

BOJO'S BACK!

would like to nominate Gamay as the most providentially shat upon grape variety in the world. Ejected from Burgundy in the 14th and 15th centuries by not one but two House of Valois dukes for being a 'very bad and disloyal grape,' it spent much of the 20th century overshadowed by the reputation-befouling bubblegum wine known as nouveau.

Then, in the early 2000s, amid a backlash against nouveau and the bland, chaptalised dross being churned out at ever lower prices, La Crise forced many wineries to shut down while a third of vineyards were abandoned.

Beaujolais needed a revolution – and, to an extent, it got one. Over the past 10 years, producers have begun to clean up their farming, work with lower-yielding clones and select favoured terroir to emphasise quality.

On top of that, the region has capitalised on its status as the home of the natural wine movement. Beaujolais is buzzing – its wines the toast of superstar somms in trend-setting bars and restaurants from Bethnal Green to Buenos Aires.

'When I started as a sommelier in 1996, there was no interest in Gamay,' says Raj Parr, one of those superstar somms. He notes that 'Bojo' is a guest favourite at Bibi Ji, the Santa Barbara Indian restaurant he opened with chef Jessi Singh earlier this year. 'In the past ten years the game has changed. Californian importer Kermit Lynch has played a huge part in promoting Cru Beaujolais – Lapierre, Foillard, Breton and Thevenet, for example.

Twenty years ago Beaujolais' wineries were closing and its vineyards being abandoned. But now, demand is soaring, particularly in the on-trade. DARREN SMITH heads to planet granite to find out what's behind the turnaround

'What's most exciting now is the next generation – Mathieu Lapierre, Alex Foillard, Anthony Thevenet, Jules Metras and Justin Dutraive, among others. These guys have taken their families' idea and brought it to the millennials. And they have tweaked the winemaking to be more pure and precise. The farming has improved

'The game has changed. The next generation have taken their families' idea and brought it to the millennials' RAJ PARR

and the lesser known communes (Juliéas, Brouilly) are part of the line-up.'

Those names he's checking can trace their inspiration back to the father of the natural wine movement Jules Chauvet. In the early 80s, Chauvet's ideas about making Gamay from granite soils with cool temperature semi-carbonic maceration and, where possible, no sulphur were

ridiculed. Now, the wines of his acolytes – the 'Gang of Four' of Marcel Lapierre, Jean Foillard, Guy Breton and Jean-Paul Thevenet (some commentaries add a fifth: Joseph Chamonard, Georges Descombes or Yvon Metras) – are among the most prized in the world. And they have since passed on their knowledge to the next generation, who are rocking a new Beaujolais style, which if you'll forgive a little lyricism befits the late Chauvet's own definition: 'Beaujolais – it's nature with its fragrances, its light, its infinities, the repose of the evening and the enthusiasm of morning.'

Rising demand has been apparent in trend-setting restaurants in the UK for some time now. For Michael Sager, it was around the time he opened Sager + Wilde on Paradise Row, Bethnal Green. So enamoured was he of the wines that when constructing his list he threw caution to the wind and devoted a whole page to Beaujolais.

'We still have loads,' he says. 'At [our]



Hackney Road [venue], we have probably 50 different Beaujolais – they sell for anything from £29 to £120 – which is more than Burgundy and the Rhône combined.’

He was convinced enough to become a minority shareholder in Uncharted Wines, the new company set up by former OW Loeb wine-on-tap man Rupert Taylor. Uncharted majors in Beaujolais, teaming up with exciting young growers and importing wines in both bottle and keg.

BOJO THE ADAPTABLE

What seems to be working in the new Beaujolais’ favour is its ability to work both as a *vin de soif* and in a more serious, structured style comparable to Burgundy. For some, such as Geoffroy Benat, owner of Cépage[s] in Notting Hill, whose family owns Domaine le Cotoyon in Juliéna, it’s still the ultimate bistro wine.

‘The concept of Cépage[s] is to serve French “tapas”’, he explains, ‘and very often one bottle of wine would have to match most of the dishes. In this case, Beaujolais makes our life quite easy. It goes well with most dishes on the menu.’

It even works with more exotic, spicy cooking. ‘At Bibi Ji, we find it works really well with the vibrant and spicy flavours of the cuisine,’ says Parr. But the new Bojo has also shown that Gamay can fill the vacuum left by Burgundy as allocations and prices have gone haywire. Agnieszka Sledz, cellar master at Gleneagles Hotel, notes that her customers began to turn their attention to Beaujolais around the time of the 2007-8 financial crisis.

‘People were looking for less expensive alternatives to Burgundy,’ she says. ‘In those days we could see Beaujolais being served in the top restaurants all over the world by bottle and magnum, which shows us that there is more than “nouveau” in the area.’

For Matt Wicksteed, wine manager at Streatham Wine House – which permanently lists wines from all 10 Beaujolais crus – the region is able to hit the terroir-tastic heights of Burgundy, while also ticking that most crucial of millennial boxes: smashability.

‘We tend to get much more excited about the smashable purity good quality Bojo offers,’ he says. ‘It’s a style that I

MY FAVOURITE BOJO



AGNIESZKA SLEDZ, CELLAR MASTER AT GLENEAGLES HOTEL

Domaine Marcel Lapierre Morgon 2016

‘This is made with low sulphur and no chemical intervention, and is great served slightly chilled in the summer or as a wonderful accompaniment to food. It has dark red fruits (blackberry, cherry, raspberry) with a slight gamey tone, and violets and peppery notes.’

£20.48, Bibendum, 0845 263 6924



GUS POLLARD, GENERAL MANAGER AT 10 CASES

Château Thivin Côte de Brouilly Les 7 Vignes 2016

‘I always find myself reaching for this as an after-work knock off and it never fails to please me! I also have to mention Le Grappin as a producer. The wines are outstanding, always so pure and expressive of the various terroirs and just so full of personality. We like to support the Nouveau from Le Grappin every year, which is always fun and deliciously drinkable.’

£13.50, Domaine Direct, 020 7404 9933



GEOFFROY BÉNAT, OWNER, CÉPAGE[S]

Cuvée Fût de Chêne 2015 from Domaine le Cotoyon

‘From the best terroir of Juliéna, this wine is powerful due to the exceptional’ 2015 vintage, but also elegant thanks to the selected terroirs. It’s an explosion of black fruits and juiciness in the palate, together with spices and smooth tannins. I would serve with my signature dish Braised Ox Cheeks au Juliéna.’

£12.25, Les Vignerons Supra Ordinaires, 020 3602 8890



‘We have 50 different Beaujolais, more than Burgundy and the Rhône combined’ MICHAEL SAGER

personally love. Wines of this purity and finesse that show a sense of place should ring a bell with any lover of Burgundy.’

The influence of a number of étranger micro-négociants like Andrew Nielsen (Le Grappin) and Chris Santini (Santini Frères) has been striking. They are showing the traditional Beaujolais négociants a thing or two, not just by making drinkable terroir wines, but also by engaging consumers with new formats – by-the-glass-friendly one-litre bottles, kegs and ‘bagnums’ for the discerning boutique festival-goer.

Nielsen’s vision when he launched Le Grappin in 2011 was to seek out special sites in the overlooked, under-appreciated

reaches of Burgundy. He now makes 30,000 bottles, as much as one-third of which is sold in keg and bagnum formats.

This is great for restaurants focusing on sustainability and carbon footprints – it means 80% lower carbon emissions than glass. It also helps that the wines are excellent. His Du Grappin keg wine more or less sparked the wine-on-tap revolution, while his Fleurie-Poncié has superb granitic structure and sells in some of the world’s best restaurants.

Every wine Nielsen makes is single-vineyard, even his Beaujolais-Villages, which is made from a single slope called Le Pente in Lancié, tucked between Fleurie and Morgon and considered by many to be the 11th cru. He notes that Lancié and Lantignié are showing the way forward for the region as a whole, by banding together to ban synthetic chemicals by 2022.

‘For the future, more people need to





move away from these industrial practices that Beaujolais fell into after the Bojo Nouveau hangover,' Nielsen says. 'People would do anything to cut corners, using herbicides and over-cropping, which meant they made less exciting wines. It was a vicious circle. I think now [with Lancié and Lantignié as examples] we have a great opportunity to be in a virtuous circle.'

Santini Frères, meanwhile, is a négociant based in Auxey-Duresses and was started in 2013 by American brothers Chris and Patrick Santini. Also working for US importer Kermit Lynch, Chris is based in Beaune and has been sourcing his own parcels of Beaujolais from Régnié and Quincé. His Beaujolais-Villages and Régnié go into 'litre étoilé', the classic French litre bottles for everyday table wines.

Chris is also behind the Auxey Collective, a group of young producers he's invited to set up shop in the Santini Frères' cuverie to make their own wines from their own sources. A good example is Jon Purcell's Vin Noé négociant label.

SUPPLY AND DEMAND

Smashability and versatility. It's in these aspects that Bojo has really come into its own, benefiting from the broad shift in taste towards cool-climate, lower alcohol

wines that are light and quaffable, but still with that grip, sapidity and finesse that speaks of terroir. The only downside, in fact, seems to be supply. Chris Santini highlights the difficulty of recent vintages, while Le Grappin won't have any of its flagship Fleurie-Poncié from 2017 since the appellation was ravaged by hail last year.

'Over the last five or six years, Beaujolais has become a total feeding frenzy,' he says. 'Also with the new generation of growers, there's people just lining up before their wines are even released.'

Doug Wregg of Les Caves de Pyrene, one of the UK's biggest sellers of Beaujolais, says he is struggling to meet demand for top cru wines owing to the big fall in the allocations.

Let's hope that these issues don't spoil the party. In a region as historically beleaguered as this where, despite the frenzied popularity of the names mentioned above, the region as a whole continues to be in a fragile state of economic health – this is a revolution that needs to be sustained. For now though, whether for the priced-out Burgundy lover, the natural wine enthusiast or the sucker for smashability, its attraction is irresistible. By the glass, by the bottle, by the barrel-load – bring on the new Bojo. 🍷

PRODUCERS TO WATCH:

DAVID CHAPEL AND MICHELE SMITH

(Importer: **Uncharted Wines**)

Rupert Taylor of Uncharted Wines began working with David and Michele at Domaine Chapel in November 2017, with their inaugural Juliènas from the Côte de Bessay. 'I've never ever sold a wine that was received so universally as their first vintage,' he recalls. Along with their Juliènas, look out for their Beaujolais-Villages 2017 from the (to many) cru-level commune of Lantignié.



KEWIN DESCOMBES

(Importer: **Red Squirrel**)

Kewin 'Kéke' Descombes is the son of Georges Descombes, while fellow emerging Beaujolais talent Damien Coquelet is his half brother. He works six hectares of certified organic vineyards in Morgon and released his first vintage in 2013. His wines have a refinement, structure and confidence that belies his 26 years.



CHARLY THÉVENET

(Importer: **Roberson**)

More progeny of the 'Gang of Four', this time that of Jean-Paul Thévenet. With experience working for his father and in Marcel Lapierre's cellar, Charly bought some 80-year-old vines in Régnié, where his dad's mate Guy Breton also makes wonderfully ethereal Bojo. Only in his mid-30s, Charly is following in Breton's footsteps in highlighting the terroir of this renaissance appellation.

