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France, Beaujolais: Battling the Odds - 2014/2015

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I wonder if it is coincidence that my reports on two regions that geographically bookend Burgundy appear in the same issue. You may wonder why I gave both Beaujolais and Chablis the same title: Battling the Odds. I felt that it was appropriate in both cases, if not for the same reason. With respect to Chablis, it refers to recent, what you might euphemistically term "meteorological challenges" that have beset the region, even though Beaujolais has had its own unfair share of misfortune with hail destroying swathes of Chiroubles and Morgon. No, the phrase "battling the odds" is written with a different context in mind. It refers to the battle of changing the perception of Beaujolais as easy-drinking, tooty-fruity vino sold mostly through "Beaujolais Nouveau" into a region that garners the same respect and kudos as the Côte d'Or or the Rhône. The battle to encourage drinkers to treat the region's wines with the same respect as Pinot Noir, to treat Morgon Côte du Py with the same respect as Clos Saint-Jacques or Les Epenots.



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What lies at the end of a rainbow? A pot of gold? No, it is Morgon Côte du Py.

The good news is that though the war is not yet won, Beaujolais is winning small battles. It is a war of attrition, since you are never going to alter consumers' and connoisseurs' perceptions overnight - a long-term deconstruction of prejudices, chipping away at the caricature of Beaujolais as a glugging "vin de soif." Fortunately, this is precisely what is happening as more and more distributors, sommeliers and even one or two enlightened writers, descend upon Beaujolais and begin to really understand and appreciate its multifarious *terroirs*, exciting growers and its vastly improved wines. So it is only right that *The Wine Advocate* should be there every year investigating its progress and guiding its readers upon where they should be buying. For sure, there remains many producers that continue churning out sloppily-made wines, which nowadays seem hackneyed and old-fashioned when rubbing shoulders with Beaujolais from winemakers determined to take greater care in the vineyard and not cut corners in the winery - winemakers that take pride in their juice. There are sufficient numbers of these forward-thinking growers to state that there is a "movement" in Beaujolais just like there is in Chablis.

Now is the perfect moment to expand your Burgundy horizons and embrace Beaujolais.

Why? Well, mirroring Chablis once again, the region was blessed with two vintages worth

investigating: 2014 and 2015. Whereas in Chablis, the former is held up as its benchmark *millésime*, in Beaujolais the predominance of reds played into the hands of 2015. As I shall explain, that does not infer that every Beaujolais born this vintage is going to blow your mind and impel you to flog your stash of La Tâche to buy some Moulin-à-Vent. However, there are plenty of marvelous wines geared up to bestow an enormous amount of pleasure at prices that ensure they remain some of the greatest value wines on the planet.

The 2014/2015 Beaujolais Vintages

The beginning of the growing season passed well and without problems; sunshine and dry conditions permitted an even flowering. Then, as spring turned into summer, it turned wetter with lower temperatures than normal. What saved the vintage was the Indian summer in September that allowed the grapes to be harvested under almost perfect conditions, with cooler nights helping maintain acidity levels. Most of the bunches were picked at between 12° and 13° potential alcohol. Fermentations were rapid.

If you have read my report on Chablis, you will have already noted my descriptions of the "sunshine vintage." It is no different in Beaujolais. The region enjoyed historic levels of sunshine that produced berries with thick skins and almost unprecedented levels of concentration. From June until August, it was extremely dry, although intermittent showers in August alleviated potential hydric stress. Georges Duboeuf likened it to 1947 - probably the only time a winemaker will make such a firsthand comparison. Many of the pickers went out into the vines in the last week of August, around August 24 in some cases, although it was so hot that much of the picking was done from dawn until midday. The timing of the picking was crucial because as Jean-Claude Lapalu explained, sugar levels rocketed towards the end of that month, more so with respect to younger than older vines, though fortunately such were the sanitary conditions that hardly any sorting needed to be done.



Camille Lapierre, who now works alongside her brother Mathieu, as well as organizing the local music festival.

Some mentioned that plots reached 15.5° alcohol and it would not surprise me if there were vats touching 16.0°. This implies that acidity levels are low. This is true in many cases, although it varies according to grower, location and their approach to vineyard husbandry. It is possible to mitigate excessively high pH via careful canopy management, and two or three growers averred that organic viticulture also helps regulate excessive alcohol. Another issue is volatility that can accompany high alcohol levels, attested by Mathieu and Camille Lapierre, who decided not to make a non-sulphite cuvée of their Morgon that they normally distribute through Kermit Lynch. Better to be safe than sorry. The lack of moisture, in addition to one week of warm winds just prior to picking, meant that production overall decreased from 756,000 hectoliters in 2014 to around 600,000 hectoliters in 2015.

The Wines

First and foremost, there is a bevy of great Beaujolais in 2015, although as I have already mentioned, I would caution that this does not imply every bottle is stupendous or that it is necessarily superior to 2014. Julien Sunier, always one of the most candid and outspoken winemakers, actually lamented the general style of the 2015s and clearly preferred his 2014s to 2015. The reason is the aforementioned alcohol levels. They can be high and much like Pinot Noir, Gamay does not thrive when alcohol levels are north of 14.5° alcohol. You begin losing *terroir* expression and the wines become homogenous. My tastings cover everything from cult, cutting-edge winemakers to stalwarts hidebound by age-old practices and overtly commercial enterprises. Frequently, I found that the latter was blemished by volatility evident on the nose and on the palate. In many instances this upset the balance of the wine and made them laborious to imbibe. Beaujolais should be about fruit intensity

and 2015 has abundance of that. At the same time, the precocity in its DNA must be counterbalanced with freshness and acidity, and this was sometimes to be found lacking, rendering rather "soupy" expressions of Gamay.

The best examples of 2015 find that balance between fruit intensity and brightness, with crispness and tension. I found that in 2015 the talent of the winemaker is fundamental to the success of the wine. The growing season made it easy for vigneron to make delicious Gamay and it gave quality on the plate. However, that can be a trap that is easy to fall into - not only in Beaujolais, but everywhere. You had to be wary of ripeness levels spinning out of control, especially in terms of picking and fermenting the wine. Those vineyards occupying higher altitudes had a slight advantage in terms of cooler temperatures than on flatter reaches. Also, older vines with deeper roots were able to cope with any water deficiencies better than younger vines.

There is a valid argument that in 2015, the expressions of Beaujolais individual *terroirs* are less tangible than in 2014. What we as consumers gain in sheer drinking pleasure often comes at the expense of the intellectual aspect of what makes Morgon Côte du Py different from Côte de Brouilly, those minutiae that distinguish one wine from another. On the other hand, who, apart from readers of World of Fine Wine, want to be intellectual *all* of the time? Sometimes, you just want a wine that is stuffed full of delicious, clean and pure fruit, and that is where Gamay excels.



Jean Foillard on the left, Cédric Chignard in the middle and Claude-Edouard Geoffray pictured at Château Thivin, perched on the steep slopes of the Côte de Brouilly.

In terms of distinguishing between different Beaujolais appellations, I found much to admire in Morgon as you would expect, and also Fleurie and Moulin-à-Vent. And I want to sing the praises of what is fast becoming one of my favorite Beaujolais appellations - Côte de Brouilly. In my mind, Côte de Brouilly is a level above Brouilly itself. I adore the depth of fruit, mineralité and tension coming from this incline on the volcanic granite, diorite and schist soils on Mont Brouilly. There are around 50 growers who farm here, but for starters, check out the brilliant example from Château Thivin and use the search function to find others. In addition, I would re-emphasize my appreciation for the catch-all label of Beaujolais Villages. If Beaujolais is underappreciated compared to other wine regions, then Beaujolais Villages is underappreciated compared to its village crus. On many occasions, I was impressed by the quality of this category that occasionally surpassed the village crus. Sometimes it is because the wines are less tinkered with than more prestigious cuvées and you just end up with a really delicious, unadulterated Gamay, and perhaps also its less propitious *terroirs* actually helped moderate alcohol levels in 2015. Whatever the reason, do not dismiss a Beaujolais Villages from a good producer.

The New Generation



Les enfants terribles! Here are the dudes making some of Beaujolais' most exciting wines. Pictured on the veranda chez Julien Sunier high up in the hills from the left: Richard Rottiers, Paul-Henri Thillardon, Julien Sunier, David Beaupère and Antoine Sunier

In previous reports on Beaujolais, I have welcomed the new generation of winemakers that are redefining the region. Whereas just a decade ago, Beaujolais was spoken about in disparaging terms, nowadays it has almost become the byword for cutting-edge, French fermented grape juice. There is a sense that Beaujolais had no choice but to reinvent itself, certainly if it wanted to extricate itself from images of half-naked inebriates doggy paddling around a pool of Beaujolais Nouveau on the third Thursday of November. Though there is still some hangover from those days, there are now sufficient interesting, talented and charismatic winemakers to attract more and more people to this beautiful region, which has majestic hills that on a clear day gaze across miles and miles towards the snow-capped Alps.



Jean-Claude Lapalu, one of Beaujolais most distinctive winemakers.

Part of that is fuelled by a cluster of winemakers following in the steps of biodynamic godfather Jules Chauvet and the so-called "Gang of Four": Jean Foillard, Jean-Paul Thévenet, Guy Breton and the late Marcel Lapierre. That gang has expanded in recent years as winemakers in their twenties and thirties take up the mantle. That is not to suggest that *biodynamie* is mandatory for great wine, after all, there are plenty of growers that spray their vineyards and intervene in the winemaking process that create wonderful expressions of Beaujolais. What they both have in common is attention to detail among the vines, meticulous practices and prudence where necessary in the winery. Of course, organic/biodynamic growers are catnip to sommeliers and has fuelled their popularity in chichi Lyonnais and Parisian bistros and bars. Personally, I am not going to give extra brownie points for a winemaker that follows Steiner's philosophy and simply assess the wine in the glass. A

philosophical practice does not taste of anything. But there is no doubt that these growers are shaking Beaujolais up, moving it forward and enhancing its image, and that can only be a positive thing.

What Is Beaujolais?

One issue that has come up during my visits is the prosaic question: What *is* Beaujolais? Here, I refer to whether Beaujolais should be defined as much by winemaking technique - that is to say carbonic maceration, known here as "*maceration traditionnelle*" - as by its *terroir*. Whether you like it or not, carbonic maceration is closely associated with the region, the practice of filling the vat with whole bunches, so that fruit at the bottom is crushed and fermented, thereby filling the vat with carbon dioxide and inciting intracellular fermentation in the absence of oxygen. It is difficult to pin down exactly how the process enhances wine, but I often find it lends not only fruitiness, especially red cherry or kirsch, but an intangible element that I can best describe as "joie-de-vivre." It seems to make Beaujolais...vivid. It is not without risk. It tends to increase pH levels and the lower acidity can encourage the growth of bacterial infections such as *brettanomyces*, and any ingress of oxygen can cause volatility, which explains why you need a skillful and experienced winemaker to oversee the process. Then of course, there is the use of oak barrels for aging and the attendant use of new wood.

The more I taste Beaujolais and the more I become familiar with the wines, the more I appreciate the "traditional" Beaujolais style, even though "traditional" is not exactly the correct word, since the practice was only introduced in the early 20th century. I am not going to be dogmatic about the *modus operandi* of each winemaker and hope that is evidenced by this report. However, as time goes on, I find myself yearning for Gamay that: A) undergoes at least a semi-carbonic maceration that may include some submersion of the cap and alcoholic fermentations; and B) undergoes maturation in used larger vessels, such as *foudres*, rather than traditional Burgundy barrels. While I certainly appreciate the likes of Château du Moulin-à-Vent, Domaine Labruyère and Jean-Paul Brun that de-stem and ferment in a typical Burgundy method, if somebody asked me to offer examples of quintessential Beaujolais, then I would be heading for the likes of Julian Sunier, Château Thivin or why not even one of Georges Duboeuf's better wines.

I suppose it comes down to the question of whether full or semi-carbonic maceration is part of Beaujolais's identity, or whether it is a winemaking process that masks it. Opinions clearly differ. Certainly winemakers from the Côte d'Or that have branched out into Beaujolais, such as Louis Jadot (Château des Jacques), Louis Boillot, Thibault Liger-Belair, Volnay-born Anne-Sophie Dubois and Michel Lafarge see carbonic maceration in a negative light and apply traditional Burgundian techniques. And yet as I have commented in previous tasting notes, while I might appreciate the wines, I sometimes find myself seeking more "Bojo in my Beaujolais." It is not just a question of Beaujolais differentiating itself from the rest of Burgundy, but an attractive quality within Beaujolais itself that enhances its attraction. It is an aesthetic question that I am continuing to tussle with, just as winemakers are doing themselves. If more outside investors buy vineyards in the region and eschew full or semi-carbonic maceration, would that be to the detriment of Beaujolais in the same way that if growers in the Côte de Beaune insisted upon new oak in Chablis? Would both be viewed as an extension of the Côte d'Or albeit with different soils and grape varieties? Is that a good thing?

There is nothing wrong with diversity within Beaujolais. In fact, it should be encouraged. However, I suggest that the growing popularity of its wines has less to do with inward investment and famous Burgundian growers acquiring holdings in the region - welcome as that is - and more to do with continually improving standards of viticulture and vinification in tandem with growing consumer appreciation of its wines.

—Neal Martin

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