



# art nouveau

Ralph Kyte-Powell joins the race to be the first to try this season's Beaujolais, just in time for the warmer months.

About 30 years ago a sort of madness descended on parts of the wine world. It was all about a race, but it didn't involve horses and jockeys, Ferraris or Hondas, nor cyclists with bodies "flattered" by Lycra. It involved wine.

The event in question was the annual Beaujolais Race and the wine at the centre of it was Beaujolais Nouveau, or 'new Beaujolais'. Typically a French cafe wine, Beaujolais is a light, fruity red, only slightly removed from grape juice. Although the Nouveau arrives on the market in the northern winter – barely weeks old – better-quality Beaujolais appears the following year, just in time for the summer months, when it is consumed slightly chilled.

## OFF AND RACING

Since the 19th century, French regulations have prevented the 'new' wine from leaving the producers' cellars, near Mâcon in southern Burgundy, until the third Thursday of November, when barrels of Beaujolais Nouveau were traditionally transported down the River Saône to the city of Lyon, about 50 kilometres south.

Each year, growers, sellers and promoters of this light French red were pitted against each other in a quest to be the

first to deliver the latest vintage to the marketplace. When the wine arrived, the barrels were rolled from the dock to tents in the city centre, where three days of boozy festivities ensued.

Soon the rush was on to get it to eager fans in Paris, but it was the British wine trade that really got the race going. In the 1950s and '60s, London became the favoured destination for the new wine, and soon each Beaujolais Race involved Hooray Henry types in cars, trains and aeroplanes in a sort of latter-day *Around the World in 80 Days* scenario. The extreme was reached when a spoilsport employed a Harrier Jump Jet to get the wine to London in record time.

Soon the race reached the USA, and Australia followed suit. Downunder, the fad took off in Melbourne and became a great excuse for wearing berets, listening to Edith Piaf, eating escargots and enjoying too much of the new French wine, but the craze was short-lived.

## END OF AN ERA

Due to the amount of hype that surrounded it and the price of air freight, the Beaujolais Nouveau that arrived here attracted a fairly steep price premium over the normal (summer-release) wines of Beaujolais. The race "ran its race" across the world, and although it still survives as a charity event in London, any international excitement has all but disappeared.

The gimmicky nature of the race, and the quality of some of the overpriced wines involved, did the regular wines of Beaujolais no favours. But it did create a fashion for the Beaujolais style of light, fruity red in Australia, and a number of local wineries started imitating Beaujolais methods of production, fashioning similarly light wines, such as the Mitchelton Cab Mac. The trend lasted for some years, but eventually fizzled out. Other wine fashions arrived, and Beaujolais disappeared from the consciousness of many wine drinkers, at least in Australia. Beaujolais, the prototype, remained a deliciously gulpable light red, but it returned to the periphery of the local wine business.



## BEAUJOLAIS TODAY

So what is it about Beaujolais that got people so excited? The red grape of the Beaujolais region is known as gamay. Banned in the 14th century from the more illustrious vineyards of northern Burgundy that were home to prized pinot noir, gamay flourished on the granite soils of Beaujolais in eastern-central France. Over the centuries, Beaujolais wine became prized for its beguiling drinkability. The essence of Beaujolais is freshness and directness with raspberry, plum and strawberry-like fruit. As a general rule, it's a wine that should be consumed very young. Most wines currently available in Australia are of the 2007 vintage; anything older may be starting to fade.

Top-level Beaujolais, known as 'Cru', comes from 10 specific village sites in the region. These wines are labelled with the names of the villages they come from: Côte de Brouilly, Brouilly, Régnié, Morgon, Chiroubles, Fleurie, Moulin-à-Vent, Chenas, Juliéna and Saint-Amour. Most of these can benefit from two or three years' bottle age, although the juicy, fruit-forward style is what drives them. Some (most commonly from Morgon,

Moulin-à-Vent and Juliéna) do continue to evolve in the bottle, developing complexity and almost pinot noir-like richness.

While the main source of Beaujolais' fruity personality is the gamay grape, the method of production also has a big bearing. Most wines are made using whole bunches of grapes that are fermented in sealed tanks to capture the bright colour and forward, primary fruitiness, without too much extraction of tannins. Variations on this method, known as carbonic maceration, have also been adopted in other countries in attempts to produce Beaujolais lookalikes.

Gamay is a minor grape variety in Australia, but a clutch of producers are trying their hand. Some of the best come from Beaujolais aficionados David and Wendy Lloyd at Eldridge Estate on the Mornington Peninsula. Other pockets of gamay are found here and there, mostly in Victoria. There should be more of it, as its bright, breezy, gulpable wine is perfect for our warm climate and outdoorsy lifestyle. As spring and summer arrive, gamay – whether the local drop or French Beaujolais – should be on every wine drinker's shopping list. **d.**

## bottleshop

### Joseph Drouhin Morgon 2007, \$25

This solid Beaujolais opens with a slight ferment pong, but loses it with breathing to reveal the cherry scent of gamay, along with some earthy, foresty notes. It tastes juicy, with light-to-medium body and a fleshy middle palate. There's some tannic structure but it's still easy drinking with good length of flavour.

### Joseph Drouhin Beaujolais-Villages 2007, \$20

A classic Beaujolais aroma introduces this wine, but it shows a little more power and evolution than most '07 Beaujolais-Villages. Typical strawberry, spice and earthy notes kick things off, and while it's lightweight, it's quite intense, with a little dryness at the end to give it a bit of structure.

### Georges Duboeuf Fleurie 2007, \$31.50

Georges Duboeuf is the biggest name in Beaujolais and his range offers very good quality at a reasonable price. This ripper of a Beaujolais opens with strawberry and cherry-shortcake aromas that are extremely inviting. On the light side of medium body, it's succulent and quenching, with a silky texture and a whisper of tannic grip.

### Georges Duboeuf Chiroubles 2007, \$22.50

Sealed with a screwcap, this example from Georges Duboeuf has a forward aroma fragrant with raspberries, floral scents and a thread of sweet spice. It tastes clean, soft and fruity with a light grip at the end.

### Paul Sapin Fleurie Les Chambards 2007, \$20

Less rich and structured than the Duboeuf Fleurie, this is still right in the classical style. Aromas of red berries are pure and fruity, and it has appetising cherry fruit of good intensity. Easy drinking.

### Eldridge Estate Gamay 2008, \$35

Is this Australia's best gamay? The Mornington Peninsula seems to suit the variety. This '08 ideally needs a few more months in the bottle to mellow further. It has juicy plum and red berry aromas with a whisper of herb. The palate is clean, intense and tangy, with great personality.

### Sorrenberg Gamay 2008, \$45

A substantial, serious gamay from Beechworth, Victoria, showing smooth, foresty, berry and spice aromas. The palate is velvety with soft tannins and good integration of flavours. It's a bit fuller bodied than we've come to expect from gamay, with almost pinot noir-like weight and concentration. It builds with air and should improve over a few years.

### Pfeiffer Gamay 2008, \$18

Both the 2008 and soon-to-arrive '09 editions of this gamay from north-eastern Victoria capture the light, sappy qualities of the grape, but the '08 has a little more depth and presence at the moment. Both are pale with red berry and spice aromas, and a light, soft, fruity palate.

