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Beaujolais Nouveau: Easier to Like, Harder to Love

Taking Off Its Rough Edges

Also Reduces Its Charm;

A Reminder of the Fields

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Wine should be fun. At best, it should be a celebration. That pretty well sums up why we enjoy Beaujolais Nouveau. It's released with fanfare on the third Thursday of November, more grape juice than real wine, as a gulpable symbol of the new harvest in France. Truth is, wines from 2006 have been on shelves for months now - from Southern Hemisphere producers such as New Zealand and Chile -- but Nouveau remains a fine reason for a fall party and, in good years, can also be quite tasty. Is this a good year? We bought every one we could find for a quick tasting to find out.

Beaujolais -- real Beaujolais, not Nouveau -- is one of the wine world's great wonders. Made from the Gamay grape, it's widely available, inexpensive, great with a wide variety of foods and can even be enjoyed at various serving temperatures. It can be sipped by the fire in winter or chilled to sip in the park in summer. It's even a great red wine for white-wine drinkers. Beaujolais should be a year-round treat, not just a once-a-year special-occasion wine.

Nouveau is something very different. The grapes are picked and the wine is rushed out the door just weeks after harvest, creating a young, fresh wine designed for lusty toasts and immediate consumption. Sometimes, this can create a wine with all of the negatives of bad Beaujolais -- watery fruit, salt, bananas and, yes, even anchovies. John likes anchovies, but not in his wine. Yech. But when it's right, Nouveau can be charming, its grapey, just-picked, jammy tastes still filled with newborn life and its jazzy purple color screaming, "Drink me!"

Sticker Shock

In fact, if we have any beef with today's good Nouveau -- and we wouldn't really have it with beef, by the way -- it's that it tastes more like a finished wine than it did when we first began enjoying it more than 30 years ago. Back then, there seemed to be an implicit understanding that anyone drinking such a rough, young wine knew what it was, and what it was not. As the years went on and the wine became more popular, it seemed to become less real, less rustic, more finished and rounder, which may make it easier to drink but certainly makes it less charming. This is particularly true of the ubiquitous Georges Duboeuf, which we always enjoy but which never quite tastes like Nouveau to us. We like these new wines to taste like they will never be better than they are today. That here-today-gone-tomorrow, carpe-diem taste has become harder to find as the years have gone on.

Last year's Nouveau was pretty good, the best since 2001, after a very rough patch (in fact, the last vintage we truly enjoyed was 2000). We must say that our first experience with this year's Nouveaux was negative: the prices! As recently as 2000, we didn't pay more than \$8.99 for any Nouveau, and that's a fair price in the first days of its release. This year, the least we paid was \$8.99, and we paid up to \$16.99. Huh? If anything, interest in Nouveau has cooled over the years, and the French wine industry is in the midst of all sorts of economic problems. Who was the genius who decided to raise prices dramatically in the midst of a soft market? This is silly and counterproductive. Memo to French wine producers and American retailers: \$16.99 for a bottle of Nouveau is insulting and will not win you friends.

But how were the wines? We tasted this year's in blind flights over several nights. Our verdict: They're OK this year. We particularly liked the Bouchard, which tasted like Nouveau to us, with just-picked tastes of sun-ripened fruit. "This really tastes like an agricultural product to me," Dottie said approvingly because, indeed, these are wines that should remind us of being in the fields for harvest.

That said, the Nouveaux this year, again and again, tasted overly acidic and somewhat under-ripe. Some were so acidic that they tasted more like lemon juice than grapes. In fact, if we had tasted these with our eyes closed, we might have thought that some were white wines. However, underneath the acidity, we did taste some fruit, so they generally were not unpleasant, just not the lusty, easy red wines we hope for every year.

Beaujolais Nouveau isn't the only harvest-celebration wine on shelves. There is also Novello from Italy (we tried Mionetto's, which was quite good this year, earthy and a bit rich). In addition, quite a few local wineries make new wines from various grapes and these are always fun to try. Whether it's Nouveau, Novello or a bubbling new Riesling, rush out and get one and celebrate the new harvest and the new hopes that always come with it.

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It's time for our semiannual reminder of who we are and what this column is about. Lifelong journalists who have been studying wine since we met in 1973, we began writing this column with the debut of Weekend Journal in 1998. At that time, John was Page One editor of the Journal and Dottie was news editor for urban affairs. We became full-time wine writers in 2000. In addition to this column, we write "Wine Notes" in the Pursuits section of the Journal's Weekend Edition and a monthly column on wine for SmartMoney magazine. We are the authors of four books on wine and parents of two almost-college-age daughters. Our memoir, "Love by the Glass: Tasting Notes from a Marriage," explains how we accidentally fell into such a great job.

We buy the wines we taste for this column from retail shelves all over the U.S. The Journal pays for the wine, which we taste blind unless specifically noted otherwise. We do not accept free wine and we only attend events that are open to the public.

We are not a rating agency and we don't provide a "buying guide." The index that often runs with this column is designed simply to give readers an idea of what a certain kind of wine can taste like, at its best, and how much it costs. It's usually a waste of energy to look for any specific label because it's impossible to know what wines will be available in your store or even your state or favorite online sources. In our tastings, by sampling dozens of examples of various kinds of wine, we are looking for general trends. For instance, we believe Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon right now is often a great deal, while American Zinfandel is not.

We understand that some people go to wine stores with our index and look for those specific wines. That's a recipe for frustration because all good wine is made in limited quantities and it's impossible to know what's available in any store. If a wine in the index sounds good, it would be more worthwhile to ask a merchant to recommend a wine that has similar characteristics. This could be the start of something far more important and lasting than a single bottle of good wine: a trusting relationship with a wine merchant. Wine, like any art, is highly personal, both for those who produce it and those who enjoy it. Only you will know what wine tastes best to you. We hope to guide you toward winning types of wines and away from losing types, but in the long run you will only truly enjoy wine when you find merchants whom you trust to help you develop your own palate.

To us, wine is part of a full life. It helps us slow down, especially at mealtimes, and reconnect with what's important: love, family and friends. That is what this column is really all about.

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The Dow Jones 2006 Beaujolais Nouveau Index

In a blind tasting of every 2006 Beaujolais Nouveau we could find, these were our favorites. These are best served slightly chilled and should be consumed immediately. Nouveau pairs well with Thanksgiving leftovers. Prices are highest when Nouveau is first released and drift lower over the next few weeks. Buy "real" Beaujolais, including Beaujolais-Villages and Beaujolais from villages such as Morgon, all year long, but never buy Nouveau after Jan. 1.

NOTE: Wines are rated on a scale that ranges: Yech, OK, Good, Very Good, Delicious, and Delicious! These are the prices we paid at wine stores in New York. Prices vary widely.