

# Snow on Wine

By Dr. Jeff Snow

## Carbonic Maceration - The Magic of Beaujolais

At a recent International Wine and Food Society dinner a member with years of wine and food pairing experience was bemoaning that Beaujolais, a wine she greatly disliked, would be served with the third course. She was unconsoled that it was a 5-year old Morgon (a cru Beaujolais – more on that later). However, after tasting the wine she LOVED it, and wondered out loud how she could have so misunderstood the nature of Beaujolais. Well she, like many consumers, had been drawn in by all the fanfare and hype of the “**Nouveau Beaujolais**” release, which occurs annually at midnight of the third Wednesday of November. Based on a couple of Nouveau tasting galas, her opinion mirrored most Wine writers description of simple and quaffable. Jancis Robinson<sup>1</sup> claims such nouveau Beaujolais “were often thin and tasted like bananas and bubble-gum.” What is surely the lowest quality Beaujolais is rushed through primary fermentation, quickly bottled, then immediately sent off to showy tastings where it acts as the poster child of each new vintage. No wonder consumers are confused – some marketing strategy!

Quality Beaujolais is known for its fine light refreshing red fruit and berry flavors, sometimes with pepper. Made from **Gamay noir** (also known as G. Beaujolais, and other names), the real source of its wonderful fruitiness is the unique fermentation method, “**carbonic maceration.**” In typical red wine making, all the grapes go through stem removal and crushing and then into the fermentation tank. In carbonic maceration, **whole clusters of uncrushed grapes** are dumped into open top fermenters. As the tank fills, the weight of the top grapes eventually begins to crush the bottom layer. Native yeast on the skin of those bottom grapes begin fermentation, forming alcohol and carbon dioxide gas (**CO<sub>2</sub>**). **CO<sub>2</sub>** is heavier than air, so it displaces air up and out of the top of the fermentation vat. When the uncrushed grapes are **surrounded by CO<sub>2</sub> gas**, enzymes inside cause **maceration of the pulp**, with extraction of color and flavor from the **inner side of the uncrushed grapes skins**. After 7 days, the free run juice is drawn off. The grapes are pressed (**press wine is 75%** of the juice, whereas less than 10% as in typical red wine making). The two are recombined in a tank to complete primary fermentation, then bottled.

Better than “**nouveau**”, simple “**Beaujolais**” comes from the southern half of the region, with its high grape yields and heavy soil. It is said one should “drink

the youngest available.” **“Beaujolais-Villages”** is a wine with some complexity and the ability to improve for 2 to 3 years. It comes from 30 villages in the northern half where hills are steeper, temperatures warmer, yields restricted, and soil light and sandy. Finally, scattered around this northern area, are the 10 highest hilltop villages, called ***cru Beaujolais***. Nicely complex wine with some substance and real quality, a few even spend some months in oak barrels. Once bottled, the best improved for up to 6 years. They are labeled by village: ***Chiroubles, Saint-Arour, Fleurie, Regnie, Brouilly, Cote de Brouilly, Julienas, Chenas, Morgon, and Moulin-a-Vent***, in approximate order of quality.

Finally, it is worth noting that some Beaujolais producers have added to consumer confusion by labeling their wine Burgundy, which Jancis Robinson<sup>1</sup> suggests is “to give the impression their wines were Pinot noir rather than Gamay.” Beaujolais is in the southern area of the French administrative region of Bourgogne-Franche-Comte’, often called “greater Burgundy.” It is technically *in* Burgundy, but the political region, not the wine appellation. You must drive from Beaujolais north through the appellations Cote Maconnais, then Cote Chalonnaise to reach Cote de Nuits and Cote de Beaune (together Cote de Ore), the true Burgundy, where Pinot noir is the authorized red grape.

So, if the name on the label is “Beaujolais Nouveau” or “Beaujolais,” in my humble opinion it’s best to pass on by. When the label reads “Beaujolais-Villages” or better yet, a cru village name such as “Brouilly” or “Morgon,” **buy it**. Served a bit cool, on a warm summer day it’s the perfect match for smoked salmon salad, or grilled chicken -- a light red fruity treat with strawberries and maybe a hint of pepper, it is close to heaven.

- 1) Jancis Robinson, Julia Harding, Jose’ Vouillamoz, “Wine Grapes, A complete guide to 1,368 vine varieties, including their origins and flavours, 2012, page 385.
- 2) Hugh Johnson’s modern Encyclopedia of Wine, Simon and Schuster, New York, pp 104 – 149.