



CREATORS



December 6, 2016

Rethinking Beaujolais

By Robert Whitley

ROMANECHE-THORINS, France — Georges Duboeuf, now 83 years old, is old enough to remember when Beaujolais was the French wine of choice for many, if not most, American wine drinkers.

Light, fruity and absent of aggressive tannins, it was the perfect bistro wine. But the American wine scene has shifted substantially since Duboeuf began pedaling Beaujolais in 1964. Sales in the U.S. have slipped as much as 40 percent over the past decade, prompting Duboeuf to switch importers recently.

But if the U.S. market has changed, so, too, has the Beaujolais region, where Duboeuf oversees a vast network of small growers and independent winemakers.

The region is located at the southern tip of the Burgundy region of France, closer to Lyon than the epicenter of the Burgundy wine trade in Beaune. The grape of the Beaujolais region is gamay. It hardly commands the level of reverence accorded pinot noir and chardonnay, which are dominant throughout the rest of Burgundy.

Duboeuf and other producers from Beaujolais have struggled to overcome the perception that gamay is lesser than pinot noir, and toward that goal they have made a point to demand more of the gamay grape by treating it with greater respect. Lower yields have boosted quality, and improved technology has paved the way for Beaujolais wines that are more intense and have greater fruit purity and the ability to improve with age — though the worthiness of Beaujolais to age will likely never approach that of pinot noir from its neighbors in Burgundy's Cote d'Or.

"We have this modern place to do traditional wine," said Emeric Gaucher, Duboeuf's chief winemaker, as we walked through the sprawling state-of-the-art Duboeuf complex here in Romaneche-Thorins. Gaucher oversees a complex network of independent growers and winemakers, as well as properties owned outright by Duboeuf.

"We have 100 contracts, and the biggest of those have 10 hectares," said Gaucher.

The popular perception of Duboeuf, considered by many to be the king of Beaujolais, and certainly the largest Beaujolais exporter to the United States, is that all of those independent grapes get dumped into one giant vat and result in one generic Beaujolais. The reality is that each of the plots that come in at harvest are vinified separately.

"It would be so easy to make just one wine," Gaucher says with a laugh. "The fact is, because we have only one variety, gamay, everything ripens at the same time. Different elevations give us different levels of maturity, but the entire harvest is typically over in three weeks."

Duboeuf pays its growers using a formula that includes weight and also adds quality to the equation. One way Duboeuf tracks quality is its commitment to keeping plots separate prior to blending.



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Before we finalize the blend, George needs a selection of many different cuvees," said Gaucher. "We have some villages that give us wines that are more full-bodied, some that are more delicate. George tastes and he decides. Maybe he says 70 percent of this one, and 30 percent of that one. We want to be able to show the diversity of the gamay grape."

In addition to the wines it produces from purchased grapes, Duboeuf purchases a substantial quantity of wines made at individual domaines, even bottling and marketing some of the finer domaines separately.

Those that are not bottled separately are either blended into the Duboeuf Beaujolais Villages or, for the finer domaines, the Beaujolais Crus. The Beaujolais region has identified 10 villages that have historically demonstrated unique characteristics combined with consistently high quality. Those have been awarded cru status by the government and typically sell at a higher price than Beaujolais Villages (a blend of wine made from multiple crus) of the simple Beaujolais AOC, which is the lowest classification in the district.

Duboeuf is banking on crus Beaujolais — because of its characteristics that are distinctive from village to village — to reignite interest in Beaujolais and reverse the sales trend in the United States. Countering the perception of Beaujolais among U.S. wine drinkers is complicated by the relative popularity of Beaujolais Nouveau, which is the earliest bottling of the most recent vintage in Beaujolais.

The Beaujolais Nouveau is released to great fanfare each November.

"It is both a blessing and a curse," said Romain Teyteau, who manages exports to the United States. "It accounts for about half the Beaujolais sales for the year, so the growers and the winemakers have some money in the bank very quickly after harvest. They like that.

"But it creates the misperception that all Beaujolais is quite simple and fruity. We hope that once someone tastes a cru Beaujolais, they will realize that it is a step up."

Bolstering the argument is the 2015 vintage that is now in the marketplace. It is a spectacular vintage for Beaujolais, producing superb wines through all the tiers. Georges Duboeuf himself has called it the finest Beaujolais vintage since he became involved with Beaujolais in 1964.

While that might be open for debate, the fact remains the Beaujolais wines of 2015 are splendid by any measure. Across the board they exhibit deep color, richness and depth common only in the finest vintages, and many of the crus Beaujolais clearly possess the structure to age for five to 10 years, a trajectory that defies the conventional wisdom.

I dropped in on Duboeuf recently to taste some of the wines from this heralded vintage and was impressed with the consistency from top to bottom. In consideration of space constraints, I have kept my tasting notes on these wines brief.



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TASTING NOTES

Wines are rated on a 100-point scale. Wines are chosen for review because they represent outstanding quality or value, and the scores are simply a measure of this reviewer's enthusiasm for the recommended wine.

Georges Duboeuf 2015 Beaujolais Villages, France

(\$12) — This wine has a dark color with a broad, expansive palate and supple tannins. **RATING: 88.**

Georges Duboeuf 2015 Domaine des Pontheux, Chiroubles (\$20) — Wonderful floral note with hints of raspberry and an elegant mouthfeel characterize this wine. **RATING: 92.**

Georges Duboeuf 2015 Brouilly (\$20) — Intense red-fruit palate with modest tannins and a long, persistent finish are notable with this wine. **RATING: 90.**

Georges Duboeuf 2015 Domaine du Riaz, Cote-de-Brouilly (\$20) — Lighter and leaner than other wines from the vintage, this was a mineral-driven Beaujolais that is a good prospect to improve over the next two to five years. **RATING: 89.**

Georges Duboeuf 2015 Morgon (\$20) — This wine is meaty and intense with a beautiful core of red fruits and black fruits and a richly textured palate. **RATING: 91.**

Georges Duboeuf 2015 Domaine de Javernieres, Morgon Cote du Py (\$20) — This wine shows exceptional depth, bold fruit flavors and a touch of minerality. It's one of the stars of the vintage and has excellent potential to age up to 10 years. **RATING: 94.**

Georges Duboeuf 2015 Morgon Cote du Py (\$22) — At this stage it's lean and a bit tight. It shows a strong note of minerality with superb underlying fruit and persistent length. **RATING: 90.**

Georges Duboeuf 2015 Morgon, Jean Ernest Descombes, France (\$22) -

This elegant wine is suave and refined with a fleshy texture that doesn't hide the fact that it has a strong thread of minerality. **RATING: 91.**

Georges Duboeuf 2015 Domaine des Quatre Vents, Fleurie (\$22) —

This feminine cru shows gorgeous, supple red fruits with a hint of wood spice. **RATING: 92.**

Georges Duboeuf 2015 Chateau de Saint-Amour

(\$22) — This Saint-Amour is among the most elegant from the cru, with exceptional intensity of color and flavor and a touch of minerality. **RATING: 90.**

Georges Duboeuf 2015 Chateau des Capitans, Julienas (\$22) —

Big, rich and spicy, this is among the most muscular and powerful Beaujolais you are likely to find. It has excellent potential for aging up to 10 years. **RATING: 94.**

Georges Duboeuf 2015 Moulin-a-Vent (\$20) —

A stunning wine that exhibits richness and depth, it has complex red and black fruit aromas and a striking note of white pepper spice. **RATING: 94.**

Georges Duboeuf 2015 Domaine de La Vigne Romaine, Moulin-a-Vent (\$25) —

Meaty and bold without sacrificing elegance, this is perhaps the most sophisticated and compelling Beaujolais I have tasted from this vintage. It has intense red and black fruits and a touch of wood spice. **RATING: 95.**