

What's the Big Deal About Cru Beaujolais?

Think Beaujolais is just about banana-flavored Nouveau? **Wink Lorch** invites you to think again.

It's that time in November when thoughts turn to Beaujolais. But, before you move on swiftly, stop a while and join us on a discovery cruise of the best the region has to offer.

You're surely not on about Nouveau again are you?

Certainly not. [Beaujolais Nouveau](#) might be all the rage in Japan, but its appeal has distinctly paled in most countries. This story is about the mighty cru [Beaujolais](#) of Moulin-à-Vent, Chénas and Morgon; the sturdy Juliéнас, the sensual Fleurie, Saint-Amour or Chiroubles; the excellent value Brouilly, Côte de Brouilly and not forgetting Régnié. Yes, that's 10 designated vineyard areas – or crus – that sit right at the top of the Beaujolais appellation family tree and at the top of the map too – these areas lie in the north of the Beaujolais, abutting the Mâconnais or southern Burgundy.

Are the crus simply a better class of fruit bomb?

With my last breath I swear that's not the case, as I sip on the deep and divine 2014 Dernier Souffle Moulin-à-Vent of Richard Rottiers. He named this cuvée Dernier Souffle (last breath) because it comes from a very old [Gamay](#) vineyard next to the cemetery. After classic dark red cherry notes on the nose, the palate offers mouthfilling layers of intensity, with a light tannic structure indicating that, if you can resist opening it, this baby will grow up into a truly lovely young thing in two or three years' time. It is simply the essence of finely made Gamay, and it's farmed organically too.

So, these reds are a genuinely big deal, then?

New York sommelier, Chris Struck thinks so: "Cru Beaujolais is awesome and, with Loire Valley and Corsica, producing some of the more interesting red wines coming out of France that are still affordable. My favorite producers include Foillard, Lapierre, Pignard, Thivin, Desvignes. Once we delve past simple [carbonic maceration](#) and tutti frutti notes, we can find some really beautiful crus Beaujolais." Clark Z. Terry of Kermit Lynch, long-time importers of several of Struck's favorites, adds: "The crus definitely have an identity of their own and many discerning consumers have preferences between the crus. That identity is intrinsically connected to Beaujolais."

I sense some caveats. What's going on here?

Two issues: first is that the crus are not entirely sure of their identity or about their relationship with Burgundy. Second, they are made by several different techniques, including carbonic maceration (the traditional way), thermovinification (a quick fix, where the grapes and must are heated to near boiling prior to fermentation) or traditional Burgundian winemaking methods – this can cause confusion as each gives a very different wine style.

Let's deal with the Burgundy disconnect first...

Open up any world wine atlas and you'll find that Beaujolais appears on the Burgundy map; go to a basic introductory wine course and you'll learn about Beaujolais in the Burgundy class. Yet, even the cru vineyards in the north of Burgundy are much closer to the city of Lyon (more associated with the Rhône) than they are to Burgundy's capital city of Dijon. The rolling landscape and climate is more southern, the vineyards are higher and steeper, with soils nothing like the clay-limestone dominated terroir of Côte d'Or. Instead there are complex granites, schists and shales, currently being mapped out in detail for the first time. There's no Pinot Noir here, it's all about Gamay, a grape banned from the rest of

Burgundy centuries ago as being downright inferior, but that suits this area down to the ground.

Côte d'Or négociants have always made cru Beaujolais from purchased grapes, but in recent years Louis Jadot, Albert Bichot and Joseph Drouhin among others have purchased vineyards in the crus taking advantage of the much cheaper land prices than in the Côte d'Or.

What about these winemaking methods – which one makes the best wine?

That depends what you're looking for. Thermovinification gives predominantly blackcurrant-flavored wine – originally introduced to help in a bad vintage, some producers persist in using it, as it is easier to use than carbonic or semi-carbonic maceration, which I'll get to shortly. Traditional Burgundian methods have made a big comeback recently, treating Gamay as a serious red, aged in oak, released not earlier than a year after harvest and designed to age.

You mean cru Beaujolais can age?

Indeed. It's one of the big mysteries that a 10-year-old [Moulin-à-Vent](#) can fool you into thinking it's from the Côte d'Or. Gamay is genetically an offspring of Pinot Noir and it seems that with age it takes on some of the latter's characteristics. Most of the crus benefit from a couple of years of aging at the very least. Wines from Château des Jacques (Jadot's estate), made in resolutely Burgundian methods can age for well over a decade, but then so can those made by Lapierre or Foillard with carbonic maceration techniques.

So what is carbonic maceration? Doesn't it give those banana flavors?

No, not at all. Years ago, a special fast-acting yeast was introduced into Beaujolais that, combined with carbonic maceration techniques, gave the fearful banana flavors that many associate with Nouveau. Without using this

yeast, fermenting whole bunches in an atmosphere of carbon dioxide, either in a sealed vat (that's full carbonic maceration) or over naturally crushed grapes (the semi version) allows the real Gamay fruit to express itself. Old oak aging adds more complexity too.

Matthieu Lapierre, based in Morgon, says that using carbonic maceration requires lots of human intervention. It was his father, the late Marcel Lapierre, who, encouraged by visionary chemist and négociant Jules Chauvet, brought Beaujolais back to its roots. He and his followers started farming the vineyards better, bringing down the yields, using oak again and eliminating additives in the winery – Marcel Lapierre is widely credited as a founder of the natural wine movement.

But, how do you choose your cru?

First, learn the names of those 10 crus, because many do not even mention Beaujolais on their labels. Cyril Chirouze of Château des Jacques, one that doesn't, defends that position: "We are extremely proud of our region, but for nearly 20 years our wish has been to promote our terroirs, by naming the 'climats' [named vineyard areas] as we do in the Côte d'Or. Equally we want to remind people that Beaujolais isn't just Nouveau." Indeed. Each cru offers its own style and sommeliers have their favorites but, with the top producers, you won't go far wrong with any of them.

Are chilled crus the rule like all Beaujolais?

Crus Beaujolais should be served and enjoyed according to the weather, their style and your mood. In summer, slightly chilled would do just fine, especially for those lighter crus made in the traditional carbonic maceration way. But, if you need some winter warmth, especially with the bigger crus with some age, serve them as you should any not-overly tannic red, a little above cellar temperature, say 14-16C (57-61F).

Alone or with food?

Cru Beaujolais excels with a meal. From the light [Brouillys](#) to the firmer Morgons and Moulin-à Vents, these reds are ultra-flexible with food, ideal for a group choosing several different dishes. The soft tannins and lively, juicy acidity of Gamay, together with red-fruit characters, make them work with anything from poached salmon to light-spiced chicken stir fry or a traditional Beaujolais meal of charcuterie, rich pork stew and a cheese platter.