

Beaujolais Nouveau is here! But it's so overrated. Here are 6 wines to try instead



Bottles of Beaujolais Nouveau stand on a bar Thursday in Lille, France, for the launch of the 2016 vintage. (Michel Spingler / AP)

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Chicago Tribune

NOVEMBER 17, 2016, 9:19 AM

"Beaujolais Nouveau est arrive!" So goes the cry when, on the third Thursday of November, the light, fruity wine is released at midnight.

Made from 100 percent gamay, the purple-hued, juicy wine is fermented a few short weeks after the last grape harvest, and the bottles are popped to celebrate the hard work of vineyard workers and vintners. The young wines are meant to be drunk soon, not laid down in a cellar, which is why they are often poured through the holiday season — fresh, easy-drinking and inexpensive (\$15 and under in many cases), they're a holiday table must-have. (Or at least that's what the marketing blitz will have you believe.)

"I like the inexpensive and cheerful aspect, but it rarely delivers. It was not made to travel across the ocean," says City Winery's wine director, Rachel Driver Speckan.

The problem? Some nouveau wines that make it stateside are insipid and underdeveloped in flavor — what's in the bottle can often be tutti-frutti-Bazooka Joe-esque juice.

Instead, Driver Speckan steers guests towards wines that give more bang for the buck, like upgrading to Cru Beaujolais — wines from the same region and grape (gamay), but from better vineyards and more thoughtful winemaking. Designated vineyard areas like Morgon, Brouilly, Regnie and Moulin-a-Vent hint at quality vineyard practices and high-quality fruit.

“Cru Beaujolais is a growing category that people can get into,” says Driver Speckan. “Nouveau is adventurous for some, but I want to introduce people to brighter, punchier wines.” Two to try include **Georges Descombes' Brouilly** (\$19) and **Guy Breton's Morgon** (\$30).

Nouveau continues to thrive because it is so easy to drink and doesn't overpower food. Offering more acidity and lower alcohol than a New World cabernet sauvignon, nouveau is less like to send you into a food coma. “I really feel that wine should be on the table,” says Driver Speckan. “It's a food that should seamlessly go with the other items on your plate.”

Her personal tastes skew toward high-acid-style wines, like **Valle dell'Acate's** frappato (\$18) from Sicily, “very sunshiney, retaining lots of acid and fruitiness,” says Driver Speckan. “It's straightforward and has great value.” Frappato is a red grape native to the Italian island and is typically lighter in alcohol, tasting and smelling of cranberry, strawberry, black pepper, even hints of smokiness — flavors represented on your holiday table.

You can always go domestic, says Driver Speckan, for instance, with an American-made gamay like **Brick House Vineyard's** biodynamically produced offering, from Ribbon Ridge in Oregon. Unlike its thinner nouveau counterparts, the gamay (\$30) here is plush and deep, with concentrated flavors and aromas of violet and pepper — closer to a pinot noir than a nouveau.

Driver Speckan also name checks another Oregon winemaker Brienne Day, who is behind some of the sommelier set's favorite wines. One, in particular, the sparkling **Mamacita** (\$31), made from the malvasia grape, is “bright, friendly and playful. It's not flashy but super easy to drink a lot and have fun.” **Papacito**, Day's riff on Italian Lambrusco, made from primitivo, is more tannic and richer than gamay. “Sparkling wine and pet-nat, in particular, just complement the holidays,” says Driver Speckan.

And while Driver Speckan steers clear of nouveau, she encourages people to not fret about their wine buying. “I'm thrilled when someone is brave enough to bring a wine and introduce me to things I may have missed. More alcohol on the table just means dinner is more fun and adventurous.”

All prices reflect the average price listed on WineSearcher.com. If a wine is unavailable at your local retailer, ask for something similar in style.

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