

NATASHA HUGHES MW

THE WINES OF BEAUJOLAIS

Excerpt:

The Chateau de Lavernette lies, quite literally, on the borderline between Beaujolais and the Mâconnais, with vineyards from both regions, facing each other from across a narrow track. The property originally belonged to the monks of Tournus, but at the end of the 16th century passed into the hands of the lords of Lavernette, and now the 12th and 13th generations of the same family live on the estate and manage its lands. In a meet-cute worthy of a Hollywood movie. Xavier de Boissieu met his wife, Kerrie, an American, while on his way round the world, studying and doing stages in the Rhône, New Zealand and California. Kerrie, who was working at Sainsbury in Carneros, what's charged with taking the Young French wine maker under her wing and showing him a thing or two about the American way of growing grapes and making wine. Xavier is happy to admit that even now, some 20 years later, he's still learning from Kerrie.

It wasn't all that long before Kerrie moved to rural France, where she and Xavier set about quietly revolutionizing the Château's approach to both viticulture and winemaking. Xavier admits that although he'd always wanted to farm organically, he was rather prejudiced against biodynamics, thinking that it was founded on airy-fairy notions rather than being grounded in science. Kerrie, an urgent advocate of the approach, helped to change his perspective on the topic, and by 2008 the entire 13.5-hectare estate was being farmed biodynamically. Realizing that there was no point in growing beautiful biodynamic grapes and then using oenological additives, the couple also altered the family's winemaking practices. Xavier says that his father was initially wary of the change in approach, but has become increasingly positive thanks to the changes in quality he's seen in the wines produced at the Château.

Most of the wines made at Lavernette are built for the long haul, and a tasting of the Beaujolais Blanc going back as far as 1996 proves the cuvée has a remarkable ageing

capacity, particularly in cooler years, where acidity is retained. The wine is now aged in tank for two years prior to bottling, which means that the wine has time to reach its potential before it hits the market. Even in warmer years, it has good levels of freshness, as well as a stony mineral quality, enlivened by notes of white blossom and juicy pears.

Of the two Beaujolais Leynes wines (both are Beaujolais Villages, but the de Boissieus, like many producers in Leynes, choose to specify the name of the village), my preference is for the more lightly oaked Le Clos. It's vinified by means of layering whole bunches and destemmed grapes, topped off with more whole bunches, then aged for a few months in barrel, of which around 5-10% is new oak. The palate is plush and generous, with lashings of dark berry and plum fruit, spice and a little hint of salty liquorice on the finish. There's a bit of grip here, but not too much.

