

Putting Beaujolais back on the map

The beautiful French region Beaujolais has emerged from the bad old nouveau days with a new image and fine credit-crunch wines .

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Pick and mix: although all beaujolais is made from the gamay grape, the quality and taste differ dramatically

Photo: DANIEL GILLET

I had forgotten how pretty Beaujolais is. The rolling hills, the first ripple of the Massif Central, are a vibrant green at this time of year, blanketed with vines and forests and dotted with ancient villages and the occasional elegant but discreet château. I've driven past the region several times recently – as most of us do, whizzing between Lyons and Beaune on the A6 – but I haven't stopped here for ages.

I'm beginning to wonder why I bothered, though. Despite being June, it's sheeting with rain in Villié-Morgon and the

consoling bottle of Fleurie I've just ordered in the village's Café des Sports tastes decidedly ropy. It's not "off" exactly, just thin, weedy, tired and acidic. My second choice is little better.

I feel quite despondent.

It wasn't meant to be like this. The British wine trade is currently all atwitter about the quality of the 2009 beaujolais, eulogising its drinkability and the fact that serious wines are now made here, with the dreaded beaujolais nouveau but a memory. It's time to take beaujolais seriously again, they chorus. On this evidence I'd say they were bonkers.

The waitress feels my pain and goes away to consult the boss. She returns with a 2007 Fleurie from Lucien Lardy that, she explains, I might prefer. The wines I'd chosen were made without sulphur, she says, something of a vogue in these parts, and although this might mean the wine is more "natural" the result can be a bit hit and miss. The proffered substitute, though, is a corker, full of fresh, ripe, juicy, damson-like fruit and silky tannins. It's delightful.

Equilibrium firmly restored, I head off to visit Domaine Henry Fessy, producer of wines from all 10 of the beaujolais crus,

namely Brouilly, Chénas, Chiroubles, Côte de Brouilly, Fleurie, Juliéna, Morgon, Moulin à Vent, Régnié and Saint Amour. Fessy also makes the more basic Beaujolais-Villages, the most basic beaujolais, and a really tasty and quite rare beaujolais blanc.

“2009 was a marvellous vintage and the perfect way to put beaujolais back on the map,” says winemaker Laurent Chevalier. “Forget all about beaujolais nouveau. That was then and this is now. It was a great marketing tool in the Seventies and a golden river for producers: pick in September, sell in October, drink in November. But as a region we’ve outgrown it, concentrating instead on making the best we can at the top end.”

This top end – the aforementioned 10 crus – often gets dismissed as being rather lightweight and not in the same league as the great wines of Burgundy and the Rhône, the two regions that abut Beaujolais, north and south. They’re certainly not so expensive, with a top Fleurie around half the price of a top Beaune, say, or half-decent Hermitage. But, as I discover at Henry Fessy, that’s no reason to take them lightly.

“The pleasure in well-made beaujolais is the instant delight it gives you, especially with food,” says Chevalier. “It’s all about fruit and freshness and, above all, drinkability. We always speak of the plaisir of beaujolais.” I taste my way through the 2009 range and the wines are indeed hugely appealing with luscious juicy red and black fruit, soft tannins and gentle acidity. Although all are from the same vintage and the same grape (100 per cent gamay), they do differ. The Fleurie, for

example, is round and generous; the Juliéna more tannic and complex, even a little rhône-like, and the Chiroubles elegant and fine. We’re often told that beaujolais can be drunk young, when it’s vibrant and refreshing, but what I hadn’t appreciated was how well the wines can age.

As a reward for my diligent tasting, Chevalier uncorks a magnum of 2002 Morgon, followed by one from 1992. They are revelatory: smoky, mellow, slightly vegetal but still fresh and elegant with smooth red berry fruit. If I’d had them blind I would have sworn they were burgundies, an old Volnay perhaps or Beaune.

There was a time when top beaujolais was the same price as top burgundy and Chevalier shows me old price lists and menus to prove this. Today, burgundy is too pricey and beaujolais too cheap and it strikes me that fine beaujolais is an ideal credit crunch wine. Instead of spending £30 on a bottle of cru classé claret, top rhône or burgundy, one could spend the same on three bottles of Juliéna, say, and enjoy its rhône-like youth or let it mature into something slightly burgundian.

“There are indeed elements of both Burgundy and the Rhône in the wines of Beaujolais,” Chevalier says. “But we make gamay here, with around 90 per cent of the world’s plantings, and we value our independence. We see ourselves as a proud little Gaulois village holding out against outsiders thanks to our magic potion.”

I can’t vouch for its magical properties, but on this evidence the potion’s an extremely drinkable one.