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BEAUJOLAIS CRUELLY NEGLECTED

The ten crus of Beaujolais may lack the grandeur of the best of Burgundy, but for **Peter Liem**, they have a delicious charm all of their own and, contrary to the popular preconception, certainly qualify as fine wine



One of the most famous wines of France, Beaujolais is also one of the least respected. For many people, Beaujolais is largely associated with the third week of November, when the barely finished wine from the latest harvest is foisted upon consumers worldwide in one of the greatest marketing triumphs to be found anywhere in the wine business. Beaujolais Nouveau has been both a boon and a curse. On the one hand, it has turned Beaujolais into a household name; yet on the other, it has drawn valuable attention away from the real stars of the region, the wines of its ten crus, or communal appellations.

Beaujolais is technically part of Burgundy, but in practical terms it is rarely thought of as such. *The Wines of Burgundy*, the latest book by Clive Coates MW, includes Chablis and the Côte Chalonnaise but not Beaujolais; other significant books on Burgundy, such as Remington Norman's *The Great Domains of Burgundy* or Matt Kramer's *Making Sense of Burgundy*, also omit Beaujolais. This is presumably because Beaujolais is so radically different from other Burgundian appellations: Its grape

variety is different, its soils are different, and furthermore, its culture feels entirely different, with more of a kinship to Lyon than to Dijon.

I wonder, though, if part of the reason is because Beaujolais is not taken entirely seriously as a wine. The insidious specter of Beaujolais Nouveau has diminished the standing of high-quality cru Beaujolais among wine consumers, and while wines from the top growers might be willingly embraced by a hipster Parisian wine-bar crowd, they are more likely to be met with raised eyebrows at a finer-dining establishment. It's a shame, because top-quality Beaujolais has a great deal to offer.

In considering the question of why Beaujolais ought to be considered as a serious wine, I began to think about the particular traits that fine wines are commonly considered to possess, such as finesse, harmony, complexity, longevity, or expression of terroir. Of all of these characteristics, longevity is the one that I find to be the least relevant. One can argue that a truly fine wine requires a certain period of time to develop its full range of



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complexity and character. But if this arc of development takes place within five to ten years rather than 20 to 40 years, I fail to see how that factor alone serves to diminish intrinsically the quality of a wine.

Good cru Beaujolais does, in fact, take some time to show at its best, evolving in character through that process. I've drunk cru Beaujolais that was still fresh and vital at 15 years, 20 years, and even 30 years of age. I've even had a Moulin-à-Vent from 1929 that, poured blind, fooled me and my dining companions, all of whom were seasoned wine professionals, into thinking it was from the Côte d'Or. In general, however, even the best cru Beaujolais matures more rapidly than do its Pinot Noir counterparts in the Côte d'Or—for example, Jean Foillard, in Morgon, recommends drinking his Côte du Py and Cuvée Corcelette up to ten years after the vintage, and his basic Morgon at between two and five years of age.

Silky charms

As I write this, I am drinking Foillard's 2006 Corcelette, which, only a couple of years after release, has shed the eager exuberance of its youth and is already demonstrating a quite exceptional harmony and depth of flavor. Recently I had the pleasure of revisiting Foillard's 2000 Côte du Py, a Morgon that I remember as being relatively backward and constricted when it was first released.

It has since blossomed into a positively regal wine, and in terms of sheer satisfaction, I doubt that I would have traded it that evening for very many other wines of supposedly grander pedigree.

If it's finesse and refinement that one seeks, a wine from Foillard or from another first-class grower such as Marcel Lapierre or Pierre-Marie Chermette can have a silky, graceful charm that rivals many a Pinot Noir in texture and elegance. In fact, the purity of fruit found in these wines can often accentuate the feeling of finesse, and the fresh acidity, supple tannins, and relatively low alcohol of Beaujolais all combine to give it a compelling harmony and balance.

No one will argue that Beaujolais is the most complex wine in the world, yet it's not necessarily a simple one, either. While it's true that Gamay thrives on a succulent fruitiness in its youth, primary fruit is not the only component in a top-quality cru Beaujolais. The best

examples show a stony tension and a subtle, soil-driven intensity that shapes and defines the fruit flavors, and Gamay is surprisingly adept at reflecting the terroir in which it is grown. Beaujolais might not be as overtly minerally as, say, a Wachau Riesling or a Savennières from the Loire Valley, but it remains highly influenced by soil nevertheless, as evidenced by tasting through the region's various crus.

A study in terroir

This capacity for soil and site expression is the primary reason that I consider Beaujolais to be a fine wine. In fact, I would extend this sentiment to encompass wine in general: The most notable common thread among all of the world's great wines, and by far the main reason that they

are interesting, is that they all have something significant to say about the place in which they are grown.

In Beaujolais, the various crus offer a fascinating study in terroir, particularly if you taste examples from those growers who restrict their yields to reasonable levels and ferment with natural yeasts instead of factory-made ones designed to amplify fruitiness. It's useful to taste several examples from the same commune: Morgon, for example, seems to be particularly blessed with conscientious growers, and comparing wines

from estates such as Foillard, Lapierre, and Louis Claude Desvignes allows for a multifaceted perspective of Morgon's schisty slopes. It becomes even more intriguing when pairing wines from different locations within the village, contrasting Foillard's lithe, silky Corcelette with the sterner and more baritone Côte du Py, for example, or Desvignes's more elegant version of Côte du Py with his complex, ageworthy Javernières.

The ten crus of Beaujolais are located fairly close to one another, arrayed very roughly along a north-south axis, and the most northern of them, St-Amour, lies only about 12 miles (20km) away from Côte de Brouilly in the south. The characters of their respective wines, though, can differ to a notable degree, influenced largely by subtle changes in the composition of the soil. For the most part, this involves variations on themes of granite and schist in this section of the appellation. (South of the crus, some vines are grown on a gold-colored limestone

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known as *pierres dorées*, but these vineyards qualify only for the regional appellations of Beaujolais and Beaujolais Supérieur.)

In the north, where the region's granite tends to be mixed with higher proportions of clay, St-Amour and Juliénas are best represented by the wines of Michel Tête, which are highly aromatic and boldly flavored. The nearby crus of Moulin-à-Vent and Fleurie are adjacent to one another, yet their soils are dissimilar, with a heavy influence of manganese in the granite of the former, as opposed to the purer pink granite of the latter. These wines are starkly different in personality, too. A great Moulin-à-Vent from Bernard Diochon, Paul Janin, or Louis Jadot's Château des Jacques shows a powerful structure and mouth-filling depth, while a top Fleurie like that of Yves Métras, Michel Chignard, or Jean-Marc Despres retains a certain delicacy and floral finesse, no matter how prominent the fruit happens to be. Crus such as Chiroubles and Regnié lean toward an elegance echoing that of Fleurie but are usually even lighter in body, while the darkly brooding intensity of Moulin-à-Vent can be rivaled by that of Côte de Brouilly, particularly as expressed by the superb wines of Château Thivin.

All the distinctions among these communes become even more apparent when tasting different crus vinified by the same producer. Pierre-Marie Chermette of the Domaine du Vissoux owns vines in Fleurie, Brouilly, and Moulin-à-Vent, and while each cuvée demonstrates the silky elegance and sophistication that is the hallmark of Chermette's wines, they also each express highly individual personalities. Chermette makes wine from two different parcels in Fleurie, with the fragrant, high-toned Poncié contrasting the deeper, more structured Les Garants. At the same time, the two have more similarities with each other than they do with the broader, more muscular Brouilly, from a vineyard called Pierreux, or with the dark, sappy Moulin-à-Vent, a blend of three different parcels within the commune.

A similar comparison can be made with the wines of Jean-Paul Brun, of Domaine des Terres Dorées. Brun's estate is in the village of Charnay, in the very south of the Beaujolais appellation, which lies closer to Lyon than it does to the nearest of the crus. Nevertheless, Brun makes

wines from some of the region's most renowned locales: Côte de Brouilly, Morgon, Fleurie, and Moulin-à-Vent. A tasting chez Brun is a lesson in terroir, because each of his wines demonstrates an uncommon purity and transparency, achieved by natural-yeast fermentation, little to no chaptalization, and traditional vinification rather than carbonic maceration.

Drink me!

The expression of terroir demonstrates the intellectual side of cru Beaujolais, but another element that is often ignored, particularly in an environment driven by professional blind tastings and numeric scoring, is sheer drinkability: the capacity of a wine to compel us to keep returning to it over and over again. Somewhere along

the line, the notion of deliciousness seems to have become, if not pejorative, then at least frivolous—as though we should feel guilty for delighting in a wine's visceral pleasures.

Like a Kabinett Riesling from Germany or a finely balanced Non-Vintage Champagne, good Beaujolais has an ideal combination of delicious drinkability and intellectual appeal, offering value to both novice and expert alike. This drinkability also brings food-friendliness, the combination of bright fruit, fresh acidity, low alcohol, and mild tannins allowing for

versatile applications without the danger of the wine dominating or overshadowing a dish.

One of the examples that best illustrate this versatility is Alain Coudert's Clos de la Roilette. The Clos lies in Fleurie on the border with Moulin-à-Vent, and its wine seems to combine many of the best elements of each commune: Its succulently fragrant red-fruit aromas place it plausibly in Fleurie, while an underlying sternness and mineral intensity are often more reminiscent of the neighboring cru. Although it's a serious wine, it's never severe, and it's as delightful to drink upon release as it is at ten years of age. As a wine lover, I find Clos de la Roilette to be highly satisfying for its vinosity and expression. At the same time, it seems that whenever I open a bottle with friends, it's emptied with an almost alarming rapidity. To me, this is ultimately an indicator of quality. After all, what is the *raison d'être* of wine, if not to be drunk? ■

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