

# PUNCH



If it seems like Beaujolais—good Beaujolais, the *real* Beaujolais—is everywhere, that’s not by happenstance. Its moment has been a long time coming. All it took was for its best practitioners to believe that it could be more than the minor wine it was considered to be—and as crucially, for the whole wine world to change seismically around it.

Cru Beaujolais, which describes wines that come from one of 10 villages in the Beaujolais area north of Lyon, has become a juggernaut of postmodern wine. It not only serves as this current generation’s substitute for the red Burgundy we can no longer afford, but something more: a totem of how wine itself has changed. The things we once considered informal side acts, wines built for upfront drinkability and made without status markers like new oak, are now perfectly acceptable and embraced as great wines.

To understand why Beaujolais has become such an important part of wine today, let’s take a quick, unvarnished look at its history. For centuries, Beaujolais was the great outlier of eastern France, namely because its native grape, gamay noir, had an unfairly sullied history in Burgundy. Going back to the 13th century, gamay was deemed lowbrow and swag compared to pinot noir, unworthy of the great slopes of the Côte-d’Or. And so it found a home to the south—wedged between the Mâconnais and the city of Lyon.

That’s usually how the scene is set, and it’s a fair start, but history is much more complicated. For much of the 20th century, Beaujolais was enjoyed and respected, not just as bistro wine, but as a great example of paysan beauty, something from the gorgeous countryside, born of worthwhile tradition. It wasn’t by happenstance that most of the *crus* were present at the birth of France’s appellation system in 1936. They were already known to produce superior wines—not as stoic as Burgundy, but more sensuous and real. If Burgundy was a love poem, Beaujolais was sex talk, and thus had enough obvious populous appeal that snobby types were bound to turn their backs on it (even if they found themselves drinking a lot).

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All that set the tumblers for its great late-stage undoing. As the 1970s arrived, what had been a local tradition—the drinking of the new vintage wine, Beaujolais Nouveau, was adopted globally, especially by Americans who were newly craving anything French. Soon enough, Beaujolais became mostly discussed in terms of Nouveau, a barely finished wine that can be sold as of the third Thursday each November, about two months after harvest. Nouveau was an instant hit; it was chuggable and offered a nubile version of that sex talk, and quickly became an early success of modern wine marketing. Usually this is credited to Georges Duboeuf, the large *négociant* who, for many years, was essentially the godfather of Beaujolais, and who made the ritual of buying Nouveau a global fad. The ludicrous idea of drinking fresh harvest wine shipped halfway around the world had, candidly, a far longer life span than it should have. But like all bad ideas in wine, the zest for Nouveau was destined to fail.

Meantime, in the shadows of all that cheap, industrial Beaujolais, the region was sowing the seeds of revolution. In the 1980s, a set of winemakers now known as the Gang of Four (although there were five, or six, or more, depending whose version of events you believe) began to reconsider both their farming practices—moving toward organics—and their winemaking. At the center was a scientist and wine broker named Jules Chauvet, who had been working to produce some of his wines without sulfur dioxide, and who believed that ripe fruit and diligent, controlled winemaking with native yeasts could make far better Beaujolais. Chauvet proved this with some of his own wines, but more importantly inspired *vignerons* like Marcel Lapiere, Guy Breton, Jean-Paul Thévenet, Jean Foillard and Yvon Métras, who adopted his views and, sometimes contentiously, made very different wines than their neighbors.

This Gang of However Many put serious Beaujolais on the radar of a new generation of wine types in the 1990s and 2000s, and their work continues. But that doesn’t quite explain how Beaujolais achieved its current status. For that, it’s worth looking to a subsequent generation of producers, including some of the Gang’s children, who either grew up or came to Beaujolais at a time when its potential, and the idea of terroir, was already accepted.

This current generation essentially started with a different narrative than those who came before. Fuck no, Beaujolais would no longer simply be a southern annex to Burgundy; it had its own geographic specificities and rivalries and lore. And when parcel-specific geological maps of the region appeared a few years ago, it marked a debutante moment—an acknowledgment that we would have to start talking about Beaujolais in the terms we now use for important places like Champagne and Burgundy.

In other words, for someone warming to Beaujolais today, it is hard to express just how great this modern era is. It’s not just the quiet proliferation of organic farming, or the increased quality of winemaking, largely reverberating with Chauvet’s ideas. It’s also that we now can talk about Beaujolais in specific terms that would have been too geeky even five years ago. That’s not just knowing the Côte du Py is Morgon’s most famous vineyard, but also being able to appreciate the labeling of places known a few years ago only to locals, like Douby or Grand Cras.

If there’s any asterisk, it’s that top-notch Beaujolais has grown more expensive, perhaps uncomfortably so. That was inevitable, probably, and also not the first time it has happened. During the 1970s Beaujolais frenzy, there was worry about good Beaujolais reaching \$6 a bottle (\$35 with inflation) and fear it might reach \$10 (or \$60, in 2018 dollars). That might bring caution to those who have seen how quickly Burgundy became unaffordable.

But on balance, this is a time to revel in our good fortune. We live in an unabashedly guilt-free time for wine, and great Beaujolais is right in the midst of it.

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#### Fast Facts

- The 10 crus, from north to south, are: Saint-Amour, Juliéas, Chénas, Moulin-à-Vent, Fleurie, Chiroubles, Morgon, Régnié, Brouilly and Côte de Brouilly. Moulin-à-Vent was often described as the best, usually because it makes the most stoic wines. But increasingly it’s clear that there are several other contenders for that title, including Morgon and Fleurie. There are also murmurs that an 11th village, Lantignié, might be added to the list.
  - Beaujolais is usually associated with a specific style of winemaking, often called carbonic maceration, in which whole grape bunches are left in a vat, which is often sealed, so that the fermentation begins inside the grape itself, with the grapes eventually crushed under their own weight. This process best takes place in the presence of carbon dioxide, which is a byproduct of fermentation, but is sometimes manually added to the vat. (A subset of this technique is cold carbonic maceration, which involves the use of dry ice to regulate the process.) In addition, many practitioners of carbonic actually prefer “semi-carbonic” maceration, in which a carbonic wine is finished with more conventional yeast-driven fermentation. The glossy, drinkable texture of Beaujolais is very much associated with the don’t-touch method of carbonic.
  - What the Beaujolais often call “Burgundian” maceration is also used; this is essentially treating gamay like pinot noir, with more typical manipulation of the grapes (usually punching them down to release juice). However, this technique was also well established in Beaujolais for much of the 20th century, prior to the pioneering of carbonic. So it’s hard to say that one is more “traditional” than the other.
  - The soils of Beaujolais are usually described as granite, which isn’t untrue. But while a town like Fleurie has relatively uniform soils, namely of pink sandy granite, others like Juliéas have veins of silica, sandstone and schist. Moulin-à-Vent, meanwhile, has calcareous soils amid its granite and pockets of manganese and in Saint-Amour, there’s not only a transition to the limestone of the neighboring Mâconnais, but also schist and flint.
  - Typically Beaujolais has been described as a “drink it young” wine. While it tastes good young, there’s ample evidence that good Beaujolais can age a decade or more.
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### The Essential Producers

**Domaine Lapierre:** It would be impossible not to start this list here, given Marcel Lapierre's outsized influence on the region. Marcel Lapierre's death in 2010 created uncertainty about the domaine's future, but his children, Mathieu and Camille, picked up and even expanded on their father's work, and the Lapierre wines are as good as ever. In addition to their Morgon, they've recently added a Juliéna, which quickly became a new benchmark for that appellation.

**Jean-Louis Dutraive:** Although the thoughtful Jean-Louis Dutraive wasn't part of the Gang, his wines from Fleurie are some of the most exquisite in Beaujolais, masterful in their winemaking (Dutraive takes a flexible view of carbonic), and have finally found a deserved audience. His son, Justin, is also making remarkably good Beaujolais-Villages and straight Beaujolais. The lineup can change, but wines like Jean-Louis' 2017 Le Pied de la Rue show a profound talent for bringing out the mineral complexity of Beaujolais.

**Guy Breton:** If Lapierre was the George Clooney of the Gang, with his mixture of charisma and contentiousness, Guy "Max" Breton is the Matthew McConaughey in his chillness. His Morgon is atypical and quiet, the rare Beaujolais that needs a couple of years to really show itself (and his P'tit Max, from century-old vines, can be hard-edged when young). He's less known for his Régnié, but it's a portrait of subtlety, all rose petal and Bergamot orange.

**Domaine de Fa:** This is a new property in Beaujolais, with its first vintage in 2014, but it's hardly a newcomer. If Burgundians have been looking south, this was a case of looking north from the Rhône Valley, specifically on the part of owner and winemaker Alain Graillot, arguably the best producer of Crozes-Hermitage. Graillot already had family land in northern Beaujolais, and he now splits his time between the two, making Beaujolais with the tension and aromatic punch of his syrah-based wines. His Saint-Amour, especially, is one of the best examples of that *cru*, with savory, sage-like fragrance and silken but powerful fruit.

**Domaine Thillardon:** Paul-Henri Thillardon has land in Chénas, one of the little-known *crus*, but his tutelage with Dutraive and Yvon Métras gave him skills to quickly become a rising star in the region. His single-parcel wines, like Les Carrières and Les Blémonts, can be hard to get hold of, but are great lenses on how diverse and unique wines from Chénas can be.

**See also:** Jean and Alex Foillard, Yvon and Jules Métras, Julien Sunier, Domaine David-Beaupère, Nicole Chanrion, Laurence & Rémi Dufaire, Yann Bertrand, Mee Godard, Jean-Claude Lapalu.

### The Essential Wines

**Clos de la Roilette Fleurie:** There's no missing winemaker Alain Coudert's well-known bottle, given its bright ochre label with a picture of a horse (that's Roilette). Coudert remains a benchmark for the flamboyant floral aromas of Fleurie, but his property is near the edge of Moulin-à-Vent, and the wine has that appellation's dark fruit and firm, aggressive texture.

**Jean-Paul Thévenet Vieilles Vignes Morgon:** Jean-Paul Thévenet might have the George Harrison role in the Gang, but his wines are often the most elegant—bright, stately, full of black peppercorn and dried flowers. (His son Charly makes equally interesting wine in Régnié under his own label.)

**Domaine Chapel Côte de Bessay Juliéna:** This is another relatively new property, from David Chapel and Michele Smith-Chapel, who met while working as \_\_\_\_\_ sommeliers in New York. David Chapel's family ran one of the region's most famous restaurants, though, and he returned and apprenticed with Mathieu Lapierre. From the outset, the pair has made irresistible wines—like this one from a steep slope in northern Juliéna, showing both forward fruit notes and subtle undertones, like caraway seed.

**Louis-Claude Desvignes Javernières Morgon:** Brother and sister Louis-Benoît and Claude-Emmanuelle Desvignes are more low-key presences in Morgon, and while their wines don't always get the attention of their neighbors, their Javernières comes from old parcels directly under the Côte du Py. It has the lilac and bloody mineral side of wines from that famous site, but with firmer tannins. A Beaujolais for steak.

**Antoine Sunier Morgon:** Like his brother, Julien, Antoine Sunier came to Beaujolais to make wine as an outsider. He settled in Régnié, and while his wines can be less overtly juicy than his brother's, they have a terrific savory aspect. This is an atypical Morgon from old vines in the southern part of the village, full of poppy seed and carob accents and a bit of charcoal-like bite to the tannin.

### The Essential Fringe

**Beyond *cru*:** While the new generation of winemakers is mostly in the *cru villages*, a set of talented *vignerons* like Julien Merle and Sylvère Trichard (Séléné) is also reviving the fortunes of more basic Beaujolais and Beaujolais-Villages—and, after several hard vintages, so are many of the big names in the *crus*.

**Not just red:** Although gamay is the defining grape in Beaujolais, there's also a small amount of very good white Beaujolais made from chardonnay; the best known might be from Jean-Paul Brun of Domaine des Terres Dorées, but Rémi Dufaire and several others also make standout examples.

**Not just in Beaujolais:** Gamay may be the quintessential grape of Beaujolais but it's also well founded in the Loire, in appellations like the Côte Roannaise in the Massif Central foothills. As top Beaujolais becomes more in-demand, and after several thin harvests, there's ever more interest in gamay from elsewhere (including North America).

**Northern neighbor:** The Mâconnais, just north of Beaujolais, is usually shuffled off into its own story, mostly because it's almost all chardonnay on limestone. But a growing amount of red Mâcon, from both gamay and pinot noir, is becoming a worthy counterpart.

**Blurred lines:** Several very difficult vintages have forced some of the best-known Beaujolais producers to buy grapes from elsewhere in Beaujolais, and even southern France, after their own grapes were damaged or ruined, including the Dutraive family and Yann Bertrand. This has turned out to be an unexpected boon, putting talented hands to making an expanded range of wines.