 to 140 years at his eponymous domaine in Moulin-à-Vent. Hand harvesting clearly remains de facto, although machines are now permitted.

Winemaker influence

As for winemaking, some points need clarification. These days the most contentious technique in Beaujolais is not carbonic maceration, where intact bunches of grapes undergo an intracellular fermentation over about a week in a sealed tank of carbon dioxide. Instead, the controversial process is thermovinification, where the grape must is heated to 60°C for 12 hours before being cooled rapidly over about four days. This extracts aroma and colour but leads to homogenisation and wines that are aromatic but dull and short on the palate.

Most growers in the Beaujolais crus abhor this technique, relying on one of two other methods instead. The majority practise a form of semi-carbonic maceration, whereby whole bunches are placed in a tank and both normal and intracellular fermentation is allowed to take place. Extraction of aroma and colour is obtained by pumping the juice back over the macerated skins, punching down the skins, or racking the juice off and returning it to the tank, in a process lasting up to 15 days. The wines are then aged in a neutral tank or old casks for about a year.

The other winemaking process, which is referred to locally as the 'Burgundian method', is simply the classic method of fermenting destemmed and crushed grapes. Both techniques work the grape



Photographs: Serge Chapuis(2); Daniel Gillet; Mick Rock/Cephas(2)

Clockwise from above: vineyards in the Chiroubles cru surround the Chapelle St-Roch; Burgundy négociant Louis Jadot acquired Château des Jacques in 1996; Jean-Marc Burgaud is famed for his wines from Morgon's Côte du Py

must to obtain structure and substance and take the wine beyond an aromatic burst of fruit.

The other implicit influence is that of vintage. Climate still has the final say in ripeness and style of wine and, in recent times, the choice for the consumer has boiled down to later- and earlier-ripening years. Recent Beaujolais vintages like 2009, 2011 and 2014 were all earlier ripening – 2009 atypically rich and opulent, 2011 concentrated and complex and 2014 looking to be full-bodied and food-friendly. These are the vintages with a modern feel. If you would prefer something along more classical lines, try the later-ripening 2010s and 2013s, which are fine, fresh and structured. Beware of 2012, which was compromised by rain.

Investment and change

I mentioned at the outset that investment had been lacking and winemaking could be improved, but here too there has been change. At a judicious level, domaines like Daniel Bouland and Louis-Claude Desvignes in Morgon have in recent years acquired pneumatic presses and this has clearly helped improve the textural quality of their wines. >

Know your Beaujolais crus

Juliéнас (578ha) Mainly blue-stone soils. Deeply coloured wines with red fruits, minerality and freshness.

St-Amour (319ha) Diverse soils. Lively, light, fruity and floral wines.

Chénas (249ha) A steep granite hill with alluvial slopes. Generous, dark-fruited, structured wines.

Moulin-à-Vent (717ha) Pink granite slopes. Concentrated, complex, powerful with definite ageing potential.

Fleurie (914ha) 90% pink granite. Elegant, aromatic, floral, finely textured wines.



Chiroubles

Chiroubles (334ha) Pink granite slopes of the highest altitude. Lively, fragrant, delicate wines.

Morgon (1,114ha) Granite and alluvial soils with seams of blue stone. Dense, structured, ageworthy wines with black cherry characters.

Regnié (368ha) Granite soils. Supple, fruity wines with a red fruit character.

Brouilly (1,257ha) Pink granite, ancient alluvial pebbles and limestone hillocks. Sound, generous, fruity wines.

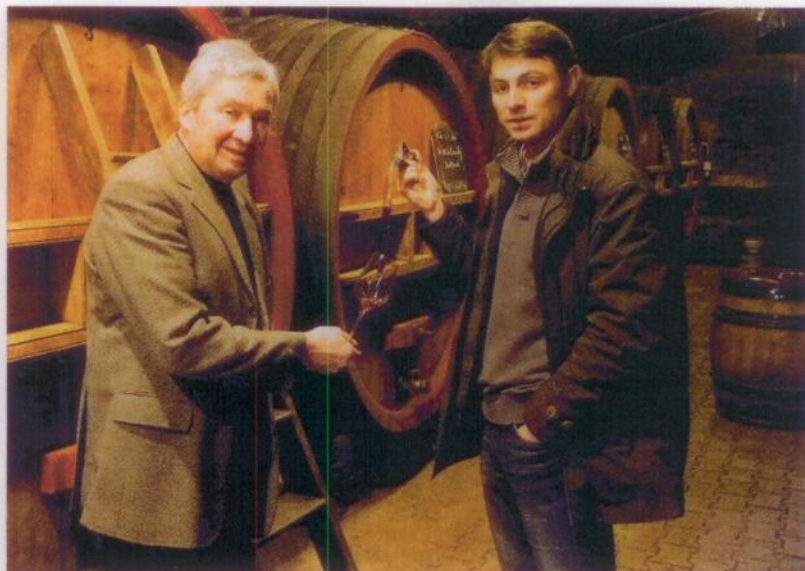
Côte de Brouilly (340ha) Blue stone and shale on steep slopes. Dense wines with fine tannins, pepper and mineral notes; fine ageing potential.

'People thought I was mad at the time, but land values have since increased by 20% due to demand' Thibault Liger-Belair on buying his first vines in Beaujolais in 2008

New names and a younger generation have also entered the frame with figures like Jean-Marc Burgaud in Morgon and Claude-Edouard Geoffray at Château Thivin demonstrating technical prowess.

On a grander scale there has also been change of ownership, with Burgundy, in particular, investing heavily in the crus. Thibault Liger-Belair from Nuits-St-Georges bought his first vines in 2008 and now has 11ha. 'People thought I was mad at the time, but land values have since increased by 20% due to demand,' he says. Other Burgundian growers present in the crus are Frédéric Lafarge of Volnay and Louis Boillot of Chambolle-Musigny.

Nor are the serious négociants absent. Jadot acquired Château des Jacques in 1996, but more recently the Henriot family of Bouchard Père et Fils bought Villa Ponciago (2008), Albert Bichot acquired Domaine de Rochegrès (2014) and Joseph Drouhin has just taken over the management of the Hospices de Belleville, which owns vineyards in Brouilly, Fleurie and Morgon.



Above: Claude-Edouard Geoffray of Château Thivin (right) is one of a number of younger winemakers whose technical abilities are helping take cru Beaujolais to the next level

Other investors from outside Burgundy have also acquired holdings, so clearly things are humming. Fleurie, Morgon and Moulin-à-Vent are leading the charge, so keep an eye out for these crus. Above all, remember that if you want authenticity, terroir and character then the Beaujolais crus really can deliver. It's chalk and cheese compared to Nouveau. **D**

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Lawther's top 2013 cru Beaujolais reds



Château Thivin, La Chapelle, Côte de Brouilly 17.5/20 (91/100)
£18-£20.50 (2011) **Domaine Direct, Theatre of Wine**
Dense and racy with an affirmed structure. Spice and red fruit notes. Fine texture. Loads of freshness and length. **Drink** 2016-2022 **Alcohol** 13%

Domaine Daniel Bouland, Vieilles Vignes, Morgon 17.5 (91)
£19.26 **Seckford, Vine Trail**
Concentrated and intense. Complex dark fruit, pepper and liquorice notes. Firm but refined texture. Structured. Long, saline finish. **Drink** 2015-2022 **Alc** 13%

Domaine Thibault Liger-Belair, Vieilles Vignes, Moulin-à-Vent 17.5 (91)
£13.33 (ib) **Flint Wines**
Tight, dense and structured. Intense nose with morello cherry notes. Mineral palate and long, firm finish. **Drink** 2017-2024 **Alc** 13%

Domaine Chignard, Les Moriers, Fleurie 17 (90)
£12.50-£16.50 **AG Wines, Berry Bros & Rudd, The Wine Society**

Elegant red fruit and lifted floral nose. Silky texture. Poised and complete. Delicious. **Drink** 2015-2018 **Alc** 12.5%

Domaine Louis-Claude Desvignes, La Voûte St-Vincent, Morgon 17 (90)
£13.95 **Berry Bros & Rudd**
Floral-violet nose. Very much on the fruit but good intensity. Finely woven tannins. Pure and almost feminine for a Morgon. Good value. **Drink** 2015-2017 **Alc** 13%

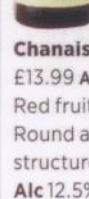


Jean-Marc Burgaud, Côte du Py, Morgon 17 (90)
£13.50-£16.50 **Berry Bros & Rudd, The Wine Society**
Dark cherry notes with a hint of black pepper. Tight, firm and structured. Length and grip on the finish. Great value from the most famous slope in Morgon. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 13%

Domaine Laurent Martray, Vieilles Vignes, Brouilly 16.5 (88)
£14.95 **Lea & Sandeman**
Lovely depth of fruit. Eminently drinkable but should hold up for a few more years. **Drink** 2015-2018 **Alc** 12.5%



Domaine Paul Janin et Fils, Les Vignes du Tremblay, Moulin-à-Vent 16.5 (88)
£14.30 **Christopher Piper, Domaine Direct**
Subtle red fruit expression with a mineral character. Firm and structured in style. Well defined. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 13%



Dominique Piron, Domaine de la Chanaise, Morgon 16.5 (88)
£13.99 **Averys, Domaine Direct, Telegraph Wines**
Red fruit and lifted floral aroma and flavour. Round and supple on attack then firm and structured on the finish. **Drink** 2015-2017 **Alc** 12.5%



Lucien Lardy, Les Roches, Fleurie 16.5 (88)
£10.95 **The Imperial Wine Co**
Firm and more masculine in style than many Fleuries. Juicy red fruit with a strong tannic frame. Fresh finish. **Drink** 2015-2020 **Alc** 12.5%

For full details of UK stockists, see p107