

Wine

Tim Atkin

Ripe, juicy and under £20: it's time to get excited by beaujolais not-nouveau



Talking about beaujolais in May feels weird, like donning thermals in the height of summer. This vibrant, juicy red is so closely associated with Beaujolais Nouveau Day, a worldwide celebration

held on the third Thursday in November, that it's all but ignored for the rest of the year. Nouveau accounts for only a third of what the region produces, but to many people the two are synonymous.

There's nothing wrong with nouveau — a wine that is released within a few weeks of the harvest and is meant to be gugged rather than savoured — but it has cheapened and trivialised the image of beaujolais as a whole. Like a classical actor who appears in a television soap opera to earn a few quid but finds himself typecast for life, beaujolais has become the prisoner of nouveau's success. All 65 million bottles of it.

The only other time beaujolais appears in the news is when it is embroiled in a minor scandal, such as large-scale creative blending with wines from lesser areas or the prosecution of a few growers using illegal quantities of sugar to boost the alcohol levels of their wines.

That may be about to change, however. The 2009 vintage was very good all over France but Georges Duboeuf, the area's most famous winemaker, reckons that it is the best beaujolais harvest in 50 years. Berry Brothers & Rudd, the UK's leading independent merchant, concurs. In an offer of 20 wines released this week (see

bbr.com), it describes the wines as "exceptionally exciting". The men from St James's are not known for their use of hyperbole.

I don't need an excuse to drink good beaujolais but I, too, am impressed by the concentration, balance and purity of the 2009s. The best of them are even better than the 2005s, which is high praise. If ever there were a time to start drinking serious beaujolais, this is it.

Did I say serious? Indeed I did. Nouveau may be intended for immediate consumption but that is not the case with all the region's wines. Beaujolais doesn't make the most structured and age-worthy of reds but the leading examples can be kept for three to five years or more. As they mature they can resemble red burgundies, taking on the aromas and flavours of aged pinot noir.

Talking of which, beaujolais is much easier to understand than its northerly neighbour. The reds are all made from a single grape and are sold as: nouveau, straight beaujolais, beaujolais villages (from one of 39 named villages) or as one of the ten "crus", regarded as the region's elite. These crus are situated on granite soils in the hilly, beautifully bucolic northern part of the region, while basic beaujolais and nouveau tend to hail from the sandier and generally flatter south. They aren't always easy to tell apart in a blind tasting, but you can divide them stylistically into three groups: light and aromatic (Chiroubles and Saint Amour), middle-weight (Côte de Brouilly, Brouilly, Fleurie, Chénas and Régnié) and chunky (Juliéas, Morgon and Moulin à Vent). There are

exceptions, but the generalisation still holds.

Sadly, there is still a lot of bad beaujolais produced, even in the crus (I have to choose my words carefully here, as a

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French hack was taken to court by the ultra-sensitive locals a few years ago for describing beaujolais as a "crap wine"). But the average quality is much higher than it is in Burgundy and the wines are considerably cheaper. For less than £20 you can find reds of real personality, and that's not something that can be said of Burgundian pinot noir.

Beaujolais satisfies my growing preference for balanced red wines with less than 13 per cent alcohol. It is sometimes dismissed for being light and inconsequential, but its freshness and elegance are part of its charm. Even an oak-aged Morgon, Juliéas or Moulin à Vent tastes subtle when you put it alongside an Aussie shiraz or an Argentine malbec. With these wines it's easy to finish a bottle.

I think beaujolais is one of the most adaptable, food-friendly reds of all. It's also perfect served chilled from the fridge. So shelve your prejudices about Beaujolais Day and think of summer rather than autumn. I promise you, you'll never drink nouveau again. timatkin.com

In Weekend this Saturday

The Times wine critic, Jane MacQuitty, on how vegetarian wines have come of age

WINES OF THE WEEK



2009 Brouilly, Henry Fessy

Brouilly can vary in quality but this unoaked example is spot-on. It's a little closed, so make sure you decant it before serving to allow its cherry and strawberry fruit to strut its stuff.