

# The Pleasure Of Now

Long considered Burgundy's  
frivolous cousin, has Beaujolais figured out  
how to be just serious enough?

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It used to be so simple in Beaujolais, perhaps because Beaujolais was considered, unfairly, a simple wine. Here was a wine to drink with abandon, which is what not just the Beaujolois did but so did the Lyonnais, oceans of it washing through their bouchons, to the point that the old joke – *What are the three rivers of Lyon? The Rhône, the Saône and the Beaujolais* – stopped being terribly funny.

All that has changed, of course. Beaujolois, at least

the best of it, is now serious stuff, a wine allowed to play in the shoals of Burgundy, while creeping open the door to just a touch more pleasure, all while offering what Burgundy typically hasn't: consistency. It's not coincidental that the balance of culinary power in France has shifted from Paris to Lyon: slowly, begrudgingly, France is coming to embrace the heartier, lustier, IDGAF-about-stars nature that Lyon, and its ravenously unbound restaurants, represent. Its

favourite wine, too, is part of that equation: pure pleasure turned respectable.

Which leaves us in a complicated place with Beaujolais. Just a few years ago it was much easier to hold it up as a wine antihero, perhaps because it was so odd to think of taking the region and its wines seriously. Declaring it to be serious was an act of practiced cool. But that narrative is now well established, and Beaujolais' modern hagiography is now enshrined: the coming of the

prophet Chauvet, with his disciples Lapiere and Foillard and so on. Now comes an even newer testament – another generation coming into its own, from origins both established (the Lapiere siblings; Jean-Paul Thévenet's son Charly) and new (Mee Godard, Julien and Antoine Sunier).

There's now an honest-to-goodness discussion of terroir in Beaujolais — study up on your Corcelette versus your Pré Jourdan (both in Morgon) — and the maturing of its own sort of indie fair, Bien Boire en Beaujolais, is a sign that this is no longer a happy-go-lucky (if dirt poor) outback for farmers. It's a serious place making serious wine. Nouveau dare not speak its name. Some craptacularly bad decisions, like thermovinification and tailored yeasts like banana-bready 71B, are now recognised for the damage they did. Even Duboeuf, that piñata for the perils of hype, has quietly started shopping around its Cru Beaujolais as though that, and not the global takeover of wine shelves with banana-flavored grape juice, was its core mission. Today, that earnest and serious spirit has spread beyond the ten Crus, with new evangelists like Mathilde



Charly Thévenet



Tending the vines, Fleurie (Moulin-à-Vent in background)

and Stephen Durieu, who see greatness in humble Beaujolais Villages, and Nathalie Banes and Julien Merle, who see the charm in the southern Beaujolais, a place only ever known for simple wines.

But what if we lovers of Beaujolais as meditative object went too far? After all, we've already screwed Burgundy, subjecting it to our endless geek nature and our fetish for detail (or at least the fetishes of those rich enough to buy it today), sucking much of the pleasure from it. Now Beaujolais is our new grail. It has just enough of the vague pedigree of Burgundy — Burgundy's prodigal son, perhaps, given how Burgundians like the Lafarge family and Thibault

Liger-Belair have rushed to buy up Beaujolais dirt.

It's actually hard to blame them, or others like the Graillot family of Crozes-Hermitage, for wanting a piece of Beaujolais. It's a cheap and proven place to have a bit of a land grab, and as much as it's an unspoken bit of gloom hanging over the horrors of the 2016 vintage (hail, storms, a vastly diminished crop) the scene is set for lots of old peasant land to find new caretakers in Beaujolais – potentially people who will farm it with more tenderness and fewer chemicals, and who have no interest in the ugly négociant-based economics of the past.

They, and the rest of the new Beaujolais generation, stand to help the world



(Above left) Courtyard scene, Domaine Julie Balagny (Above right) Lunch with Julien Sunier



embrace a lot more of that Lyonnais world view — wine flowing with abandon but not disregard, a balance that indulges both brain and balls. This isn't to say that we should abandon the cerebral nature of Volnay for the sexiness of Régnié, but Beaujolais and Lyon, and our whole new worldview in wine, is about the pleasure of now. And you can theorise and rhapsodise all you like, but Gamay frankly hits you in a different, more aroused

place than Riesling or Pinot Noir. Pinot wants to be loved; Gamay wants to fuck.

But is that enough to give Beaujolais a real future? It's worth being a bit worried about the naturalists who have been busy erecting barricades in every wine region of France. They have made Beaujolais their Bastille, probably because Chauvet, their patron saint, was so influential there. Today, ten thousand *sans soufre* wines can trace their

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roots back to the hills outside Villefranche, because the rise of great Beaujolais and the triumph of the 'Gang of Four' is ultimately a triumph of naturalism over industrialism. Modern Beaujolais' success, in the post-Duboeuf era, has been a matter of taking power back for the people.

But the reality of Beaujolais always has been more complicated than that. It is a place that even today is raw, embracing a side of nature that's more Hobbes than Rousseau. Life in Beaujolais doesn't just thrive, it *throbs* — you can feel it in the local gardens bursting with growth (even with the hail) and the constant swarms of flies and bees. It is a place rife with vitality, even after a half-century of chemical farming, a biological holocaust in its soils.

That vitality, I think, forces the Beaujolois to not only spurn fancy airs but to shower disdain upon them.

At a wedding not long ago in Villié-Morgon, you could easily identify the winemakers because, unlike the suit-wearing Americans, they were sporting shorts and, when enough of their product had been consumed, doing splits on the dance floor. (We're talking about dudes here.) In true Beaujolais fashion, they had no fucks to even lend.

And yet they can be damn serious when it's needed. Never mind Duboeuf, a sort of anti-Wonka, cosseted in his giant factory near Lancié. Beaujolais could at least respect the work of somewhere like Château des Jacques — never loved because its template was Burgundian and its loyalties were to Jadot, but appreciated for trying to elevate the craft. And nearly everywhere you look, equally serious work is being done — far more than the Gang of Four gospel describes. Here's a place where stars often hide

in plain sight, perhaps not fully acknowledged because Beaujolais is still guided by a cool-kids club, and these others are just a bit apocryphal: the Suniers, or Godard, or Anne-Sophie Dubois, making stoic, Lafarge-like wines in her gorgeous amphitheater of vines at the very top of Fleurie.

For the moment, Beaujolais has figured out how to be just serious enough, without abandoning its base impulses. It can be the free-flowing wine of the bouchon, and yet sit respectably on a tablecloth. And for the moment we're able to thread a needle with Beaujolais, to revel in wines that toe a line between profound and delicious. In other words, Beaujolais is a testament to the way we drink wine today. The Parisian has shifted to the Lyonnais. We can acknowledge love, and embrace lust.