

# FOOD & WINE

## The Next Big Thing in Beaujolais

**A small revolution is taking place in an area called Les Pierres Dorées, and it might not be long before you start seeing Pinot Noir from southern Beaujolais on shelves. Here's what we know so far.**

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For some 700 years, the Gamay grape has become synonymous with the French hillside towns of Beaujolais, the southernmost region of Burgundy, which produces beautiful dark-berried Cru Beaujolais, and spicy village-level wines, as well as the fresh and fruity Beaujolais Nouveau reds. But after centuries of going unchallenged in the region, Gamay might soon see some competition.

Though producers have long agreed that Gamay—a grape that soaks in the sun's rays and grows vigorously in granitic soils unless tamed—thrives in the granite-based soils of Beaujolais, where the weather is typically warmer than the rest of Burgandy, it turns out that a small sub-region of Beaujolais about 45 minutes north of Lyon is hospitable to another kind of grape—and winemakers are taking note.

Enter Les Pierres Dorées, which translates to “golden stones.” A cluster of 39 small villages, the region has earned the nickname “Little Tuscany” thanks to its steep hills and gorgeous landscape, dotted with tennis ball- and football-sized golden stones.

But what is of most interest to winemakers is what lies below the stones, underground, where pockets of limestone soils on steep hillsides. The limestone, coupled with the ample sunshine but not excessively hot daytime temperatures and dramatically cooler temperatures at night, make planting another grape an intriguing notion. I'm talking, of course, about Pinot Noir, which ripens fully here and develops complex flavors under these conditions.

And in a clear break with French tradition, some producers are indeed beginning to replace Gamay vines in Les Pierres Dorées with Pinot Noir and even Syrah.

One Burgundy négociant, Maison Louis Latour, began exploring the region in 2010 as a potential for new Pinot Noir vineyards. By 2012, fifth-generation owner Louis Fabrice Latour and Boris Champy, Latour's director of winemaking, had planted some 44 acres of Pinot Noir on sites situated between 900-1,200 feet in elevation, where the grapes can ripen and retain that critical, natural acidity.

While Maison Latour is not the first to plant Pinot Noir in the steeper hills of Les Pierres Dorées, they are the first to do so on such a large scale. "We want to create a new category—Pinot Noir from southern Beaujolais," Louis Fabrice Latour told me.

As of this writing, bottles are hard to find. I was only able to taste the first two vintages of Latour's wines: The 2015 and 2016 Maison Louis Latour "Les Pierres Dorées" Pinot Noir, which will retail in the U.S. for around \$20.

Though Latour is in the early stages of exploring different clonal plantings of Pinot Noir, as well as various methods of aging, I found the wines quite enjoyable. The 2015 was soft and juicy, bolstered by spicy and grippy tannins—a sink-your-teeth in Pinot with power and generosity, finishing with vanilla and cinnamon notes. The 2016 is a departure, with less time aged in oak, and more in stainless steel. The result is a fresher Pinot, with great texture, rich and robust, calling to mind Cru Beaujolais with deeper berry flavors, and finishes with sweet spice and even hints at cocoa notes.

Even to the discerning eye, however, it won't be easy to identify these bottles when they hit shelves in greater numbers. While the words "Pinot Noir" and "Les Pierres Dorées" are prominent features of the front labels, the back labels list "Coteaux Bourguignons" as the appellation—a designation that denotes an area from "Auxerrois (about as far north as Épineuil, north-east of Chablis)

down to and including Beaujolais,” according to Jancis Robinson MW. Beaujolais is mentioned on the back label, but only in reference to Les Pierres Dorées in a sentence that puts the area, “in the heart of the Beaujolais district.”

Only time will tell if Latour’s presence helps establish Pierres Dorées as a new frontier for French Pinot Noir. For now, they’re so hard to come by that I had to ask Bernard Retornaz, President of Louis Latour Inc., for help in identifying other producers following his lead. He pointed to four: two big producers smack in Les Pierres Dorées making Pinot Noir bottled under the Bourgogne AOC appellation—Jean-Paul Brun and Château Lachassagne. At present, you won’t find their wine stateside.

Two other producers, Domaine Jean-Pierre Rivier and Domaine de la Fond Moiroux, are next to impossible, if not impossible to locate. The only other vineyard I could find with Pinot Noir plantings is Domaine Romy, which grows Chardonnay and Gamay too. But, as far as I can tell, they are not producing a 100 percent Pinot Noir bottles from Pierres Dorées.

Louis Jadot, I am told, is rumored to be exploring the area, but when reached for comment, I was told “the winery can’t confirm any plans to plant in Les Pierres Dorées,” at this time.

In a story published this fall by my colleague Roger Morris, I learned that Pinot Noir wasn't the only grape that might give Gamay a run for its money in the region, either. It turns out that Burgundy heavyweight Jean Charles Boisset, or JCB, is growing Syrah at Mommessin, the oldest house in Beaujolais, founded in 1865. I spoke with JCB while he was walking the vines in the famous Clos Vougeot vineyard.

When I asked him what he thought about planting Pinot Noir in Les Pierres Dorées, he said, "The soil is appropriate of course for Pinot Noir, but we think Syrah is the best choice." In fact, they planted some 12 years ago at Mommessin, and hinted at the proximity of all the great Syrah vineyards of the

Côte Rôtie as part of his reasoning. He thinks the planting of Pinot and Chardonnay is “an obvious evolution if you are from the Cote d’Or,” but stands firmly behind Syrah.

Interestingly, both Latour and Boisset agree that the evolution of Beaujolais is all about the evolution of the vineyard. When it comes to the stalwart Gamay grape, they both favor the northern Burgundy approach to trellising vines, as opposed to growing them in the gobelet (or bush-trained) style. In the winery, both seem to favor less carbonic maceration and a more “Burgundian approach” with a slower fermentation, which lends more depth and more earthiness and more structure to both Gamay and Pinot Noir.

Will wine drinkers embrace Pinot Noir from southern Beaujolais?

Curious to know how sommeliers would react, I asked Michael Madrigale, a Food & Wine Sommelier of the Year in 2012. “I think it’s a very interesting project,” he told me. “When it comes to the Crus of Beaujolais—wines considered the crème de la crème of the region—the soil types are always granite. I think Latour planting Pinot Noir on a soil type more similar to Burgundy in the southern Beaujolais is both a progressive and risky proposition,” he said, before adding, “I am very intrigued to taste, and I think planting Pinot Noir in Beaujolais will be another reason for people to discover and ultimately understand the diversity of terroir in the region.”

As Louis Fabrice Latour said to me, “the proof is in the pudding. Make great wine, and they will drink it.”