

Strategies to restore the image and identity of Beaujolais

Beaujolais is a wine with a problem. It has a very well known brand but with a negative image. Every body knows Beaujolais but very few people drink Beaujolais. Thanks to the success of the Beaujolais Nouveau, Beaujolais experienced a golden period between the 1970s and 1990s. During this period winemakers and negociants lost focus on quality and sales started declining dramatically till today. The Beaujolais Nouveau's lightweight image and price discounting has led to serious brand dilution for the whole region.

Since a few years many players in the area want to restore the identity of the region. Several initiatives have been taken by authorities and generic bodies as well as by some small producers to restore the good image of Beaujolais.

In order to have a clear idea of the actual situation and plans for the future I decided to visit the region and speak with some key players.

The image of the region cannot be restored without improving the quality of the wines. Different measures have been taken to improve the work in the vineyard and in the winery. Gobelet (bush wine) training and hand-harvesting are no longer mandatory. Due to the introduction of modern vertical pruning systems (VPS) and harvesting by machine on demand makes it possible for the growers to work more cost effectively, to increase quality and to work more organically. In the past carbonic maceration and thermovinification were widely used in an often inappropriate way. This has led to the image of Beaujolais wine as an easy drinking fruity wine without aging potential and some undesirable off-flavours. Research and optimization of both technics are the reason why the average Beaujolais wine tastes much better than ten years ago. Today more Crus wines are made according to the Burgundian way of winemaking. They have more structure and complexity than in the past.

The results of recent detailed studies on soils and climats provide the winegrowers with accurate information in order to improve the vineyard management and the cellar work.

The consequences of climate change are also taken into consideration. The wine research center Sicarex is doing experiments with other varieties than Gamay. Research learns that the Gamaret variety could be an interesting grape variety for the region in the future. Better resistance to rot, deeper colour, higher yield and a broader aroma profile are the advantages vis-à-vis Gamay.

Big efforts have been done to improve the quality of the wines. The next step is to convince the consumer to buy and drink more Beaujolais. Consumers who stopped drinking Beaujolais in the past have to be convinced that the quality of the wines has improved and new young people have to be attracted. Generic and official bodies as well as individual winegrowers or groups of winegrowers have taken different measures.

Official bodies do promote the region via the usual channels : leaflets, press communications, tastings, promotion of wine tourism, social media etc. Small groups of individual winegrowers got fed up with the negative and bad situation of the region. They decided to take initiatives on their own. This multitude of initiatives has not contributed to a common and efficient way to promote the region.

The plan for the introduction of a new and more detailed classification (similar to Burgundy) has also divided the region. The supporters believe that this new classification will contribute to a higher recognition of the Beaujolais wines. This must lead to higher prices. Opponents believe that this is not all a priority to move the region forward.

It is clear that many actors in the region act at a different speed and in different directions. There is no consistency and sometimes contradiction amongst their plans. The Board often has to reconcile the different players and as a consequence acts in many cases retroactive instead of proactive.

It would have been much better if one global strategic plan was made once the crisis started in the '90s. Then all parties could have acted in tune and harmony to that plan. The appointment of an external 'manager-coach' could be the right way (and certainly controversial) to speed up the recovery of the region. Quality control and the promotion of the region 'as a whole' should be the two priorities for the manager to work on.

There is sufficient know-how in the region to produce quality. But there are still too many Beaujolais AOP wines on the market with an unacceptable quality. A more rigid and severe policy should be implemented to refuse these wines to be sold under Beaujolais AOP. They do harm the reputation of the region.

The second priority is to promote the region as a 'united' region. Today there is a part of the Cru producers who want to separate from Beaujolais. According to them the over promotion of Beaujolais Nouveau in the '90s had a negative effect on their sales. In my opinion a split between the Crus and the rest of Beaujolais is not the best solution. The solution is to upgrade the quality of the basic Beaujolais wines. Beaujolais and Beaujolais Villages on the one hand and the Crus on the other hand have to move forward in harmony to strengthen the reputation of the region.

The emphasis in the communication should not be on the diversity of the region. It should be on the winning cards which a Beaujolais wine can offer to convince today's consumers. There are many: excellent price-quality ratio, low alcohol level, the image of 'conviviality' and last but not least the fresh and fruity style. The latter offers many opportunities. Young people prefer wines with no high acidity and no high tannins. The fresh and fruity style is also perfect to pair with vegetables. This is the reason why Beaujolais wines actually become very fashionable in new-wave bistros and bars in Paris and elsewhere.

Beaujolais is actually at a crucial stage. The quality of the wines improved considerably but the negative perception of the brand has not yet disappeared. The battle against the negative perception of the Beaujolais brand has to be continued and forced. Promotion of the region as a united region will be crucial. Some people in the region have high expectations of the introduction of a new classification system. Other people do not. Too much energy and communication have been spent on this difference of views. However the restoration of the reputation of the region 'as a whole' should be the first priority. Therefore the region has to overcome many local disputes. Only then the region can become more successful. Will common sense prevail the coming years?