

4. Beaujolais

The Beaujolais region lies immediately south of the Mâconnais in eastern France and is considered part of greater Burgundy. It produces a large quantity of wine (around half of the rest of Burgundy put together), virtually all of it from the Gamay variety, which accounts for 96 per cent of the grapes planted.¹ A tiny amount of rosé is made from Gamay, as is white wine, mainly from Chardonnay.

4.1. The Growing Environment and Grape Growing CLIMATE AND SOILS

Beaujolais has a continental climate, slightly warmer than the rest of Burgundy. There is normally adequate rainfall for grape growing (750 mm per year). The Saone River acts as a moderator of extreme temperatures. The region is subject to cold Mistral winds that can affect flowering and lead to millerandage in cold, damp, early summer weather. It can also damage leaves and grapes towards the end of the ripening period when Gamay's naturally thin skins are at their most vulnerable. Vine orientation and training low to the ground are very important to reduce these effects.

The northern part of the region (where both Beaujolais Cru AOCs and Beaujolais-Villages AOC are found) is hilly (200–500 m) and has fast-draining granite, schist and sandy soils. Here the vineyards are situated on south and south-east facing slopes, for maximum exposure to the sun. As a result, the harvest is earlier than for Beaujolais AOC wines that typically come from the flatter, southern part of the region where the soils are richer.

GRAPE VARIETIES AND VINEYARD MANAGEMENT

Gamay Noir

Gamay Noir is early budding, making it susceptible to spring frost. As stated, it is vulnerable to millerandage in cold, damp and windy conditions, which can reduce yields. Its thin delicate skin is vulnerable to rot and, as stated, to wind. It is early ripening, and can usually be picked before autumn rains arrive. Current growers report that Gamay is retaining its acidity despite the warming climate.

For the characteristics of wines made from Gamay, see [Beaujolais-Villages AOC](#). Gamay wines in Beaujolais express different nuances depending on the topography and soil of the site, giving wines of varying levels of tannins and fruitiness. The difference mainly relates to the ripeness of the grapes, including skins and seeds. Grapes grown on slopes with very good drainage, sites with very good sunlight interception and warm granite soils can create intense fruit character compared to the green leafy character often seen in less-ripe examples.

Gamay is a productive grape and yields need to be controlled for it to produce concentrated, ripe grapes. Reducing the number of buds helps to restrain the high fertility of the Gamay variety.

Traditionally, vines were trained as bushes (giving some protection from the wind) and this is still the case on the steeper slopes. However, increasingly, and where possible, vines are trained on trellises to aid mechanisation, especially where the aim is to make inexpensive wines.



Gamay pre-véraison



Bush-trained Gamay

Most Gamay grapes are picked by hand because whole bunches are required for the most common form of winemaking in the region.

Chardonnay

Chardonnay is usually found in the area in the north of Beaujolais bordering the Mâcon Villages appellation. It does best on cooler marl or limestone soils that slow down ripening, preserving acidity.

There is a lively interest in sustainable and organic viticulture in the region, and the association Terra Vitis®, which now has associations in other French regions, was founded in Beaujolais.

4.2. Winemaking

The majority of Beaujolais is made by semi-carbonic maceration (see section on Whole Berry/ Bunch Fermentations in D1: Wine Production). Chaptalisation is common, particularly in the cooler years. Total maceration time on the skins is 4–5 days for Beaujolais and Beaujolais-Villages (on Beaujolais Nouveau, see below). The aim is to enhance the fruitiness of the wine and the depth of colour in order to make a wine for early consumption. Press wine is blended with free-run wine as it gives added colour and tannins. These wines are typically aged briefly in stainless steel and released for early sale, reducing production costs. In addition to red fruit, they have the characteristic kirsch and blueberry aromas typical of the method.

Very good quality Beaujolais-Villages may be macerated for 6–9 days for wines of greater concentration.

Cru Beaujolais wines (see Appellations, Wine Law and Regulations below) may be made in this way with extended maceration time (10–20 days). Alternatively, grapes may be destemmed and crushed, followed by fermentation and maceration on the skins like most red wines.

These wines may be aged in small or large barrels with a small percentage of new oak, raising production costs. Wines made in this way are sometimes referred to as Burgundian in style. The wines are becoming deeper in colour and more full-bodied with higher levels of tannin than wines made by semi-carbonic maceration.

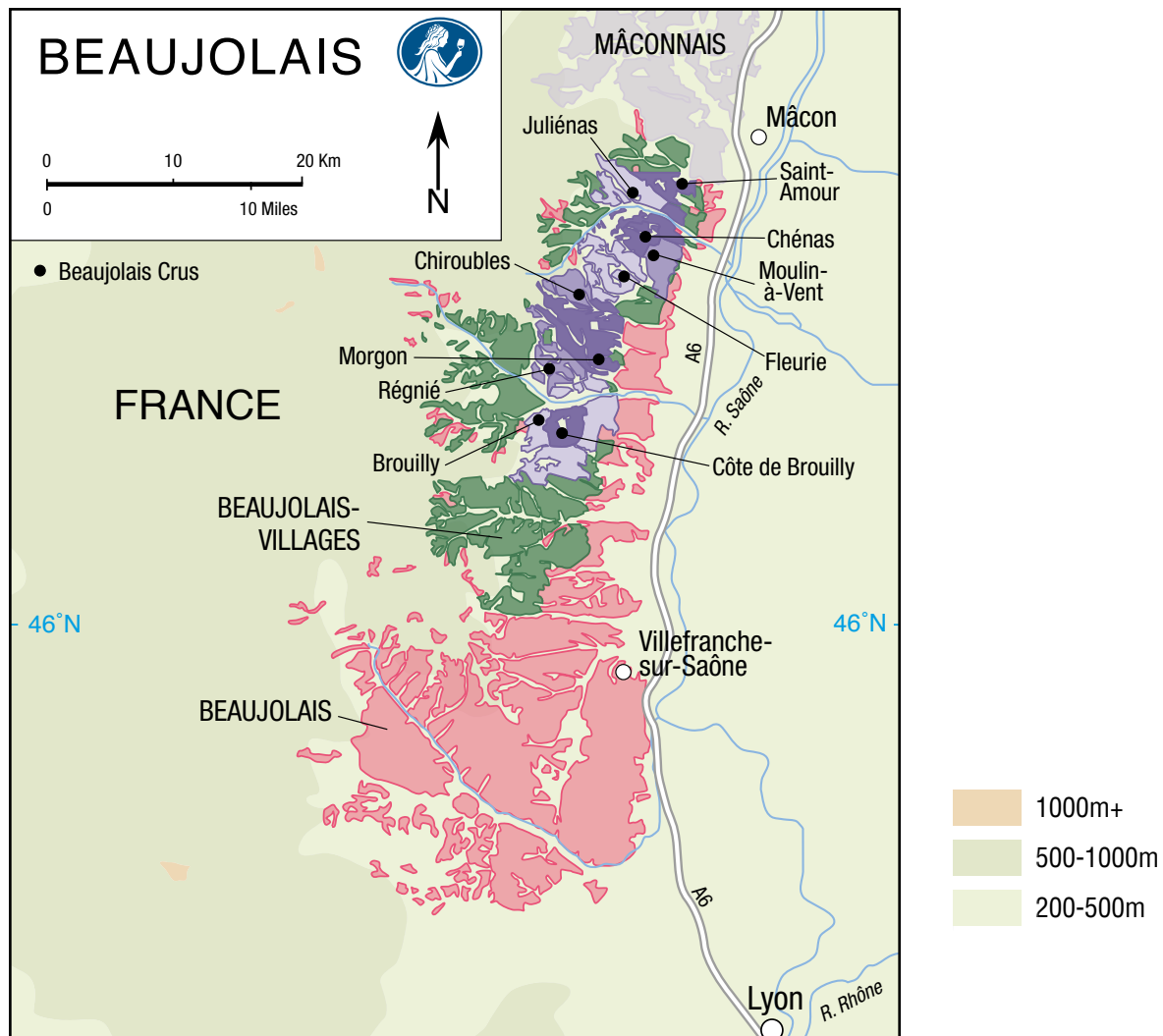
As with the interest in sustainable and organic grape growing, the region has become a centre for low intervention winemaking. The pioneers of France's natural wine movement, négociant Jules Chauvet and winemaker Marcel Lapierre, were from the region.

4.3. Appellations, Wine Law and Regulations

BEAUJOLAIS NOUVEAU

This is a category of red wine within AOC regulations and the wines can be labelled Beaujolais Nouveau AOC or Beaujolais-Villages Nouveau AOC depending on where the fruit is grown. (Primeur is an alternative designation, an authorised synonym, for Nouveau.) According to French wine law, the earliest any AOC wines can normally be sold is 15th December, although most individual AOCs in France require longer ageing. By contrast, an exception was made for Nouveau styled wines, which can be sold earlier, from the third Thursday in November.

The wines are made by carbonic or semi-carbonic maceration. They can be bottled any time after 3–5 days after fermentation has finished to 5 weeks afterwards. Some wines go through malolactic conversion; others do not. Fining and sterile filtration are common, as is



a moderate to high use of SO_2 . This is particularly important if malolactic conversion has not taken place to ensure that it does not happen later in the bottle.

BEAUJOLAIS AOC

This is the regional appellation covering the whole area, but, in practice, the majority of the vineyards are in the south of the region. The maximum yield for red wine is 60 hL/ha, resulting in some wines of low flavour intensity. Wines can be sold from mid-January of the year after harvest, as they are made in a fresh and fruity style. The wines are good quality and inexpensive in price.

BEAUJOLAIS-VILLAGES AOC

As described, these are typically better quality wines than Beaujolais AOC due to higher levels of ripeness achieved in the northern half of Beaujolais. The maximum yield for red wine is only marginally lower at 58 hL/ha. An individual village name may be put on the label if grapes are sourced from that village, but usually the wine is labelled as Beaujolais-Villages. This appellation sits alongside the 10 single cru AOCs.

The wines are typically purple in colour with medium intensity fresh red cherry, raspberry, red plum fruit (often with the kirsch aromas typical of semi-carbonic maceration), medium (+) to

high acidity, light to medium (–) body, medium alcohol and light to medium tannins. They are good to very good in quality and inexpensive to mid-priced.

BEAUJOLAIS CRUS

In total, there are 10 individual crus with their own AOCs in the northern part of the region, for red wines only. They range in size from 250–1,300 ha. (Two of the crus, Brouilly and Morgon, are significantly larger than the other crus.)

Some crus have reputations for particular styles of wine:

Brouilly AOC – The most southern and marginally warmer area, producing wines in a lighter, more perfumed style.

Chiroubles AOC – This is the cru at the highest altitude that produces lighter and fragrant wines with marked acidity.

Fleurie AOC – The southern part of this cru has sandy soils producing lighter and more fragrant wine (which is the reputation of the appellation), while towards the north, next to Moulin-à-Vent where the soils have more clay, the wines become heavier, have lower acidity and are more full-bodied.



Morgon, Côte de Py

Moulin-à-Vent AOC – This appellation produces the most powerful and long-lived wines, closer in style to Côte d'Or red wines than to most other Beaujolais.

Morgon AOC – This includes wines from fruit grown on the south-facing Côte de Py vineyard, part of the appellation, that tend to have pronounced intensity black cherry fruit alongside red fruit, and sufficient tannins to age for a decade in bottle.

The other crus are Saint-Amour AOC, Juliéna AOC, Régnié AOC, Côte-de-Brouilly AOC and Chénas AOC.

Some top producers in Beaujolais-Villages and in the crus, often working organically with old vines, make low intervention wines that also may be aged in oak. These wines are medium

(+) to pronounced intensity in aromas and flavours with medium tannins. The wines are typically very good to outstanding in quality and are premium and (for Beaujolais crus) super-premium priced. Examples include Jules Desjournays and Yvon Métras.

As noted, some vineyards within the crus have particularly high reputations for quality and ageability. As land prices are cheaper in Beaujolais than in the Côte d'Or, the region has attracted investment from Burgundy growers looking to diversify. This has helped to drive quality in the region and encouraged the trend away from carbonic maceration, especially in the Beaujolais crus.

4.4. Wine Business

Average size of holdings is eight hectares, with many growers selling to co-operatives (responsible for 25 per cent of sales) or *négociants*.

The popularity of Beaujolais Nouveau in the 1990s brought great visibility to the region but unfortunately encouraged too many producers to jump on the bandwagon and some very low-quality Nouveaux began to be produced thanks to too-high yields and over-chaptalisation. This had a negative effect on the region's reputation. Thanks to concerted efforts by the region's generic marketing body, Inter Beaujolais, and a renewed focus on quality on the part of many producers, the Beaujolais region is recovering its reputation and is being discovered by a new generation of wine drinkers.

In 2022, 65 per cent of Beaujolais is sold in France and 40 per cent is exported. In France, the most important channels are direct sales and specialist wine shops, followed by supermarkets and the hospitality sector.

The top four export markets make up more than 60 per cent of the export sales. They are USA, UK and Canada (with a preference for villages and the crus) and Japan (with a preference for the Nouveau style).

As prices for Burgundian Pinot Noir have risen, buyers' attention has turned to Beaujolais Cru wines as a lower priced alternative in a similar style.

Important producers include the *négociant* George Duboeuf who, from 1964 on, promoted Beaujolais Nouveau, creating new markets in France and around the world. (Increases in sales of standard Beaujolais and the crus then followed.) In the second half of the 20th century, the release of Beaujolais Nouveau became a wine festival and media event and the wine became hugely popular in France, the UK and especially Japan. Around a quarter of all Beaujolais is made as Nouveau.

More recently, Beaujolais and especially the crus have gained a following among sommeliers and wine lovers, especially in the USA, with prices now reaching premium and super-premium levels.

References

- 1 All statistics are taken from [*Beaujolais, Expressions of a Vineyard*](#), InterBeaujolais, p. 11 (retrieved 7 June 2023)