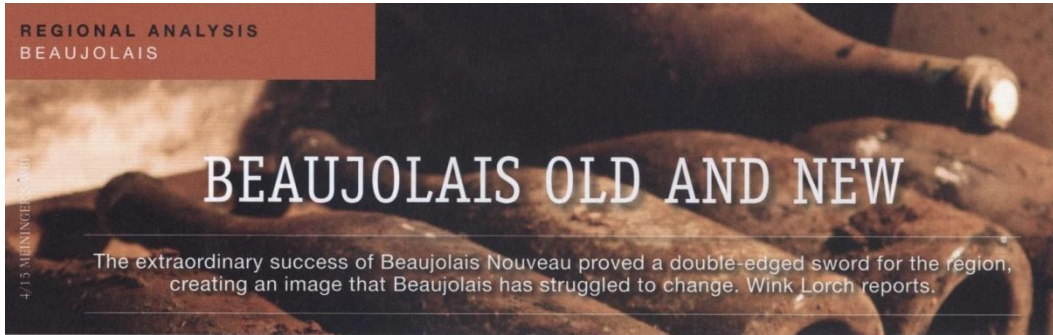


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Back in the 1980s, as the summer holidays drew to a close and attention was paid to how vintage in France was shaping up, there were two urgent tasks for the wine trade: Order your allocation of Beaujolais Nouveau, and design a stunt to mark its November release date.

To make sure customers received their allocation on the all-important third Thursday in November, the stunts grew ever bigger. They ranged from road races (later banned) to pick up the wine direct from the region, to flying it by Concorde, as favoured by négociant Georges Duboeuf, who'd launched the wine to great acclaim in the US. There were even leather-clad, Chicago-style, violin-wielding gangsters, driving a vintage Chrysler to pick up the wine from London's docks (yup, my Dad and me in 1983).

For a couple of weeks post-release, wine shops, bars and restaurants ran special events that brightened up dull November days. Sales soared. By the 1980s, Nouveau accounted for

over 50% of the Beaujolais' annual output and huge sums were spent on marketing.

Finally, greed took over. Each year pressure increased on the region to release the wine, ready or not, and the price was squeezed. Quality slumped. By the turn of this century the Nouveau parties were a distant memory, at least for those of us in the UK or the US, and a downward spiral began. Worse, the Beaujolais name had become synonymous with Nouveau, giving the region a poor reputation. Not surprisingly, Beaujolais' crus - the 10 designated areas that produce the best wine - suffer an identity crisis, even today. But their identity, for good or bad, remains tightly linked to the fortunes of Nouveau.

The region

The 10 crus are: Brouilly, Côte de Brouilly, Chiroubles, Chénas, Fleurie, Julliénas, Morgon, Moulin-à-Vent, Régnié (added to the list in 1988) and Saint-Amour. To the north of the Beaujolais Villages appellation, the 10 are all appellations in their own right, from villages abutting the Mâconnais region. These crus make up 35% to 40% of total Beaujolais volumes, but account for only just over 20% of exports.

For the past decade, the crus have been the focus for Inter Beaujolais, leaving Nouveau to sell itself, something it does particularly well in Japan - today's Nouveau output varies with vintage between 25% and 45%. But the crus and Nouveau cannot be divorced. As director of Inter Beaujolais, Jean Bourjade, puts it: "The future of Beaujolais is outside of Nouveau, but without it the region, even the crus, would not survive. The strategy is to use the crus to drag the region upwards."

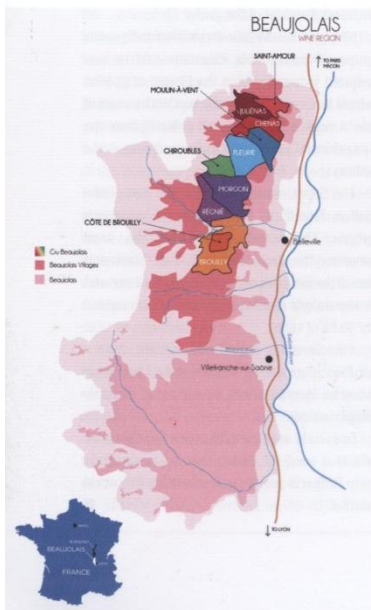
The Beaujolais region has been in crisis since demand for Nouveau plummeted after its peak in the 1980s. The total vineyard area has shrunk from 23,000 ha to under 17,000 ha and could fall further. Vineyards in the crus are not immune. Some of the steepest, or those whose owners have no successor, are being abandoned. Claude

Geoffroy of Château Thivin in Côte de Brouilly says simply: "The crisis in Beaujolais risks pulling the crus downwards. We are paying for the excesses of the '80s and '90s, but Beaujolais is a wine for today with many advantages. The crus need to be a locomotive."

There's a distinct wobble in exports to the UK, although other markets such as Canada show good growth. In the US at Kermit Lynch, importers of established estates such as Lapierre and Foillard in Morgon, and Château Thivin, Clark Z Terry states that its sales across the US are strong and the wines sell out each vintage, but "to say they are mainstream would be a stretch". David Lillie of Chambers Street Wines in New York comments: "The Beaujolais Cru market has seemed quite moribund since the highly praised 2009 vintage ... but the US market is very vintage-driven." The small and poor vintage of 2012 did much damage, and 2013 was not that easy either; 2014 should be better received though.

With an influx of top Burgundy producers buying vineyards and some serious young vigneron settling there, confidence in the future of the crus is not in question. Yet there seems little agreement among producers as to how best to present them to the world or how to lift the whole region out of its crisis. Even labelling is in question. Whereas some producers will proudly add 'Cru de Beaujolais' on their label, others, like Château des Jacques in Moulin-à-Vent, owned by Beaune négociant Louis Jadot since 1996, make no mention of Beaujolais. Cyril Chirouze of Château des Jacques defends its position: "We are extremely proud of our region, but for nearly 20 years our wish has been to promote our terroirs, by naming the 'climats' [named vineyard areas] as we do in the Côte d'Or. Equally we want to remind people that Beaujolais isn't just Nouveau."

Château des Jacques has added nearly 20 ha to its holdings in the past five years and several other Côte d'Or producers and négociants have recently invested in the crus, attracted by old vines, interesting terroirs and relatively



inexpensive prices. Among them are Bouchard Père et Fils (Villa Ponciago), Albert Bichot (Domaine de Rochegrès), Joseph Drouhin (now running the Hospices de Beaune) and Nuits-St-Georges producer Thibault Liger-Belair, with 14 ha of old vines in Moulin-à-Vent.

Chirouze of Château des Jacques and Liger-Belair both think their investments are good for Beaujolais. "In the context of the crisis that the region is suffering, having new investors, who are not just financially motivated but devoted to vineyards, is good news," says Chirouze. Liger-Belair adds that it brings in media attention. "When I bought in 2008, lots of people asked if I was mad. But they discovered we have super-interesting wines and it encouraged journalists to visit the region." Not everyone is happy. Morgon vigneron Jean Foillard's complaint is typical: "They are taking the best parcels and pushing up the prices [of the land]."

However, the past decade has seen young vignerons establishing estates in the crus, starting from scratch, renting or buying old vine plots and often converting to organics. Richard Rottiers, who took on 3 ha of old vines in Moulin-à-Vent in 2007, began conversion to organics in 2012 and now has 6 ha. He said: "When I arrived the region was a catastrophe". Now things are looking up. He exports more than 70% and believes there's real dynamism in the region.

Like many top producers, Rottiers thinks that 'vins de terroir' are the region's strength and that offering wines from single vineyards within the crus is a good thing. Yet he is not convinced of the merits of introducing a premier cru system, a project that Inter Beaujolais has been working on. The first stage has been to analyse the geology and different soils within each of the crus; once finished they will propose a hierarchy for approval by the INAO (the French appellation organisation), a long drawn-out process. Château des Jacques and Liger-Belair are cautiously in favour of the premier cru idea.

Returning to fundamentals

Naming only the cru is something that puzzled Liger-Belair when he started to search for vineyards to buy in Moulin-à-Vent. "I never understood why the vignerons just made one wine from each cru, when there are such differences in soil. People need to talk more about Moulin-à-Vent not all being the same, in terms of vineyard parcels, altitude, etc." Before

World War II this was the norm for all good bottled Beaujolais cru; a list of the best vineyards is included in pre-war wine books.

Liger-Belair, who works organically and biodynamically, believes a more widespread return to methods used in the 1930s is needed. "I would like to make wines like those from the '30s and the '40s that I've had the chance to try. Tasting them blind against Burgundies from the north, you can see the potential. Then they worked the soil and the vines very differently, and I think we need to go back to that – a more attentive method. And get rid of the quantity production."

It's also a matter of persuading people that the wines can age, he maintains, as does Chirouze: "We have to evolve, for qualitative and economic reasons and to take note of the [quality] potential of Gamay, an offspring of Pinot Noir. We have to keep reminding people that the crus are not destined to be drunk very young and that they have the capacity to age as much as Burgundy appellations." The message will take time. Terry of Kermit Lynch says: "Most people do prefer to drink them young and we rarely discuss cru Beaujolais as being a wine that should be cellared, though the examples are numerous when it comes to being able to age them."

Winemaking methods vary widely and some do not make crus to age. Guillaume de Castelnau, former winemaker for Château des Jacques, was adamantly against the use of the traditional Beaujolais winemaking method of semi- or full-carbonic maceration. However, Chirouze says: "Carbonic maceration gives another vision of Gamay and the Beaujolais crus, offering wines that are more accessible from their early youth. It is not our choice, any more than thermovinification is."

Mathieu Lapierre, son of the late Marcel Lapierre, explains that thermovinification was a strategy adopted by the Beaujolais négociants for poor vintages, but some continued using it for every vintage. Giving wines with an intense blackcurrant flavour, few agree it is the right approach for quality, ageworthy wines, but some still use the method. Carbonic maceration was developed over a century ago, but has evolved in different ways. When used traditionally by Foillard, Lapierre and others, it can certainly



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Cyril Chirouze,
Château des
Jacques

make wines to age. It is all a question of how it is employed ("lots of human intervention is needed," says Lapierre) and what type of maturation follows, the best choice being old oak barrels. Nouveau gave carbonic maceration its bad name, when producers slashed the fermentation time by using fast-working cultured yeasts (most notably 71B introduced by Duboeuf), which gave the tell-tale banana flavours.

Natural wine aficionados credit Beaujolais for starting the movement, for it was here in the

1980s that Jules Chauvet encouraged growers to reclaim the terroir by working the soil instead of using herbicides, using natural yeasts and shunning chaptalisation. Most famously he showed how Beaujolais could be made without added sulphur dioxide. His best-known disciple was Marcel Lapierre, who encouraged others, including Foillard. Today, not all these producers (even Lapierre) make their entire production sulphur-free, but they have been an inspiration to the region. Geoffray explains that following the explosion of poor quality Nouveau: "Marcel Lapierre proposed a different dream."

Today, followers of Chauvet and Lapierre make some of the most sought-after Beaujolais crus, yet those made by top Burgundy producers have a strong following too, as do others adopting a middle way like Rottiers or Château Thivin. Mathieu Lapierre is optimistic: "There is much more pride among vignerons than previously." Liger-Belair adds: "There is a real generational change going on, the youngsters are changing things, thanks to training and travelling." But, he cautions, real change could take 25 years. Meantime, the Nouveau stunts continue to bubble along in Japan – spa pools filled with Nouveau is the latest trend. Perhaps the crus need their own PR coup to ensure their survival – any internationally recognised celeb want to buy a vineyard? ■

