

Food & Drink

Beaujolais' year in the sun



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Wine

Beaujolais has had a pretty ignominious fall from grace and popularity since the Beaujolais Nouveau hoop-la of the 1980s.

(What was the point of that race to get the first bottle of two-month-old wine to London?) Even a wine lover as keen as me has for several years been able to count the number of Beaujolais tasted, let alone drunk, on the fingers of one hand. But 2009, such an exception throughout Europe, is the vintage that should change all that.

In stark contrast to the excesses of Bordeaux 2009, with embryonic Ch Pétrus being offered at almost £3,000 a bottle, how about delicious 2009s that are stuffed full of fruit, cost well under £15 a bottle and are actually delicious to drink? Now.

Beaujolais may suffer from the fact that its defining grape, the thin-skinned Gamay, has no reputation outside the region. Nor has its standing been helped by a scandal or two affecting some of the more commercial producers. So the modest price of the wine, just a few euros a bottle from the cellar door, has remained static for the past five years or so. UK importer Roy Richards, of Richards Walford, is a fan of well-made grower-bottled Beaujolais (and supplies a number to the likes of Berry Bros). Impressed by the exuberant quality of the 2009s, he told his favourite growers that this really was the year when they should put up their prices. The quality well justified it and if they didn't at least echo what has been happening to the price of France's grandest wines, they would find themselves left behind.

There was much doubtful discussion of his proposal in the Beaujolais region itself. Wouldn't they be taking a risk? Could the market stand a price rise? And then one grower finally broke free of the pack and

promised he would write to Richards with a proposed price rise. When Richards received his response, it announced the dramatic increase of 50 cents a bottle.

This is a wine region, and a delightful wine style, you should not overlook if you view wine as something to be drunk and enjoyed rather than traded in. It is also important to know that the style of Beaujolais has evolved quite considerably. The sort of wines sought out by quality-conscious importers are a long way from the pale pink concoctions that smell of pear drops, nail varnish remover and/or bananas that result from Gamay grapes fermented with feverish haste. Styles have evolved considerably over the past decade or so and the good wines have much more substance and extract, although they are rarely more than 13 per cent alcohol and are often less. They are more likely to have been made in much the same style as red burgundy from further north. In fact, an increasing number of producers based in the Côte d'Or, home of the smartest burgundies, have established operations in Beaujolais: Louis Jadot was one of the first with its acquisition of Ch des Jacques along with Nicolas Potel and his joint venture Potel-Aviron. Thibault Liger-Belair has followed them, as have the Henriot family, owners of Bouchard Père et Fils in Beaune. The family have high hopes for Ch Poncié in Fleurie, which they bought in 2008, renaming it Villa Ponciago.

Many of the most concentrated 2009s made in the Beaujolais region are not yet at their best, and it is only the lightest, most forward wines that I would recommend drinking already. Typically this means the best of the wines carrying the appellations Beaujolais from the flatter land that stretches north of Lyons and the higher, more granitic land that

qualifies as Beaujolais-Villages. These are precisely the sort of wines that demonstrate the fatuity of applying numerical scores to something as visceral and subjective as wine appreciation. These are stupendous wines – but for early drinking rather than keeping. To what extent should they be penalised for their lack of suitability for dusty cellars and the saleroom? Discuss.

Most of the more “serious” wines are made in the villages, or crus, that have their own appellations. They are, very roughly in ascending order of body and ageability, Regnié, Chiroubles, Chénas, St-Amour, Fleurie, Brouilly, Côte de Brouilly, Juliéas, Morgon and Moulin-à-Vent, whose most concentrated wines are traditionally said to become more and more like Pinot Noir-based red burgundy with age. There are some fine producers outside these hallowed blue-shaded hills, however, such as Jean-Paul Brun of Terres Dorées. And the quality of any Beaujolais, cru or not, depends on the skill and commitment of the producer, typically a family smallholder in this region, and the precise altitude,

Top Beaujolais producers

Jean-Marc Burgaud,
Bonne Tonne,
Chapelle des Bois,
Gérard Charvet,
Michel Chignard,
Louis-Claude
Desvignes,
Georges Duboeuf
(top cuvées),
Lapalu,
Laurent Gauthier,

Ch des Jacques,
Lucien Lardy,
Thibault Liger-
Belair,
Bernard Santé,
Terres Dorées,
Ch Thivin,
Villa Ponciago,
Georges Viornery,
Vissoux,
Voûte des Crozes

orientation and subsoil of the vineyard.

More and more fine Beaujolais is now sold with a specific vineyard name as well as an appellation, not unlike the heartland of Piedmont – Barolo and Barbaresco country, whose small hills and fragmented topography find an echo in the Beaujolais villages. Some of them, Côte de Py in Morgon, for instance, very obviously impose their strong mineral character on the wines grown there. But Beaujolais prices are but a fraction of those of a vineyard-designated Barolo.

The 2009 vintage was exceptional because the summer was delightfully warm without being too hot – and one defining characteristic of Beaujolais is its relatively high acidity, which, in a less ripe vintage, can be uncomfortably dominant but in 2009 is the most delightful complement to all that ripe, crunchy, mouth-watering fruit. When we spent a sunny afternoon in the Beaujolais hills on the last day of August, we fretted about missing our plane from Lyons as the narrow roads were already so encumbered by tractors trundling their loads of healthy purple grapes to various village cellars. So ripe were the grapes that the official start of Beaujolais harvest was unusually early.

I am delighted to see that some UK merchants have already responded to the obviously superior quality of the 2009 vintage with many special offers of 2009 Beaujolais. Those I have found so far are chez Berry Bros, Hicks & Don, Stone, Vine & Sun, and the Wine Society although note that Christopher Piper has long specialised in Beaujolais.

*See tasting notes on 130 Beaujolais 2009s on the Purple pages of www.jancisrobinson.com
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