

BEAUJOLAIS ANNUAL REPORT: THE BEST VALUE REDS IN THE WORLD?

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When I set off on my first tasting trip to Beaujolais in four years at the end of February I didn't expect amazing things. That was no prejudice against the region – I love good and great Beaujolais – rather, it was the result of tasting my way through two pallets of Beaujolais samples at home before I left, predominantly from the new vintage in bottle, 2021.

Don't get me wrong, there were many good 2021 wines and a few very good ones on those two pallets, but often the most exciting Beaujolais I tasted were late releases from 2020 or 2019. Those were both warm and sunny years of the kind that gave the great Beaujolais wines of the past in legendary vintages like 1976 and 1959. The gamay grape, which the region is almost totally focused on (98 percent of all vineyards), is one of the big winners of climate change in Europe.

The 2021 growing season was almost the opposite of 2020, with a early summer cool and very wet. The weather turned in mid-July when a blast of summer heat arrived, but moist weather returned around harvest time. The wine-growing textbooks tell you this leads to rot and often it did: first downy mildew, then powdery mildew, and finally as harvest approached, botrytis.

No wonder some producers hurried to bring in the grapes before they rotted away, but the results of that low-risk strategy are often pale, light-bodied and on the acidic side. Occasionally those wines are thin and tart.

Then, on my first day in Beaujolais I tasted the 2021s at Domaine Jean-Marc Burgaud in Morgon and was stunned by their depth of color, ripe aromas and fine tannins. "Personally, I prefer the 2021s to the 2020s, because of their freshness," Burgaud told me, and he made some exceptional 2020s. If you doubt me then try the [Jean-Marc Burgaud Morgon Côte de Py 2021](#). It has all the things I look for in top Beaujolais – great fruit, concentration, vibrancy and minerality – and with this combination of depth and balance it should age magnificently. Better still, there's a good quantity of it, because Burgaud owns six hectares in the famous Côte de Py site.

Then, I ran into the 2021s from Yohan Lardy in Moulin-a-Vent. They showed that exceptional-quality Beaujolais in this vintage was neither a fluke nor something specific to Morgon, the leader of the pack of Beaujolais 9 Cru (de facto village appellations). The [Yohan Lardy Moulin-à-Vent Vieilles Vignes de 1903 2021](#) is a spectacular wine that shows what the new top producers of Beaujolais are striving for. This masterpiece from vines planted in 1903 has the energy of starburst and the purity of a mountain stream. "During the summer we thought it looked like a bad vintage, but by the time we got to the harvest the grapes looked and tasted really good," Lardy said. "For us, 13 percent natural alcohol is quite enough."

THE PERFECT BEAUJOLAIS

Anita Neveu of Domaine Anita in nearby Chenas described her struggle to cope with the conditions more drastically, likening the summer of 2021 to "a boxing match with the rain." It's logical that she should use a sporting metaphor, because before she became a winemaker she was a professional cyclist.

"Cycling taught me self-discipline and to strive to get better, better, better," she said, and the tasting of her 2021 wines was just like that: it started very well, then it got better, better, better!

When I got to the [Domaine Anita Moulin-à-Vent Coeur de Vigneronne 2021](#), it couldn't have been any better. The breathtaking interplay of mineral freshness, a small ocean of berry fruit and super-fine-tannins make this the first perfect Beaujolais we have ever encountered.

Back in January 2019, when I first tasted Beaujolais for JamesSuckling.com, it became clear to me that this region is as dynamic as it is beautiful. Wine prices are also much more friendly than the Rhone to the south, never mind Burgundy to the north, where wine prices are completely out of control. **Clearly, top Beaujolais is excellent value for money, but after my recent tour to the region I think you have to go further and ask if these aren't the best value reds in the whole world of wine.**

WineSearcher.com says that Domaine Anita's 100-point wine will retail for under \$30 when it reaches the market, which will be very soon. That makes it a truly astounding bargain. The only problem will be getting to it before everyone else does. And don't worry if you are unlucky with this wine, because many other bottles rated 95-plus will be much easier to buy at prices in the \$20 to \$30 range. And they can stand in comparison with sought-after Burgundies costing 10 times this price and more.

The reason for this absurd situation is the long shadow of Beaujolais Nouveau, the light fruity red from the region, the fall release of which just weeks after the harvest was one of the first global wine phenomena. The release date of one minute past midnight on the third Thursday of November – just in time for American Thanksgiving! – was fixed in 1985, and it was after this that Beaujolais Nouveau became huge. However, the mighty bubble burst at the last turn of the century.

My experience is that some bottlings of Beaujolais Nouveau are a bit rough, but others are light, fruity and charming. Although we see no point in tasting it, we've got nothing against the stuff. However, Nouveau persuaded consumers right around Planet Wine that Beaujolais is always light, smells of bubblegum and must be drunk young. Even a quick glance at the notes below will show this is *not* the case. After tasting the young wines at Dominique Piron in Morgon, including some very promising cask samples from the 2022 vintage, company president Julien Revillon opened a bottle of 1990 Morgon for me. It was still good to drink at well over 30 years of age.

I think the enormous scale that the Nouveau phenomenon reached in the late 20th century also made some wine drinkers think that Beaujolais is an industrial product. In fact, the mix of big negociants, medium-sized companies and many small family-owned domaines is rather like that in Burgundy.

THE WAY OF THE WINE CULT

In most markets, Beaujolais lacks the kind of sommelier and collector lobby that Burgundy has in spades. But that may be about to change. Certainly, there is no shortage of potential heroes in the form of talented and innovative winemakers, and that's the raw material from which wine cults are built.

J.B. Bachevillier in Blace only has vineyards in Beaujolais Villages, the second-most-humble appellation in the region, yet he makes stunning wines. Mee Godard in Morgon is French but has Korean roots and is already one of the leading Morgon producers. Then there's Guillaume Goujon of Domaine Dupre Goujon, who is reinventing the wines of his home cru, Cote de Brouilly.

Finally, there are moves to introduce a series of single-vineyard Premier Cru appellations like those of Burgundy. Many applications for Premier Cru status are in preparation and it's too early to say when France's National Institute for Origin and Quality will recognize the first of them. Watch this space for news...

The tasting notes below provide a wealth of options, and behind them is a rich tapestry of stories that I can only hint at here. There's never been a better time to leave on a voyage of Beaujolais discovery!

– *Stuart Pigott, Senior Editor*