Gamay

27 Mar 2006 by JR

Thanks to the exceptional quality of the 2003 and 2005 vintages in Beaujolais, this is an excellent time to take a new look at the Gamay grape whose most famous product by far comes from the rolling blue granite-based hills of the Beaujolais region north west of Lyons. Beaujolais depends entirely on the Gamay grape.

In the 1970s and 1980s life was too easy for producers of Beaujolais. The world seemed to have an insatiable thirst for the thin, precocious, tart, light crimson liquid sold as Beaujolais Nouveau straight from the fermentation vat and rushed around the globe on release day in November. Growers and producers alike enjoyed being paid so rapidly for their annual produce and the temptation was to put most of their effort into this ephemeral, evanescent wine. But fashions change. Today only very unsophisticated wine markets (and some French cities) seem at all interested in Beaujolais Nouveau and the producers of the Beaujolais region have had to re-design their objectives and policies. Today, after a period of being the pariahs of the wine world, they are once again worthy objects of interest for serious wine lovers. This is all due to the magic combination of the Gamay grape and the particular characteristics of the best villages in the region, including the famous 'crus' Beaujolais. These prettily-named appellations are, roughly north to south, St-Amour, Juliénas, Chénas, Moulin-à-Vent, Fleurie, Chiroubles, Morgon, Regnié, Brouilly and Côte de Brouilly (but, arguably confusingly, you will rarely see the word Beaujolais on a label of these, the region's most articulate ambassadors).

According to DNA analysis Gamay is a member of the vast family of Burgundian grapes spawned by Pinot Noir and obscure white grape variety Gouais Blanc, doubtless centuries ago. (It is therefore also related to all the other Pinots, Chardonnay and Melon de Bourgogne, the Muscadet grape.) True Gamay, known as Gamay Noir à Jus Blanc to distinguish it from a host of red-fleshed grapes once grown to add to colour to red wines that were also called Gamay, has been grown in Burgundy at least from the 14th century when its supplanting of some Pinot Noir territory was regarded as scandalous by some. It certainly yields more generously than Pinot Noir, is much easier to grow, and if it overproduces it tends to make light, thin, very acidic wine. Like the famous Nouveau or Primeur wines it produces, the Gamay vine itself is notably precocious, budding and ripening early, so it can flourish in relatively cool regions such as Anjou-Touraine in the Loire Valley.

The wines produced are naturally relatively high in acidity and can be light in both colour and tannin, which makes simple Gamays good drinks in their youth, and flattered by being served relatively cool.

Gamay's stronghold is Beaujolais but it is also grown widely just to the north in the Maconnais – indeed red Macon is usually based on Gamay – although in southern Burgundy, as in Switzerland where quite a bit of Gamay is grown, there is a tradition of blending Pinot Noir and Gamay, specifically in the ubiquitous Dôle. The official Burgundian name for this is Bourgogne Passetoutgrains, a wine of declining interest that is supposed to taste more and more like Pinot with time.

Some Beaujolais on the other hand, notably Morgon and Moulin à Vent, are supposed to taste more and more like Pinot as they age, even though they are made exclusively from Gamay grapes. The proportion of Beaujolais that is made 'seriously' nowadays continues to rise once again. Beaujolais for early consumption is vinified fast in sealed vats using so-called carbonic maceration whereby the grapes are the bottom of the vat are crushed by those at the top which may never been crushed but ferment in the heady atmosphere of carbon dioxide. The simplest sort of Gamays, fermented like this in a hurry, can smell of rubber, bananas or boiled sweets.

But more and more growers, particularly those in the Beaujolais crus, are once again, like their grandfathers, making their wines much more in the way of traditional red burgundy, fermenting the grape in open wooden vats and ageing them in small barrels, so that the overall effect is a much deeper-coloured, more tannic, long-lived wine that may not be ready to drink until four or more years after the harvest. These wines still have Gamay's trademark refreshing acidity but they also have many attributes that make them more like red burgundy.

The result in a way is confusion. The Gamay grape no longer has a single image but on the international marketplace there are now examples all along the spectrum from thin and vapid to pretty and refreshing to deep-flavoured and rewarding.

Gamay is grown in a wide area around Beaujolais (including on flat land to the south of the famous crus which in the main producers much less interesting wine). Coteaux du Lyonnais, Côtes du Forez, Côtes Roannaises, Côtes d'Auvergne as well as St Pourçain, Châteauneuf/Lant and Coteaux du Giennois in the upper reaches of the river Loire all produce Gamay-based light reds – some with real vivaciousness and good depth of fruit.

In the lower Loire Valley, Gamay's stronghold is Touraine where it is responsible for lively, sometimes aggressively tart, wines labelled with the likes of Cheverny, Coteaux du Vendomois and Vin de Pays du Jardin de la France.

The Swiss grow Gamay in quantity but have tended to chaptalise it a bit too heavily for its natural qualities and refreshment value to shine. The variety is widely grown between Burgundy and Switzerland in Savoie in the French alps, particularly around the village of Chautagne. Wines here tend to be relatively but not disappointingly light.

Because the world's wine lovers have been taught to revere alcohol and deep colours in their red wines, Gamay has not had many fans outside Europe. (It is grown in eastern Europe but not especially gloriously and is often confused with Blaufrankisch/Lemberger.) There is one now-famous exception to this however. In the late 1970s a young American businessman called Charles F Shaw decided to invest his small fortune in a Napa Valley winery. Because he loved Beaujolais, he decided to concentrate on Gamay (not the variety once known as Napa Gamay which is the south west French variety Valdiguié). The enterprise failed but the name was acquired by one of California's biggest bottlers who more recently applied it to the runaway success that is Two Buck Chuck (Chuck being the American nickname for Charles) selling by the million bottles at $1.99.

And then there is the remarkable Sorrenberg of Beechworth in north east Victoria, Australia which make one of the most exciting Gamays I have ever tasted.

Some favourite Gamays:

Jean-Marc Burgaud, Morgon Côte du Py

Domaine Jean-Marc Desgres, Fleurie La Madonne

Cuvée Jean Descombes, Georges Duboeuf, Morgon

Château de Thivin, Brouilly

Domaine du Vissoux, St Vérrand

Jean-Paul Brun, Domaine des Terres Dorées, Charnay

Sorrenberg Gamay, Beechworth