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When the Nouveau Comes Marching In

A blind tasting of 10 wines from Beaujolais' 2012 vintage finds good quality despite a drastically smaller crop

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Continuing his family firm's tradition of dramatic celebrations, Franck Duboeuf unveiled the new vintage of Beaujolais Nouveau today wielding a jeroboam of the 2012 Georges Duboeuf Beaujolais Nouveau and leading a small parade of wine lovers accompanied by a brass ensemble playing "When the Saints Come Marching In." Nouveau's worldwide release officially occurs the third Thursday in November each year, and 2012 marks the 30th anniversary of Beaujolais Nouveau's distribution in the United States.

While this largely PR-driven event has lost some steam over the years, growers and producers in the French region of Beaujolais are perhaps looking to it as the light at the end of the tunnel, after a difficult growing season drastically reduced yields throughout the vineyards. Overall, yields were down 40 to 50 percent from 2011, which was considered an average-size crop in the region. "This year, Beaujolais rhymes with 'scarcity,'" said Arnaud Briday, owner and winemaker of Domaine des Chers in the Juliéna's appellation. "Climatic conditions were very difficult for the cultivation of the vine."

Spring frost affected old vines, early summer rain resulted in slow and uneven flowering, and several areas in the region were hit by summer hailstorms that wiped out significant portions, even entire plots, of developing grapes and vines. Hardest hit were the growers in the southern Beaujolais and Beaujolais-Villages AOCs, the only appellations from which Nouveau is permitted to be made and the appellations that typically produce the region's larger-volume, lower-priced wines.

Since many Beaujolais vigneronns sell grapes or vinified wines to négociant firms that are highly sensitive to the value price-point at which Beaujolais is typically marketed, the small crop could spell disaster and has already created serious cash-flow issues for many growers. "Bulk prices have risen, but by nothing near as much as the shortfall in yield. For those who sell most of their production in bulk to négociants—the great majority—this will be a tough year," said James Wilding, who makes *cru* Beaujolais from the 15-acre Château Grange Cochard estate in the Morgon appellation.

Despite these difficulties, there's a silver lining to this cloud for wine drinkers: Lower yields mean that the remaining fruit can draw on



Jessica Oshita

Georges Duboeuf's 2012 Cuvée Spéciale leads this year's Beaujolais Nouveaus, followed by Domaine Rochette and Jean-Paul Brun.

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more of a vine's resources during the rest of the growing season, often resulting in better-quality fruit and potentially better wine. In my blind tastings, the 2012 Nouveaux were pleasant wines that rated in the good (80-84 points on *Wine Spectator's* 100-point scale) to very good (85-89 points) ranges, showing more red fruit than black fruit character, along with Beaujolais' typical spice notes and fresh acidity.

Tuesday, March 17, 2009

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"In the end, the lower yields were good for the maturity," explained Franck Duboeuf. Among the producers Georges Duboeuf works with in the Beaujolais and Beaujolais-Villages AOCs, the average yield was 1.5 tons per acre. The legal limit is 3.7 tons per acre, which most growers probably come closer to in standard vintages.

While Nouveau provides a preview of a new vintage, Beaujolais' reputation rests on its *crus*, 10 recognized areas in the northern part of the region—Brouilly, Chénas, Chiroubles, Côte de Brouilly, Fleurie, Juliéna, Morgon, Moulin-à-Vent, Régnié and St.-Amour—each awarded AOC status. Wines from the *crus* usually offer more depth and distinctive character than wines from the larger Beaujolais and Beaujolais-Villages appellations. Though often still good values, these bottlings typically demand slightly higher prices as well, with most in the \$15 to \$25 range.

The 2012 cru Beaujolais won't be available in the United States until spring 2013, but in the interim, many bottlings of 2009, 2010 and 2011 are still available at retailers and on wine lists. With these three solid, successful vintages behind them, many producers in Beaujolais may be in good enough shape financially to hold on until next year.

GEORGES DUBOEUF Beaujolais-Villages Nouveau Cuvée Spéciale 2012 Score: 87 | \$11

Fresh and balanced, featuring strawberry, peach, plum and spice notes. Light tannins show on the finish, with an echo of ripe fruit. Drink now.—A.N.

JEAN-PAUL BRUN Beaujolais Nouveau Terres Dorées l'Ancien Vieilles Vignes 2012

Score: 86 | \$14

Balanced and fresh, this well-integrated version offers a base note of ground spice and flavors of raspberry, damson plum, tea leaf and creamy gumdrop. Drink now. 600 cases imported.—A.N.

DOMAINE ROCHETTE Beaujolais-Villages Nouveau 2012 Score: 86 | \$11

Minerally, with light tannins and flavors of grilled plum, dried herb, blackberry coulis and licorice snap. Drink now. 400 cases imported.—A.N.

JEAN BERERD & FILS Beaujolais-Villages Nouveau Domaine de la Madone 2012

Score: 85 | \$13

Creamy and floral, with ripe black currant, strawberry, herb and spice notes. Offers lightly juicy acidity. Drink now. 5,400 cases made.—A.N.

BOUCHARD-AÎNÉ & FILS Beaujolais Nouveau 2012 Score: 85 | \$12

Offering an appealing and expressive character, this features juicy acidity backing flavors of white peach, blackberry, smoke and cherry. Drink now. Tasted twice, with consistent notes. 3,500 cases made.—A.N.

PAUL DURDILLY Beaujolais Nouveau Les Grandes Coasses 2012 Score: 85 | \$12

Fresh and aromatic, this balanced red offers a well-meshed range of raspberry, cherry and white peach fruit, showing subtle accents of fresh mint and cocoa powder. Drink now.—A.N.

PASCAL CHATELUS Beaujolais Nouveau 2012 Score: 84 | \$10

Creamy, with licorice and smoke notes accenting the flavors of black raspberry and crème de cassis. Drink now. 470 cases imported.—A.N.

JOSEPH DROUHIN Beaujolais Nouveau 2012 Score: 84 | \$11

Hints of cedar and sandalwood accent flavors of plum, white cherry and raspberry in this open-knit, tangy red. Drink now. 5,000 cases imported.—A.N.

GEORGES DUBOEUF Beaujolais Nouveau 2012 Score: 84 | \$10

Bright and tangy, offering a classic banana note on the nose, with flavors of raspberry, wild strawberry and light spice. Modest finish. Drink now.—A.N.

DOMAINE PASSOT LES RAMPAX Beaujolais-Villages Nouveau 2012 Score: 84 | \$11

A hint of fresh forest runs through the subtle notes of cherry, smoke and spice in this modest red. Drink now. 50 cases imported.—A.N.

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