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From Beaujolais, Easygoing Overachievers

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Wines classically must meet certain criteria to be called great. They need to have the capacity to age, evolve and improve, to show complexity and to inspire contemplation while satisfying the soul through sheer deliciousness. They ought to have a distinctive sense of place, meaning they express the character, conditions and culture of a particular region. Recent years have seen the rise of other if less convincing standards for “greatness,” like high ratings and high prices.

By whatever scale you use, Beaujolais has rarely been included in anybody’s pantheon of great wines. It has been considered an archetypal joyous wine, pleasant and thirst-quenching. But consequential? Hardly. It lacks, to use a ponderous word, gravitas.

I’ve said as much myself, but I have reconsidered. I’ve had so many really good, complex, thought-provoking Beaujolais wines that I can’t help thinking, these wines are great.

Now, Beaujolais itself is an awfully vague term, so let me be clear about which wines I’m calling great. Beaujolais is often used to refer generally to all the wines of the region, but technically, what is called, simply, Beaujolais is the region’s most basic wine. These bottles are often the least expensive, from vineyard sites considered to have the least potential. Plain Beaujolais from a good producer, like Pierre-Marie Chermette’s Cuvée Traditionnelle or Jean-Paul Brun’s L’Ancien, epitomizes the lip-smacking pleasure for which the region is known.

A step up in the hierarchy is Beaujolais-Villages, wines that can be extremely pleasant and great values. At the top are the 10 Beaujolais crus, villages thought to be so distinctive that their names are appellations. They are — deep breath — Brouilly, Chénas, Chiroubles, Côte de Brouilly, Fleurie, Juliéna, Morgon, Moulin-à-Vent, Régnié and St.-Amour.

These are the wines that I have come to believe are capable of greatness, especially in a vintage like 2011, in which so many wines seem to fulfill their potential. If I wasn’t sure already, a recent wine panel tasting of 20 bottles of 2011 cru Beaujolais helped to prove the point.

For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Daniel Johnnes, wine director for Daniel Boulud’s Dinex restaurant group and an importer, and Michael Madrigale, the head sommelier at Bar Boulud and Boulud Sud.

It would be hard to exaggerate how good these 2011s were. They showed all the delicious drinkability of Beaujolais, yet they were structured and balanced, with layers of complex flavors and added dimensions of depth, purity and nuance. They made us all feel grateful that, unlike so many great wines, these were affordable as well.

“I’m happy that wines like this exist in the world,” Michael said. “They’re not oaky, not expensive, don’t require 30 years of aging. They’re the greatest secret in wine.”

Daniel experienced an almost electric sensation tasting them.

“With these wines, there’s a complexity and seriousness underneath the veneer of joy and deliciousness,” he said.

What is it, then, that might cause one to hesitate in calling these wines great?

“To put ‘sophisticated wine lover’ and ‘Beaujolais’ in the same sentence is a little odd,” Florence said.

Put another way, the easygoing qualities of Beaujolais work against it. But does a great wine really need to be difficult or forbidding? It’s a question that deserves reassessment.

I haven’t mentioned Beaujolais nouveau, the reason for so many of the recent woes of the Beaujolais region. What began as a quaint local custom of celebrating the harvest each fall by making a fruity young wine with some of the new grapes became a worldwide marketing phenomenon that changed the way many in the region grew their grapes and made their wines. The result, when the fun wore off, was an oversupply of poor wine and a region in such economic trouble that for some growers it was less expensive to let grapes rot on the vines than to harvest them.

The nouveau fad created an image problem as well. Many consumers think only of nouveau, and of harmless fruity wine, when they think of Beaujolais. The recent past is an awfully difficult obstacle to overcome.

Even as the nouveau phenomenon grew, a small group of Beaujolais vigneronns made serious wines regardless of fashion. These wines went beyond the pre-nouveau ideal of Beaujolais as a gulpable joy. Indeed, their goal was to show what could be accomplished when the gamay grape was grown with painstaking care in the best granite soils, with yields kept low and manipulation in the winery kept to a minimum.

These are the wines that demonstrate the future of Beaujolais, like our top bottle, the 2011 Morgon from Marcel Lapierre. Mr. Lapierre was one of the pioneering producers who, in the 1980s, began to grow grapes organically and work without manipulation in the winery. [He died in 2010](#), but his son, Mathieu, is carrying on well, as this complex, lovely wine demonstrates.

All of Mr. Lapierre’s early colleagues, long ago dubbed the Gang of Four by their importer, Kermit Lynch, were on our list of top wines. Jean-Paul Thévenet’s gorgeous old-vines Morgon, pure, focused and complex, was No. 4; Guy Breton’s old-vines Morgon, No. 6, was earthy, creamy and just plain delicious, while Jean Foillard’s Morgon Côte du Py, No. 9, was big, round, rich and juicy.

Other producers were working diligently, too. I always love Jean-Paul Brun’s wines from the

Domaine des Terres Dorées. His Fleurie Grille Midi, No. 5 on our list, is beautiful, and will be even better with age. Michel Tête's wines always seem to be the class of Juliéna; his 2011, No. 7, is no different. Domaine du Pavillon de Chavannes's Côte de Brouilly Cuvée Ambassades, so-called, the estate says, because it is served in French embassies, is pure, clear and vibrant. It came in at No. 8.

Younger producers are taking up the challenge as well. Julien Sunier, whose elegant, floral Régnié was our No. 2 wine, is up and coming. His wines are well worth seeking out. I must admit, I have not always enjoyed the wines of Christophe Pacalet, whose Chénas was both our No. 3 bottle and, at \$20, our best value. I've sometimes found them too funky for my taste, but this one hits it just right. And our No. 10 wine, the Fleurie Clos de la Grand'Cour from Jean-Louis Dutraive, a producer who is new to me, was one more of many complex, delicious bottles.

Honestly, in this tasting, the rankings don't mean all that much. Each of the 10 wines on our list received three or more stars, which has never happened before. And excellent producers, like Château Thivin, Daniel Bouland, Clos de la Roilette and Louis Claude Desvignes, did not make our list simply because we didn't have enough room. Their wines, by the way, belie the notion that good Beaujolais does not improve with age. Others, like the crus from Pierre-Marie Chermette's Domaine du Vissoux, weren't yet available at the time of our tasting.

As for the question of greatness, it's decided in my mind. We need to expand our definition. Great wines can be deep and brooding. They can be beautiful and multifaceted. These 2011 cru Beaujolais make a clear case that the combination of serious, expressive and joyous works pretty well, too.

Marcel Lapierre, \$26, *** 1/2

Morgon 2011

Complex, delicate, vivacious and pure with spicy floral and mineral flavors. (Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant, Berkeley, Calif.)

Julien Sunier, \$24, *** 1/2

Régnié 2011

Elegant and subtly complex, "like smelling a field of flowers." (Polaner Selections, Mt. Kisco, N.Y.)

BEST VALUE

Christophe Pacalet, \$20, *** 1/2

Chénas 2011

Rich, deep and slightly funky with lingering aromas of flowers and rocks. (Winebow, New York)

Jean-Paul Thevenet, \$33, *** 1/2

Morgon Vieilles Vignes 2011

Pure, clear and focused with complex, savory mineral and fruit flavors. (Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant, Berkeley, Calif.)

Jean-Paul Brun, \$29, ***

Domaine des Terres Dorées Fleurie Grille Midi 2011

Rich mineral and red fruit aromas; gorgeous already and will get better with age.

(Louis/Dressner Selections, New York)

Guy Breton, \$33, ***

Morgon Vieilles Vignes 2011

Floral and earthy with a creamy texture; just plain delicious. (Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant, Berkeley, Calif.)

Michel Tête, \$22, ***

Domaine du Clos du Fief Juliéna 2011

Slow to open up, but with air deep mineral and floral aromas and flavors emerge.

(Louis/Dressner Selections, New York)

Domaine du Pavillon de Chavannes, \$23, ***

Côte de Brouilly Cuvée Ambassades 2011

Pure, clear, balanced and vibrant. (Vintage '59 Importers, Washington, D.C.)

Jean Foillard, \$35, ***

Morgon Côte du Py 2011

Big, round, rich and juicy with spicy floral and fruit flavors. (Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant, Berkeley, Calif.)

Jean-Louis Dutraive, \$26, ***

Domaine de la Grand'Cour Fleurie Clos de la Grand'Cour 2011

Rich and deep with a crunchy texture and lingering aromas of earthy fruit and flowers. (Polaner Selections, Mt. Kisco, N.Y.)