

THE POUR | ERIC ASIMOV

Tariffs Bring Uncertainty to Beaujolais

Trump’s volatility complicates a challenging environment.

ODENAS, FRANCE — Few wine regions are as quietly beautiful as Beaujolais, where the rolling green hills are punctuated by small, pretty towns, the sort where businesses still close for lunch from noon to 3 p.m., and window boxes are bright with colorful fresh flowers.

Wine is the primary business, and the main reason the towns still have butchers, bakers and other institutions that have gone missing in many hollowed-out communities throughout rural France.

Vineyards, naturally, dominate the hill-sides. Most are divided into plots that are part of small, family estates tended by vigneron who farm the grapes and make the wines.

Beaujolais has come a long way since the days of Beaujolais Nouveau in the last quarter of the 20th century, when big négociants controlled the business and Beaujolais was thought to be no more than a cheerful, light-hearted drink.

Today, the region is full of young, energetic, quality-minded vignerons, some new to the area, while others come from families who have farmed the gamay grapes for generations. The wines are better than ever. You can still find the joyous thirst-quenching styles that many believe define the region, but it’s just as easy to find complex expressions of Beaujolais’s many different terroirs, the sorts of wines that have changed minds about the area’s potential.

Even so, prosperity is a precarious notion



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES HILL FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



in Beaujolais. Many vineyards are long abandoned, a legacy of the collapse of the Beaujolais Nouveau market. Other vineyards have torn out gamay vines to plant pinot noir and chardonnay. The grapes are sold to big companies, which use them to make cheap Crémant de Bourgogne, a sparkling wine.

On top of all that, uncertainty and disquiet pervade the region as these small businesses wait to gauge the consequences of President Trump’s 15 percent tariff on imports from the European Union, which were first scheduled to take effect on Aug. 1 and then were delayed until Aug. 7. Meanwhile, groups of American businesses and states are challenging the legitimacy of Mr. Trump’s tariffs in courts.

I VISITED BEAUJOLAIS in late June, months after Mr. Trump threatened the European Union with 200 percent tariffs before settling on 10 percent as an interim rate while he made a final decision. Many vignerons were relieved at the 10 percent rate, in the same way that having a brick fall on your head is a relief if you expected the building to collapse instead. But the uncertainty comes with a cost.

“We never know: Is it happening? Is it not happening?” said Pierre Cotton, a fifth-generation grower who, with his partner, Marine Bonnet, makes excellent natural wines under the Bonnet-Cotton label, including subtle, precise Fleuries and Côte de Brouillys. “Every distribution has a different level of paranoia and risk. Every Truth Social post is different,” he said, referring to the president’s social media posts.

Even the 15 percent tariff is uncertain, as negotiators are still trying to hammer out the details, which might, just might, include a provision that omits wines and spirits.

The months of uncertainty have made decision-making difficult. The threat of the 200 percent tariff put many shipments of wine to the United States on hold. Some producers, like Château Thivin, which makes superb Côte de Brouillys, altered their methods once Mr. Trump settled on the 10 percent figure.

“The U.S. is our biggest market, and nobody knew what was going to happen,” said Sonja Geoffray, who, with her husband, Claude-Edouard Geoffray, are the sixth



generation of Geoffrays to head the estate. “We actually bottled early to ship faster.”

Unlike Thivin, Domaine Chapel in Régnié is a new estate — 2016 was its first vintage. Since then, David and Michele Chapel have stitched together about 17 acres of vines. They now make exceptional Fleuries and Chiroubles, as well as a terrific Beaujolais-Villages.

They prefer to farm in the traditional Beaujolais fashion, in which densely planted vines are trained in the gobelet method, French for goblet-shaped bushes that don’t require wire trellises. These sorts of vineyards can’t be farmed mechanically, and the Chapels farm organically, so it’s relatively expensive, labor-intensive work.

“The mere threat of a tariff and the uncertainty it has created with importers has put any future projects on hold,” Ms. Chapel said. “Many vignerons are just barely getting by.”

Mr. Chapel said that people were apprehensive throughout Beaujolais, especially because of Mr. Trump’s volatility.

“The U.S. was always seen as the reliable country,” he said. “The economy was strong, the people were curious about wine, but now it’s changing.”

One fear, he said, was that producers would ship their wine at one tariff rate, then Mr. Trump would change his mind midvoyage.

“The business is day to day,” he said. “It has a direct effect on how you operate.”



Clockwise from top: the Beaujolais region, with a mix of many terroirs; Pierre Cotton and Marine Bonnet of Bonnet-Cotton; winemakers at the dinner after their annual general meeting in Odenas; wines of Domaine les Garçons; Michele and David Chapel of Domaine Chapel, a relatively new estate; and Loïc Crespin and Fabien Pinguet of Domaine les Garçons, which exports 60 percent of its production to the United States.

A weak dollar and a stronger euro drive up European wine costs in the United States.

Almost as important to European wine-makers has been the declining strength of the dollar in relation to the euro. On Jan. 20, the day Mr. Trump was inaugurated, the dollar and the euro were worth roughly the same amount. Now the euro fetches about \$1.15. A stronger euro means European wines will cost more in the United States even before a tariff is added.

“The tariffs are mentally difficult,” said Francesca Hansen, director of sales for the Paris Wine Company, which imports Bonnet-Cotton and several other Beaujolais producers to the United States. “We’re really feeling the dollar tanking, it’s very stressful.”

She called the 15 percent tariff a temporary relief because it would at least get shipments moving again. But she believes some wines will no longer be able to sell in American markets at higher prices.

“I’m worried about more culling of categories and less diversity in the wine market down the road,” she said. “There’s so much happening in France and in Europe in terms of winemaking, and it’s going to be harder and harder to get these wines to market in the U.S.”

DOMAINE LES GARÇONS, another new estate, was established in 2020 by Loïc Crespin and Fabien Pinguet. It makes superb Beaujolais-Villages and Brouillys, and so far, Mr. Pinguet said, exports 100 percent of its production, with 60 percent going to the United States.

The American tariffs, Mr. Pinguet said, not only slowed trade with the United States, they also stifled exports to other countries because of currency fluctuations, which led some importers to reduce their orders.

“In light of such economic uncertainty, we made the conscious decision to postpone all

major projects such as building our own winery facility in order to maintain the financial health of the estate,” he said. “We’ve chosen not to make new investments until we feel the overall climate is more stable.”

This year, he said, had been a valuable learning experience. “It taught us the importance of diversifying markets, of not putting all our eggs in one basket, and of constantly re-evaluating our strategy,” he said.

Like winemakers around the world, Beaujolais has plenty to worry about without the issue of tariffs. The climate crisis is an existential threat, people everywhere are drinking fewer alcoholic beverages, and finding good agricultural workers is difficult, particularly with the expertise necessary to work organically farmed, old, high-density, gobelet vines.

For some producers, like Mee Godard, who makes exquisite Morgons and Moulin-à-Vents, other problems outweigh the tariff issue.

“Geopolitics and economics are difficult,” said Ms. Godard, who founded her estate in 2013. “I am lucky, I’ve never had a problem to sell. My customers are more a connoisseur market that seems immune to market forces.”

But Ms. Godard is the exception. For most producers, there is consternation and a fear that the tariffs will change the nature of what they are trying to produce.

“When you take a handmade agricultural product and tax it to the point of making it a luxury item, it is completely separated from its origin and purpose and becomes out of reach,” Ms. Chapel said. “We would like our wine and the cost of our bottle to be accessible. When you throw a 15 percent tax on top of that, coupled with the devaluation of the dollar and overall inflation, it moves an undervalued wine into another echelon.”