

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

The Cellarist by Jon Bonné. Tasting notes, musings and outtakes on wine and spirits.

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Beaujolais Nouveau? Oh no, not again

For years I fought the temptation to rain on Beaujolais Nouveau's parade. Really, I did. In part because its heart was in the right place, and even in its most industrial incarnation Beaujolais is still kind of a low-key peasant thing, and of course makes people happy. In part because it was just too easy, like hunting a lame deer.

That all ends this year. Let the downpour begin.

What tripped my wire? Was it the news that Roland Passot will be delivering a case this evening of the '08 Duboeuf to his San Mateo branch of Left Bank Brasserie ... via vintage fire truck, complete with can-can girls? Or perhaps it was the missive in my inbox that the Paris Las Vegas casino would be lighting its faux Eiffel Tower red as the new Duboeuf arrives ... by helicopter. The Nouveau fetes were never exactly tasteful; now they've devolved into burlesque.

The roots of celebrating Nouveau were never so lofty, of course. Its traditions lie in the still-fermenting wines hauled down from the rolling Beaujolais hills to the bistros of Lyon, where they were slurped down as a post-harvest treat, one step past grape juice. Eventually that tradition made it to Paris in the postwar years, with the wines mostly in large casks, still an extension of local Lyon tradition. (Even if that left the Lyonnais plenty disgruntled.)

It all changed in 1970, with the arrival of the now tiresome slogan, "Le Beaujolais Nouveau Est Arrivé." As Rudy Chelminski tells it in "I'll Drink To That," his history of Beaujolais-cum-biography of Georges Duboeuf: "Suddenly the plate glass windows of cafes all over Paris were plastered with yellow and red stickers ... In the more high-tone restaurants, small inserts, table tent cards or handwritten addenda appeared on the menus to announce the same happy event." (Later, Chelminski wrote, Nouveau would become "an easy whipping boy symbol for cynics and the disenchanting who had adored Beaujolais Nouveau when it was fashionable.")

Duboeuf, Beaujolais' primal defender, was inevitably responsible for the rest of Nouveau's rabid popularity, with some help from his enterprising wine brokers (notably Duboeuf's American importer, William Deutsch). Among their concepts was to fly the Nouveau to the far-flung thirsty masses in great haste, charging a premium for the air-shipped wine.

For years, this newborn wine flew into the arms of a Francophile generation of Americans struggling through the formative years of American gastronomy. French culture was a gateway to refinement. Even if the wine was near-rotgut, hey, what were a few extra bucks to pay for the chance to join in the fun?

Now, in an era when we see Greek Moschofilero sitting next to Austrian Zweigelt on the shelf and just shrug, Nouveau is just plain silly.

Some folks grok the true spirit of Nouveau. Kermit Lynch's annual Nouveau celebration has always captured the harvest vibe (in a Berkeley parking lot), though it's more about a rustic meal and zydeco-fueled party -- with oceans of Beaujolais, Nouveau and non-, served and consumed in the course of the afternoon. If you drink Dupeuble's regular Beaujolais instead of the Nouveau, no one will much mind.

But harvest celebrations of local wine abound. Vienna's heurige were largely crafted to serve the harvest's output. So why, aside from crafty marketing and our lingering fascination with the virtue of things French, has Nouveau endured?

Certainly, it's not because of the wine. In a troublesome harvest like 2008, Nouveau ranges from weedy to cloying. (Having sampled the 2008 Duboeuf, I'd advise you to keep walking. Spend the extra cash on a decent bottle of Brouilly.)

Even in a great vintage, Nouveau's not doing Beaujolais any favors as a gateway drink. The fact that overall production of Nouveau is shrinking -- from 440,000 hectoliters in 2004 to 360,000 in 2007 -- may be a sign that the Beaujolais can make and sell better wines. And the shrinking sales (2.5 million bottles in the United States last year, down nearly 40 percent in six years) may be a signal that fire trucks and helicopters be damned, Nouveau's time is almost up. For a region with high built-in labor costs (Beaujolais must, by law, be picked by hand), it would be a welcome change to have the focus on better-quality wines. And frankly, it's not cheap anymore. The '08 is frequently reaching north of \$13.

But here's my real gripe with Nouveau: Cheap PR ploy or no, expanding a harvest celebration worldwide by jet might have been quaint 30 years ago, decades before Al Gore became a documentarian. These days, if French wines remain relatively carbon-effective thanks to shipping containers and ships, the prospect of flying pallets of cheapo Beaujolais halfway around the globe is somewhat appalling. A few Beaujolais magnates have figured this out, including Sausalito-based Boisset America, and started shipping in plastic PET bottles.

That helps, no doubt, but wine's still a liquid, and liquid is heavy. You might (and I would) rationalize air-shipping certainly luxuries, perhaps white truffles or bluefin tuna. Plonky wine worth a few bucks, still mostly shipped in glass bottles? Ridiculous.

Moreover, why turn to France to mark the harvest, especially so close to Wine Country? There was a time when the spirit of Nouveau could be found here on occasion, as with Montevina's now-gone Zinfandel Nuevo. And Macari Vineyards on Long Island's North Fork is making an Early Wine from Chardonnay that captures the spirit, if not the details, of Nouveau. Rather than air-freighting embryonic Gamay across 6,000 miles, shouldn't we fill our harvest glasses with something from closer to home?

One solution appeared this week. Andronico's wine buyer Jeff Porter is stocking about 120 cases of the **2008 Andrew Lane Nouveau Suisun Valley Gamay Noir (\$13)** at the chain's stores. Made in Oakland from fruit harvested off 50-year-old vines not far from Vacaville, it's fresh, tangy and cranberry-tinged, with a Bing cherry profile and none of the cloying candied notes that so often mar Nouveau.

All we need now is to ship the wine across the bay by barge, a small homage to the Nouveau once floated down the Saone to Lyons. (Just don't call in any fire trucks. Please.)

And if Beaujolais is still where you want to go this Thanksgiving season, seek out any of the exceptional 2007s, or even some 2006s. (See some of our recommendations here.) They probably came by sea, and unlike Nouveau, they'll actually give you a reason to keep drinking Beaujolais.