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Moore

A rumour of spring

The cool thickness of a beaujolais cru hints at more hopeful times to come, like a snowdrop pushing through cold earth

Victoria

Synaesthesia is the condition where two or more senses are involuntarily experienced at the same time. Spoken words might evoke particular colours, or a synaesthete may “see” the days of the week configured in a particular spatial pattern – circular, say, with the weekend forming a plateau at the top of the loop.

Often I feel a similar way about wine. That besides taste and smell there is something else in that glass; the loom of a distant mountain, a piercing light, a long tunnel.

Driving up Ladbroke Grove from Heathrow after two weeks in Australia drinking wines that reverberated with light – and seemed to suit being drunk in the light – I began to long for another sort of wine. It was one of those pinchingly icy, dull afternoons when the sun barely seems to struggle over the London roof lines. I started to crave a cold glass of a good beaujolais, a natural wine (but not too hairy-armpit natural) with some of the thickness of cold earth about it. I’ve

always liked drinking beaujolais in winter.

If you want to know what the real stuff tastes like, go for the crus: the 10 areas, in the north of the region, considered good enough to be awarded their own appellations.

For a couple of years I have been following the wines made by Julien Sunier, an intense young winemaker who was on the point of leaving for New Zealand – “I had my visa and everything” – when

he happened to see a derelict farmhouse for sale for €115,000 (£94,000). He bought it and stayed in France. It’s high up in the damp hills, where there are goats for cheese and a Douglas fir business. “We’re at 750m here,” Sunier said when I visited. “The vineyards stop at about 550m in Chiroubles.” He makes his wine at the farmhouse, ageing it in hand-me-down barrels from Burgundy and using grapes from vineyards rented in three crus that he says (I am not sure how fast he drives) are 10 minutes away by car – Fleurie, Morgon and Regnie.

It’s a tiny production that he watches over like a mother with a young baby in a cot. It’s not unusual to find this level of care in wine; just that beyond beaujolais you usually have to pay more for the wine once it reaches the bottle. True, the crus have fared much better than the generic beaujolais appellations, holding their land value, and on the back of three excellent vintages, one after the other – 2009, 2010 and 2011 – are beginning to re-establish a deserved reputation for delicious wines.

Sales of beaujolais crus rose by 27 per cent in the UK from 2010 to 2011, a huge increase. Still, the economics of this particular region are not easy. “Beaujolais is hard to merchandise,” Sunier says, “So people prefer to go to work in town and sit in front of a computer. Vignerons are retiring. When I first rented my vineyards people were so happy that you were going to them and asking for land.”

But the years of being out of fashion have allowed new and small young producers to get on with doing their own thing. As Jean-Claude Lapalu (another name to look for on the bottle) puts it: “Today the processes of making wine is like a communal recipe.





ALAMY

Earthbound: the church and vineyards of Chiroubles in the Beaujolais region of central France

Everyone does it." And then, firmly: "I do it my way. I'm not saying it's better. It's just how I do it."

It wasn't until two days after my return from Australia that I got my beaujolais fix. It was still timber-shivering cold. I got back to the flat after a day of all days that had involved not only an exam but being awake with jet lag from 1am. There were three bottles of beaujolais in my kitchen, all of them samples. The first two were so-so. The third was a Regnie from Domaine George Descombes, whose wines I didn't know, although I've since looked him

up online and found pictures of a sturdy man in a shiny navy jacket working in a traditional, very un-fancy-pants, winery. This one completely hit the spot. It tasted of iron and

It tasted like it had been raised on Emily Dickinson'

granite, like it had been raised on Emily Dickinson poetry, and had a cool thickness to it that seemed to match the London fog coiling around the streetlamps outside my

window. But it also contained, somehow, tendrils of hope, like snowdrops pushing through frozen earth.

I would worry that this wine-synaesthesia was my own personal madness but for the fact that I shared the bottle with a friend who immediately, before I dared to voice a single thought, exclaimed. "Cold earth, like drinking two seasons at once, winter and spring in the same glass."

Not just me, then. Beaujolais cru for January. I'll have some more. And happily it's not yet popular enough that I can't afford it.

What I've enjoyed most this week

Domaine G Descombes Regnie 2011 France (12%, Les Caves de Pyrene in Arlington, £14.99)

Regnie is the most recent addition to the collection of beaujolais crus and its wines are among the lightest. This one is just right, however, and tastes like "spring and winter in one glass" as my friend put it. Serve somewhere between chilled and room temperature with charcuterie and rillettes.



Domaine Louis Claude Desvignes Beaujolais Morgon Côte du Py 2011 France (13%, Berry Bros & Rudd, £17.25)

Those familiar with the 10 crus will know Morgon is one of the most masculine, with a distinctive weight and dark intensity. The Côte du Py is a schist and granite slope, considered to produce some of the best grapes. This wine supports that theory.



Julien Sunier Fleurie 2011 France (13%, Roberson, £18.95)

As the name suggests, Fleurie is the most floral of all the crus, with a fragrance that is reminiscent of peonies covered in summer dew. Perhaps because it's so easy to pronounce and remember it's always been very popular over here; this one is beautifully juicy and springlike.



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