

BURGUNDY'S QUIET LITTLE SECRET

Over the past couple of years, wine critic JAMES SUCKLING has tasted hundreds of bottles of a relatively lesser-known wine near Bourgogne, France: Beaujolais. And he can't stop raving about it

Now is the time to drink Beaujolais. The wine from this warm, welcoming French region just north of Lyon has traditionally been regarded as something of a poor man's Burgundy, a cheap, cheerful bottle to drink rather than collect. But the quality coming out of many of the wineries of Beaujolais in the last few years shows how "cheap" can quickly translate into "great value", and I look forward to every new release. The region is teeming with energy and has also attracted an army of talented and ambitious younger winemakers keen to explore its beautifully diverse potential, a treasure of old vines and diverse terroirs.

For starters, the recent swing towards natural wines sprang from the late Jules Chauvet in the Beaujolais region. Today, 30 years after his death, Chauvet's philosophy and methods still reside in the minds and practices of many current Beaujolais producers. Yet there are also dozens of traditional winemakers producing handcrafted, soulful bottles.

More widely, the world's taste for lighter and more balanced wine has been met by many Beaujolais producers as they move to make the Gamay grape (nearly all Beaujolais wine is made from Gamay) a more interesting, compelling and profound shade of red. Gamay has an ability to instantly deliver juicy, flavoursome and satisfying reds for

immediate drinking, creating wines that have depth, tannin structure and ageing potential.

And look at the prices. Most of the top wines sell out of their cellar door at between €10 to €20 a bottle to consumers – even in a great vintage like 2015. Winemakers lament they barely make enough to cover their costs. "We don't make wine to get rich," says Jean-Paul Thévenet of Fleurie. "We make wine for people to drink and enjoy."

The 2015 vintage will certainly do that. Historic vintages don't come very often in Beaujolais, but the 2015 draws comparisons to the legendary 1947, a hot and dry year producing powerfully rich and long-lived wines. The most recent vintage on the market, 2018, may be even better than 2015. And great vintages like these can age. I have drunk bottles that are half a century old and they're still in good shape.

The 2015s I've reviewed were rich in alcohol and fruit with an underlying freshness. Many were amazing wines showing wonderful depth of fruit and ripe tannins. Tasting them alongside the 2014s and 2016s, the 2015s showed superior depth and density. The balance of fruit, structure and acidity was irresistible.

"People say that 2015 is like 1947, but I was actually there in 1947," recalls the 84-year-old Georges Duboeuf, the patriarch of the famous



Beaujolais firm. “The grapes that were fermenting in our wooden vats in Pouilly-Fuissé were so hot that my grandmother made me get ice to put in the must. I can’t say if 2015 is at the same level but it is exceptional. Everything was excellent in 2015.”

The top wines of 2015 are more expressive than most. Some seem more like ripe Grenache or Syrah than Gamay. Many bottles are more than 14 percent alcohol. Others push 15 percent. But the magic in cru Beaujolais is that they still showed their true character despite the sunny vintage and all of the fruit and alcohol that came with it. The Moulin-à-Vents had excellent linear structure. The Fleurie showed great aromatics and fine tannins. Côte de Brouilly exhibited an underlying tannic strength. The character of 2018 seems very much the same but with more freshness.

“People have been too focussed on Beaujolais nouveau,” says Nicole Chanrion, a small grower making excellent wines on her small estate in Cercié in Côte de Brouilly. “We want people to understand that Beaujolais is made to be drunk from one to five years on release.”

Sonja Geoffray of Château Thivin in Côte de Brouilly adds, “I’m a little sad that most of the 2015 Beaujolais will be drunk right away. They will be so much better in a few years.”

The 2016 and 2017 vintages are also both highly regarded, proving that

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Beaujolais is on a roll, not to mention the just-coming-out superb 2018. “I like the 2016 wines,” says Alex Foillard, one of Beaujolais’ young producers. “They show great typicity, freshness and fruit. They are very drinkable wines with lower alcohols.”

And the 2017s showed off the diversity of the region. Some highlights: The Michel Guignier Morgon Canon 2017 delivers a more brash, dark fruit impression; powerful yet thrillingly seductive. Château Thivin Côte-de-Brouilly Cuvée Zaccharie 2017 shows how oak can be deployed to heighten great Beaujolais. This wine is certainly going to repay cellaring.

The 2017 Morgon Montchoisy from Jean-Claude Debeaune really takes the appellation to another level again. Super dark fruits are

wrapped in dark chocolate-like flavours and carried on long velvety tannins. A must-try wine and completely enthralling. And Antoine Sunier’s Morgon 2017 offers a plush array of ripe fruit in the strawberry and cherry zone. A beautifully conceived wine.

Good quality Beaujolais clearly has its place in the growing premium wine market of today so you need to take it seriously, especially considering the reasonable prices. Asia, particularly Hong Kong, is overheated with excitement for wine from Burgundy’s Côte d’Or, but in doing so it’s overlooking one of the treasures of France – Beaujolais. **EW**

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BEST OF THE BEST JAMES SUCKLING’S TOP BEAUJOLAIS BOTTLES



MICHEL GUIGNIER MORGON CANON 2017
SCORE: 97
Very impressive red and dark berries with a layer of fresh flowers and sous bois. The palate has a super-juicy edge with fine yet assertive acidity and a long, richly fruited finish. Impressive clarity and power in terms of structure. Drink or hold.



YOHAN LARDY MOULIN-À-VENT VIEILLES VIGNES DE 1903 2017
SCORE: 97
There’s a very impressive sense of balance here, thanks in part to the more than 100-year-old vines. Dark fruit, earthy notes, chocolate and spice all in abundance. The opulent tannins are captivating. Drink or hold.



CHÂTEAU THIVIN CÔTE-DE-BROUILLY CUVÉE ZACCHARIE 2017
SCORE: 96
Stunning, concentrated black cherries and plenty of the characteristic acidity of the vintage, both seamlessly interwoven with the gentle tannins and the minerality through the very long, super-clean finish. Exemplary use of oak. Almost endless finish. Drink or hold.



JEAN-MARC BURGAUD MORGON GRANDS CRAS 2017
SCORE: 96
This is a powerhouse with such precision and detail. So energetic. Very impressive aromas with spicy, fragrant red and purple fruit, leading to a plush and juicy palate with rich and velvety, fruit-soaked tannins. Exceptional wine. Drink or hold.



JEAN-CLAUDE DEBEAUNE MORGON MONTCHOISY 2017
SCORE: 95
Very deep, dark-fruited Morgon with dark cherries and plums, wrapped in dark chocolate and carried on fluid, velvety, long tannins. Great depth here. A level of structure you would normally associate with more celebrated appellations such as Cornas or Corton. Drink or hold.



ANTOINE SUNIER MORGON 2017
SCORE: 95
An exceptional wine that has a very plush array of ripe fruit, in the strawberry and cherry zone, with hints of cocoa and a long and succulent palate. Super fine, ripe tannins. Exhilarating finish. Excellent. Drink or hold.