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# Beaujolais producers slowly waking up to the potential of their wines

Winemakers want to prove there's more to Beaujolais than people think

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Beaujolais is a much-overlooked appellation. Photo: Corbis

The list of famous windmills is pretty short. If you'll allow me to group together the 1,000-plus windmills across the Netherlands into one, we're left with the symbol for the Moulin Rouge cabaret club in Paris, the Old Dutch snacks company in Canada and, at a push, the El Rancho hotel in Las Vegas.

The world of wine can claim one other. This one has sat at the highest point of Romanèche Thorins village for hundreds of years and has come to represent one of the best-known wines from the Beaujolais region. As in English, the word is straight to the point - Moulin (mill) à Vent (wind). That this particular windmill has been a protected historical monument since the 1930s gives you some idea of how seriously Moulin à Vent is taken around here.

It stands as symbol of one of the most dynamic and yet unfairly overlooked appellations of France. I have thought this for a while, but it was brought home to me again when I visited the region recently, and tasted more than two dozen wines.

There is - slowly, tentatively, with not nearly enough noise - a revolution going on in Moulin à Vent. It is one that is being mirrored in the nine other crus du Beaujolais, but this is, as Cyrille Chirouze of Château des Jacques is telling me, "the locomotive".

Château de Jacques is owned by Burgundy négociant Louis Jadot, and is one of a number of high profile names that have been drawn by the potential of these soils - others include Maison Albert Bichot at Domaine de Rochegrès and the Labruyère family who are from Moulin à Vent but now bring it expertise from their other estates in Burgundy, Bordeaux and Champagne. Big names such as Joseph Drouhin and Michel Chapoutier (through newly purchased merchant Maison Trelat) also bottle high quality examples.

For winemakers with mettle, the crus de Beaujolais represent a lip-smacking challenge. They make, when good, startlingly enjoyable bottles from the gamay grape, with high natural acidity, fleshy cherry and raspberry fruit character held in check by nuances of liquorice. Marry this to a natural concentration and ageing potential when farmed properly (which means respecting the soils, keeping yields low and forgoing easy vinification techniques) and you can make something that rivals the nearby pinot noir of Burgundy's Côte d'Or, or the syrah of the northern Rhone. Yet finding a Beaujolais cru that sells for more than €20 (HK\$170) or €30 is rare - these are not wines for which the public is willing to pay highly.

The combination of future potential and current value is seductive, and these are truly vineyards to watch over the next decade. One key driver to

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achieving recognition has begun. A series of detailed maps of the terroir across each cru was published last year, and Audrey Charton, president of the ODG des Crus du Beaujolais says various working groups are identifying individual "climates" (or designated plots of vines with specific terroirs) in all 10 crus that will be presented for official recognition by French authorities in June 2016.

"One of our key tasks is not only mapping the soils across the crus, but convincing the winemakers of the treasures they have beneath their feet," Charton says. "Some don't even realise it, and so are sending their wines off in bulk to merchants."



Beaujolais nouveau. Photo: AFP

In Moulin à Vent, many are already up to speed. Look out for small producers such as Richard Rottier and Alexandra de Vazeilles at Château des Bachelards to see what I mean. But the iconic names have a role to play in focusing the attention of consumers who might otherwise skip over these wines.

"The vineyard culture at Château de Jacques has concentrated on individual plots for several years," says Chirouze. "We have seven plots across the appellation that are all farmed, vinified and aged separately. We blend them together for our main château wine, or do individual bottlings in specific vintages."

These are wonderful wines to drink. Even the best, most age-worthy Beaujolais cru doesn't whack you over the head with its tannic thrust. Château des Jacques Clos des Rochegres 2013, for example, is charming and moreish in the best possible way with its precision, rich autumnal fruits and floral edging (and still six months away from being put on the market).

I was similarly blown away by Le Clos du Moulin à Vent 2013 by Château Labuyère. From the only monopole in the appellation, the concentrated juicy dark fruits and fine tannins have clear ageing potential - at least if you've got more self-control than me.

"When I took over in 2008, our wine was entirely sold in bulk," Edouard Labuyère says, mirroring the story of many.

"We now bottle 100 per cent of our wines at the estate, and label by designated vineyards. We hope to become one of the iconic domains of the appellation - because we believe that in the future the Crus of Beaujolais will seen as the equivalent of Grands Crus Classés in Bordeaux or Burgundy." Jane Anson is a Bordeaux-based wine writer

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*This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as Winds of change in Beaujolais*

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