

BEAUJOLAIS'S ROCK-SOLID FUTURE

At the intersection of Burgundy and the Rhône Valley, these underappreciated wines deserve a share of the spotlight.

BY ROGER VOSS

I've tasted Beaujolais's future, and it is good.

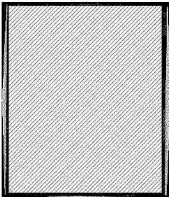
The wines of this oft-maligned region are changing fast. A renewed emphasis on quality is propelling these 100-percent Gamay wines onto the radar screens of collectors and drinkers alike. And the crus—the villages in the north of the region—are leading the way.

A Beaujolais cru is a small village, rather than an individual vineyard as it is in Burgundy. Producers are working to define distinct climats, which are the equivalent to single vineyards, within the crus. In the meantime, look for individual vineyard names on labels.

Granite, in colors from blue to pink, is the key to Beaujolais quality. The vineyards are on the eastern flank of the Massif Central, the volcanic mountain range that dominates much of south-central France.

Of the 10 crus, the five you're most likely to find are Juliéna, Moulin-à-Vent, Fleurie, Morgon and Brouilly. The others are Chénas, Chiroubles, Côte de Brouilly, Régnié and Saint-Amour.

Wines from these crus can stand against many fine Burgundies, and at a fraction of the price. They have fruit, structure and ageability, yet are easy to drink upon release. What more could any wine drinker ask?





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Juliéas

Charm and Fruit

In the morning sun, the café in Juliéas comes to life. Wine drinkers set up for the morning, while coffee drinkers stop for a quick shot of caffeine.

At one end of the village, Sylvain Tête of Domaine du Clos du Fief pours me his wines. Sylvain, 27, works alongside his dad, Michel, after stints in Australia and New Zealand. It's a voyage typical of the new generation that is taking over in Beaujolais.

His wood-aged Tête de Cuvée (no pun on the family name intended, he says) is from blue granite, which provides concentration and ageability. But even in this wine, the bright fruit and charming accessibility epitomized by his Cuvée Tradition (aged in tank) are apparent. The two wines reflect the two sides of the appellation.

Next, I meet one of the few organic growers in Beaujolais. The traditional bush vines prevalent in Beaujolais make it difficult to cultivate the soil without damaging the



vines, says Louis-Clement David of Domaine David-Beaupère. New plantings, with the vines trained on wires, make organic viticulture practical for a grower with just a few acres.

David's wines come from two areas of Juliéas: climat-worthy Vayolette, in the granite hills to the west, and La Bottière, on flat land to the east. Again, the wines take on differing styles: perfumed and structured from the granite, charming fruit on the plain. Age the first while you drink the second.

My last stop of the day, Pascal Aufranc's winery, is literally at the end of the road. The steep, narrow road navigates up a side valley and runs right under his archway, and then stops. Not that his range of wines couldn't stop traffic by themselves.

"It's like drinking cherries, but with just enough tannin," Aufranc says. The wines are certainly charmers, marked by flavors of black cherries, pepper and delicious acidity.

For all that appeal, Juliéas is one of three blue-granite hubs among the region's crus.

The granite, Aufranc says, "runs like a highway through the heart of the Juliéas appellation."

That provides the tannin, while the clay and chalk topsoil give the fruit. It's a winning combination.

Moulin-à-Vent

Wines with Body

There's no village of Moulin-à-Vent, just a windmill (*moulin à vent*). Sitting at 600 feet above sea level, it dominates the landscape.

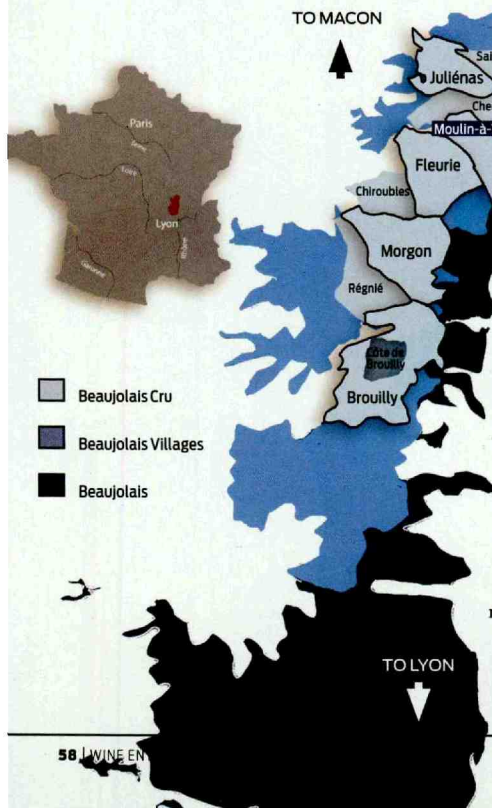
"On a clear day, you can see Mont Blanc," says Brice Laffond, winemaker at Château du Moulin-à-Vent.

I have to take him at his word. Despite many visits to Beaujolais, I've never seen Mont Blanc, the highest mountain in the Alps, from here.

In front of the chateau, within sight of the windmill, is a small parcel called Le Clos. Here, Laffond and the Parinet family, the owners of the estate, experiment with organic and biodynamic cultivation, traditional Beaujolais bush vines and vines on wires. Le Clos is a sign that this estate has become a flagship for the appellation.

Many of the estate's wines are meant for aging—Le Champ de Cour, La Rochelle and Clos de Londres, in particular. The first two come from single vineyards that will certainly be designated climats as the program picks up steam. They also show the power of fine Moulin-à-Vent.

That ageability is confirmed the following day while tasting Anita Kuhnel's wines. The house and cellar of this former pro cyclist



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Julliénas

are a far cry from the grandeur of Château du Moulin-à-Vent, but the wines are in a recognizably dense, concentrated style.

Under the name Domaine Anita, Kuhnel makes wines from another of the great climats-in-waiting: Rochegrès. Because Gamay is so strongly affected by its terroir, she makes a number of single-parcel wines.

"I believe that a wine should be a reflection of that parcel," says Kuhnel, who char-

acterizes these wines as suitably combining "power and elegance."

Her top wine from Moulin-à-Vent is Coeur de Vigneronne, harvested from old vines right in front of her house. It's a wine smoothed by wood aging, rich and robust, almost Burgundian in style.

Moulin-à-Vent is the most Burgundian of the crus: full bodied and complex, with excellent aging potential.

Fleurie

Aromatic and Floral

Of all the crus, Fleurie, just three kilometers south of Rochegrès, produces the most aromatic wines. At Domaine des Grands Fiers, there's a wonderful mix of black cherries, pepper and wild blackberries present in Christian Bernard's wines. After that perfumed moment, it's a little disappointing

Top Julliénas Wines

92 Pascal Aufranc 2015 Les Cerisiers Vieilles Vignes; \$22. Zancanella Importing. **Editors' Choice.**

90 Georges Duboeuf 2015 Château des Capitans; \$20. Quintessential Wines.

Top Moulin-à-Vent Wines

94 Richard Rottiers 2015 Dernier Souffle; \$35. Authentique Vin. **Cellar Selection.**

92 Château du Moulin à Vent 2012 La Rochelle; \$59. Wilson Daniels.

Top Fleurie Wines

92 Château de Chatelard 2015 Cuvée les Vieux Granits; \$22. Wineberry America. **Editors' Choice.**

90 Domaine de Leyre-Loup 2013 Réserve Louis Leyre-Loup Le Regard de l'Ange; \$26. Wine Universe Corp.

Top Morgon Wines

94 Dominique Piron 2015 Côte du Py; \$25. Baron Francois.

94 Jean-Michel Dupré 2015 1935 Vieilles Vignes; \$45. Serge Doré Selections. **Cellar Selection.**

Top Brouilly Wines

91 Robert Perroud 2014 Pollen; \$25. Zancanella Importing.

86 Château des Tours 2015; \$20. Baron Francois.

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to discover the appellation is said to be named after a Roman legionnaire, Florus.

These perfumed beauties can age. Bernard poured a 2009.

"It was a really ripe vintage, less dense than 2015, but with the same richness," he recalled. And so on back to 1991, his first vintage, which, like many aged crus, tastes similar to a mature Pinot Noir.

Bernard's estate is down the road from the village of Fleurie, where Restaurant Villa Cardinale in the square is packed at lunchtime with hungry *vignerons* and visitors.

Looming above the village is Fleurie's emblematic vineyard: La Madonne, named after the La Madone stone chapel at the top. It's likely to be one of the cru's climats.

Audrey Charton, president of the local growers' *syndicat*, says that after the cru of Morgon, Fleurie is next in line to designate its notable climats. Along with La Madonne, Les Roches and Grille Midi are likely contenders.

At lunch with Jacques Lanson and his family, Christophe, the winemaker of Domaine de Layre-Loup and Jacques's son, explains that Fleurie and Morgon—more of a powerhouse—are very different.

While many of the Beaujolais crus are granite, Morgon is "granite and more granite," says Dominique Piron, the 14th generation of his family to work Morgon's vineyards.

"Fleurie is delicate," he says "It needs kid gloves during fermentation. You need to keep an eye on it all the time."

Maybe that's why there are so many subtle flavors that swirl and tease around the bright cherry fruit in the wines from this cru. It's elegance with a twist.

Morgon

Power and Structure

It's 7 p.m. on the Thursday before Easter, and Villié-Morgon is bustling. Parents and their kids stream into the church of Saint Vincent, while the shops are bursting with Easter eggs and rabbit decorations.

This town of 1,700 people is at the center of an appellation that seems to have its act together. While Beaujolais is little more than an hour south of Beaune in Burgundy, it seems a world apart from the grandeur of the Côte d'Or. Still, Morgon is the cru with a climat spirit that's closest to what you find in Burgundy.

Maybe that's because its vineyards are owned by heavy hitters of Beaujolais crus: Dominique Piron, Jean-Marc Burgaud, Jean Foillard, Mathieu Lapierre and Louis-Claude Desvignes. They make wines that are "serious" when young and that can age for many years, when they become similar to red

CLIVE HELM / ALAMY



has its own appellation, Côte de Brouilly), the 3,000 acres of vines of this appellation produce the softest, most open of all the crus.

The wines can be enjoyed the year after harvest. Red cherries, red berries and smooth tannins can give the wines an easy, open character. Nothing to it, you might think. But there is another, more serious side to Brouilly.

With Winemaker Jean-Baptiste Bachevillier, I taste a glass of **Château de Pierreux** 2014 Réserve du Château. Bachevillier makes concentrated and properly dense wines from vines up to 150 years old, and ages them in oak. The wine that I taste, at three years old, is just about ready, although it will certainly age well.

That ability to age is something I find more than once in Brouilly. Château des Tours is a medieval fortress up a hill and just below Saint-Etienne la Varenne. The 2015 Vieilles Vignes from this

estate is solid and firm, packed with concentrated black fruit.

Winemaker Rémi Jean runs the property and the nearby showpiece chateau of Corcelles. It's there, lower down in the sand soils of the plain, that Brouilly shows its gentle side, where it produces wines that are soft, fruity and immediately drinkable.

Robert Perroud, a seventh-generation vigneron, has vines on the west side of the appellation, in the shadow of Mont Brouilly. To get there, the road winds around steep slopes on one side and a drop on the other—not the place to meet an oncoming wine tanker. His vines come from two vineyards: Balloquets and Saburin. He calls his Balloquets wine L'Enfer, meaning "hell."

"My vineyard workers hate this vineyard," he says. "The slope is so steep and so hard to work."

His wines bring together the two facets of Brouilly in one glass. The 2016 Cuvée Pollen from the Saburin vineyard has delicious, accessible fruit and a firm structure. You can drink the wine young, but you can also wait.

Because of the volume produced, Brouilly is easy to find and easy to drink. But don't dismiss it. The wines have as much character as any of the other Beaujolais crus.

soil; and Les Grands Cras, with its decomposed granite.

At Jean-Marc Burgaud's winery next door, we taste his massive 2015s and lighter 2016s. He likes 2016.

"It has all the delicious fruit of great Gamay, while it still has the structure that makes good Morgon," he says.

He also makes wine from another of Morgon's climats-in-waiting: Les Charmes, whose sandy soils produce wines that are more accessible when young.

Burgaud's Côte du Py reveals "the tannins that give this vineyard its reputation," he says.

The winemaker offers a surprise at the end of the tasting: a sample of Cuvée James, a blend of wines from his Côte du Py vineyards. Why James?

"We were searching for a name, and our kids were watching a James Bond movie. So we thought, why not?"

Brouilly Open and Welcoming

Brouilly is the largest of the Beaujolais crus, and everything about Brouilly is big, including the chateaus and large estates that dominate the region. Winding around the volcanic outcrop of Mont Brouilly (which



Burgundy. (To pinote, or become like Pinot Noir, is the local term.)

While many of the Beaujolais crus are granite, Morgon is "granite and more granite," says Dominique Piron, who represents the 14th generation of his family to work in Morgon's vineyards. He's also president of the Beaujolais Wine Council and a top producer.

Piron's production epitomizes what has happened in Morgon. No longer does he make general blends from across the appellation. His wines highlight individual terroirs: the dramatic Côte du Py, with its bluestone volcanic granite on slopes up to 1,500 feet; Javernières, another outcrop of the same

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