

The Annexation of Beaujolais

The Merchants of Beaune Embrace Gamay

by Roger Morris

In the late 14th century, the Black Death wiped out much of Burgundy's population, leaving in its wake a devastated economy and a labor shortage. It was a time when locals began planting more gamay—a natural cross between pinot noir and gouais blanc—which was easier to grow, less labor-intensive and more productive than the reigning pinot noir. Vineyard yields were further increased by a new practice of fertilizing crops with animal wastes.

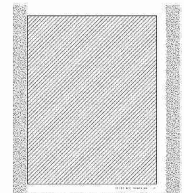
But in 1395, the region's ruler, Philip the Bold, put an end to gamay's brief popularity, ordering that within five months the "very bad and disloyal variety called Gaamez" be cut out of the vineyards of Dijon, the Côte d'Or and the Chalonnaise. In the same decree, he also banned fertilizers. Though farmers complained, Philip was unwavering, even removing the mayor of Dijon for too loudly protesting his edict. Wines made of pinot noir commanded a higher price, plus Philip wanted the reputation of having the most prized vineyards in France.

Six centuries later, the wine merchants of Beaune, Burgundy's wine capital, have re-evaluated the status both of gamay and of Beaujolais, the one place in Burgundy where Philip's edict was never enforced, and the grape has continued to flourish. Simply stated, Burgundy has run out of places to plant vineyards, and it desperately needs more of them for entry-level table wines and for sparkling wines.

To get those grapes, the Beaune merchants are jumping into Beaujolais like wine tourists into a vat

of freshly picked grapes. Beaune-based wine merchants—*négociants*—have acquired smaller, Beaujolais-based *négociants*, snapped up top Beaujolais estates, changed regulations to incorporate more gamay with pinot noir in Burgundy blends, begun planting pinot noir in southern Beaujolais (with one large firm launching a Beaujolais-based pinot noir last year) and, in December, merged the Burgundy and Beaujolais growers associations. The annexation of Beaujolais is quickly becoming a fact.

"The merge between these two wine regions started in the 1990s with the arrival of northern Burgundy houses buying either land or companies," says Frédéric Drouhin, head of Maison Joseph Drouhin, a Burgundy estate grower and *négociant* that recently purchased Hospices de Belleville, with vineyards in three of Beaujolais's ten *cru* villages. Drouhin now produces more than 1.1 million cases of regional Burgundy wines in Beaujolais, most of it in sparkling *Crémant de Bourgogne*, with recent growth in *Côteaux Bourguignon* and plans for *Bourgogne Blanc* and



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Bourgogne Rouge.

What began in the 1990s accelerated after Burgundy began to expand international markets following the recession that started in 2008. As Louis-Fabrice Latour, head of Maison Louis Latour, put it in 2012, when he addressed his fellow merchants assembled at the annual Hospices de Beaune: “I have a concern that we don’t have enough entry-level Burgundies at under ten euros, ten dollars, ten yen or ten pounds per bottle.”

To meet that goal, regulations have been changed to incorporate more Beaujolais-grown gamay in regional wines labeled “Bourgogne,” such as Côteaux Bourguignons, an appellation created six years ago, which allows unlimited amounts of gamay. Entry-level Bourgogne Rouge can contain up to 30 percent gamay. And Burgundy sparkling wine can contain up to 15 percent gamay.

In addition to having more gamay in wines labeled Bourgogne, there is also a growing trend to produce less Beaujolais in the fruitier style yielded by carbonic maceration and more in the pinot-noir style of Burgundy—by both Beaune producers and Beaujolais vintners.

“We have always thought of gamay and pinot noir as brothers,” says Frédéric Barnier, technical director of Maison Louis Jadot, which purchased Château des Jacques, an estate based in Beaujolais’s Moulin-à-Vent, in 1996. The relationship between pinot noir and gamay has indeed led many experts to observe that aged gamay and aged pinot noir often taste quite similar, more so than when they are young.

At Château de la Chaize in Brouilly, owner Caroline von Klitzing tells the story about a ten-year-old bottle of her Réserve de La Marquise, made from old-vine gamay, that stumped a panel of specialists in a blind tasting. “They ‘knew’ it was Burgundy,” von Klitzing relates, “but couldn’t figure out whereabouts in Burgundy it was from.”

The most visible changes are in the vineyards, where winemakers are converting vines once used for everyday Beaujolais to instead yield grapes for regional Burgundies. Jean-Charles Boisset, whose family’s firm, Boisset, is one of Burgundy’s largest

wine producers, explains that his team has changed traditional gobelet trellising to a higher trellis that protects the fruit against frost and encourages slower ripening. Vinification is different as well, with longer macerations, cold soaks for two or three days and long fermentation periods to bring out earthier, more complex flavors.

And growers are planting more pinot noir in what has traditionally been gamay territory. Seven years ago, Maison Louis Latour planted 180,000 pinot noir vines in Les Pierres Dorées, in the southern reaches of Beaujolais. Having launched its first pinot noir wines from the region last year, Louis-Fabrice Latour says, “I’m a great believer that there is room for expansion of pinot noir in the area.”

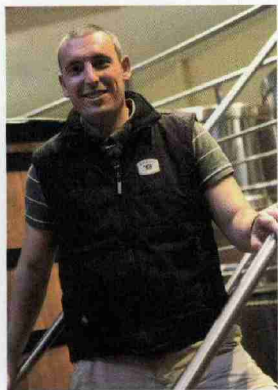
Objections to this invasion of Beaujolais by outsiders have been somewhat muted, since Burgundy sells better than Beaujolais in international markets. Meanwhile, independent gamay producers in the ten designated crus have been seeking to elevate their wines to “premier cru” status within the Burgundy hierarchy, an elevation most négociants are supporting, as they, too, own vines in the Beaujolais crus.

The annexation is also taking some surprising terms.

Boisset, who is known to think outside the box, has begun planting varieties that are “outside the appellation.” “Rather than plant pinot noir in southern Beaujolais, I would look in the other direction,” he says, “taking syrah from the northern Rhone and planting it in Beaujolais. The blue and pink granite soils would be perfect for syrah.”

Accordingly Mommessin, a négociant owned by Boisset, established a new syrah vineyard in Beaujolais in 1999, using mostly modern clones, while planting one-third of the site to sérine, a local variant of syrah in the northern Rhône, the massale selection taken from a vineyard dating to 1936 in St-Joseph. Currently, Mommessin markets the wine as “Grand Granite Sirane” under the generic appellation “Produit de France.”

“Perhaps syrah would become the Super Beaujolais of Burgundy!” Boisset asserts. ■



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photo of Jean-Charles Boisset by Mianakant Jeffrey