

REINVENTING BEAUJOLAIS by Giles Fallowfield

It's a happy coincidence. Just as a spurt of outside investment triggers wider interest in Beaujolais, along comes the 'vintage of the century' to remind drinkers who have stopped buying these wines just what they've been missing. Add to this a just begun re-evaluation of the terroir of the appellation and perhaps it is an opportunity to put Beaujolais, certainly cru Beaujolais, back on the map.

Beaujolais is the only appellation in France best-known not for its icon wines – its *vins de terroir* – but for its cheapest product: Nouveau. Even though sales of Nouveau have declined, they still accounted for just over a third of the appellation's total production in 2009. Some producers fear the name of Beaujolais has been so tarnished by the association that they use the crus names of Fleurie, Moulin-à-Vent, Chiroubles et al in isolation, without making any reference to the wider Beaujolais appellation on their labels.

Terroir zones

Guillaume de Castelnau of Louis Jadot-owned Château des Jacques puts it succinctly: 'Beaujolais has a bad image. Since Nouveau was first successful 40 years ago, the notion of Beaujolais being an interaction of soil, grape and man has disappeared.' But he and other producers are trying to do something about it. Last year, under the auspices of InterBeaujolais, the region's promotional body, they started a major project to



Above: could we soon see premier cru Fleurie on Beaujolais bottles?

re-evaluate the diverse terroirs of the appellation, starting with the 10 crus.

The idea is to re-establish Beaujolais as a high-quality wine region more in line with Burgundy to the north in the hope that prices, in particular of cru Beaujolais, will rise to a level closer to that of village wines from the likes of Gevrey-Chambertin and Volnay.

'At Jadot we began to look at the individual terroirs when we first arrived in the region from Burgundy in 1996,' says de Castelnau. 'We are sure the soil is like that [further north] in Burgundy. Our objective is to reorganise the market like the 1855 Bordeaux classification or Burgundy at the start of the 20th century. We've decided to base this on the soil. We don't have any historic [vineyard] maps, so we are creating them based on geology, subsoil, climate and history. Ultimately, we will have a map showing certain zones of the same

character. Whether this will give new premier and grand cru designations for Beaujolais is too early to say.'

Too complicated

Bruno Pépin is commercial director at Louis Latour – another major Burgundian investor in the region, taking over Henry Fessy in January 2008 and since then buying more than 50ha (hectares) of cru vineyards. He has his doubts about the project. 'We already have a clear definition of what the 10 crus are, it would be very complex to have a new classification and hard to explain "premier cru Fleurie". The idea of different terroirs [within one cru] is too complicated. It's going to be hard enough to put Beaujolais back on the map.'

Right now, though, there's a lot to get excited about in Beaujolais, and in the current economic climate the same unrealised potential that has kept prices low could prove a significant benefit as consumers search for affordable, terroir-driven wines. The fact that these wines are relatively low in alcohol and blessed with a lively acidity that keeps them fresh and food friendly should also increase their appeal as consumers turn away from turbo-charged reds.

Investment in the region coupled with re-classification of its vineyards offers a real chance to change perceptions of what Beaujolais is all about.

Giles Fallowfield is a freelance wine writer