

HISTORY OF WINE-GROWING IN LANTIGNIÉ



"It was not until the third century of our era that grape farming became firmly established in the region surrounding Lyon." (P. Viala and V. Vermorel, 1902). In 280 A.D. Emperor Probus allowed the Gauls to grow grape vines, by revoking the edict of Domitian, which had forbidden this sort of farming.

In the village of Lantignié the first written record attesting to the presence of grape vines dates back to December 994, in the form of a deed recording the donation of a vineyard belonging to the brother of Imbert I (949-1015), Lord of Beaujeu, to the abbey of Cluny.

This plot was located in "Bilacensi" which according to historians is the root of the place name "Billy" which is in turn the prior name of Les Bastys, a wine-growing estate that still exists today, where the historical attests to the presence of "wine merchants" at that time.

In 1395 Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, ordered the uprooting of the Gamay grape variety in his duchy, which greatly benefited the Beaujolais region. It had already been observed at the time that Gamay expressed itself more fully when grown on granitic soils. The family archives of the Les Bastys estate show that it was established on November 24, 1482, when the wealthy commoner Barthélemy Varenard bought "a plot planted with grape vines in the parish of Lantignié, at a place called Le Billy". A century later the estate had been consolidated and was prospering, as witnessed by the fact that in 1661 it set up a sales booth on the outskirts of Lyon that continued to do business until the French Revolution of 1789.

The parish records for 1720 report the establishment of the first wine-growers in the village: "1st day of January, burial of Pierre Trichard, aged 2½, the son of Jean Trichard, a wine-grower, and of Claudine Démonseau." "December 27: burial of Louise Auray, 40 years of age, the wife of Pierre Cinquin, a winegrower". In 1760 the village is mentioned in the Almanac of the City of Lyon and the Provinces of Lyonnais, Forez and Beaujolais: "The land produces wheat, wine and fodder". The same parish records preserve contracts for wine from 1790 between the parish priest of Lantignié and a local winegrower.

The seventeenth century also yielded the Cassini map, the first map of the whole Kingdom of France, which attests to the existence of the village of Lantignié and of several of its wine-growing estates: Monthieux, Verger, Salle, Appagnié. In the same year Lantignié became a municipality [French *commune*]. Its wine business was booming despite (or perhaps because of) its occupation by the Austrian army in 1814. Some wine-growing estates testify to the prosperity of Lantignié's vineyards. Among them are those of Thulon, La Salle and Les Bastys, which date back to the 13th and 14th centuries and exist to this very day.

The 19th century saw the arrival of "investors from Lyon" who bought estates such as Vergers, Vierres, Alouettes, Monthieux and Chappes.

A map of the "wine-growing areas of Beaujolais, Mâconnais and Chalonnais" dated from a re-issue of 1874 classifies wine-growing districts in five categories. This map lists the most important wine-growing municipalities of the time, classifying them by the quality of their wines. Thus we find in 3rd rank the municipality of Lantignié, which at the time contained 640 acres of vineyards, including Appagnié and Les Monthieux, as well as Tullon in 4th rank, with several wines. This demonstrates once again the already renowned quality of the local wines.

When local vintners began producing Beaujolais nouveau [A nouveau wine is one sold in the same year in which the grapes were harvested] in the second half of the 20th century, a local boom was triggered that prompted growers to expand their vineyards by a considerable amount.

Every year for half a century, from 1954 to 2003, on the same day that the wine from the Hospices de Beaujeu estate was being auctioned off, the competition for the Diriet trophy would be held in the morning, in which different Beaujolais Villages producers would enter their wines of the same year, provided their alcohol content did not exceed 13%.

A Swiss wine merchant by the name of Diehl-Rietmann who came regularly to the region to buy wines, one day announced: "I love Beaujolais Villages wines so much that I am willing to award a prize to the best of them." That is how the competition for the Diriet trophy began, Diriet being a contraction of its founder's name.

Competition for the trophy took place in two stages, the first of which was a contest among the vintners of the same village. The winners of the various municipal contests would then compete for the Diriet trophy. This two-stage procedure had the effect of raising the level of the contest somewhat, but most of all it stoked rivalry among the different villages vying for the prize. The competition was unique in that it was not a wine-maker who won the trophy, but the whole village. This of course had the effect of motivating the vintners of each village as a whole to bring the trophy home.

At Lantignié, selection took place on Saturday, the day before the auction of the Hospices de Beaujeu wine. The winner would become Lantignié's champion, representing the village against the victors of the municipal competitions in the other 37 villages belonging to the wine-growing district of Beaujolais-Villages, a protected designation of origin [French *appellation d'origine contrôlée (AOC)*]. In the second and final stage of the competition, the wines selected in the various municipal contests would be savored and judged by a jury composed of nine acknowledged wine connoisseurs. Among them were various Beaujolais-Villages dignitaries, i.e. the heads of the various vintners' associations and related occupational groups, but more importantly, they included influential Beaujolais wine merchants such as Duboeuf, Tête and Aligne, and wine brokers of the region.

Lantignié was the most successful village, since it won the Diriet trophy eight times out of fifty (see results in Appendix 1). Lantignié's position at the top of the list demonstrates the quality of the village's wines, but especially it highlights the advantage Lantignié enjoys when compared to the average Beaujolais Villages (list of winners at the municipal level in Appendix 2). We might even be tempted to say that after the municipality of Régnié-Durette was declared a wine-growing district [French *cru*] in its own right, Lantignié was the next village to be granted this privilege. According to several retired wine-growers, the Diriet trophy competition carried great prestige for the profession, since we are told that it was a springboard for subsequent competitions like those of Villefranche-sur-Saône and Mâcon. Above all, we should not overlook the impact of the Diriet trophy on the Beaujolais-Villages wine-growing district, since competition within the same village sparked intense rivalry among its producers, who strived year in, year out to perfect the quality of their wines, egged on by the ambition to represent their respective home towns in the final contest.

It was not uncommon for the winner of the contest to learn of his victory directly from a merchant who was a member of the jury and was eager to buy that producer's vintage for the year. Consequently the victor was often able to rely on his triumph to sell much of his output for the year in a single transaction.

Additional testimony to the importance of the Diriet trophy for a village's public life. Each year, the annual plenary meeting of the wine-growers' association for the Beaujolais-Villages wine-growing district was organized by the village that had won the Diriet trophy that year. In the course of such annual meeting the trophy – bearing the engraved names of the victors from prior years – was ceremoniously handed to the wine-grower who had represented the victorious village that year, for him to keep until the next.

The reports of the Lantignié wine-growers' association enable comparisons between the village's viticulture and that of the other villages belonging to its wine-growing district. Thus the 1978 report contains an article entitled "Beaujolais Pollution" written by a female wine-grower, urging her colleagues to adopt environmentally sound farming practices. At that time such opinions were unusual and contrasted with a tradition of intensive agriculture that had prevailed since the end of the Second World War. The authoress' proposal was largely inspired by the gradual disappearance of wildlife and natural vegetation as a result of widespread use of agrochemicals.

In her article, the environmentally committed viticulturist then urged her colleagues to "leave the edges of roads, groves and slopes (...) to animals and people who want to pick flowers".

She was reacting to the fact that «Lantignié is at the forefront in using new technology». She became a symbol for all the richness of the village's viticulture, which would be asserted again in 1985. The same year saw the establishment of a mutual aid service for wine-growers that assisted those who were sick or injured by recruiting idle colleagues to replace them at the workplace. This social safety net arrangement demonstrates the solidarity among the village's viticulturists and especially their awareness of being interdependent.

In 1986 the department of toxicology and forensic medicine at the University of Lyon issued a report on the use of arsenic in the vineyards of Lantignié. "If history repeated itself." Once again the village was reminded of the pernicious side-effects of the unrestrained use of chemicals. Lantignié's awareness of the perils of agrochemicals was unusually precocious and made the village a guiding light on this issue. That same year one of the village's wineries began making kosher wine under rabbinical supervision. This enabled the wine maker in question to introduce Lantignié wines to Israel and to market to practicing Jews in places where Lantignié wines were already being sold.

The 1981 annual report describes an advertising campaign carried out by the village's wine-growers' association in the form of leaflets, advertising stickers, t-shirts and adhesive tape bearing the words "Beaujolais-Lantignié." (MUST LOOK FOR THEM!).

Here too Lantignié was a pioneer in advertising its wares aggressively already since the 1980s. In the 1990s leaflets were again distributed.

In 1984 the local winegrowers decided to ban harvesting machines in order to produce a quality product, because "the exclusive nature of our wines [*French: le privilège de notre taille en gobelet*] will for a long time be an obstacle to mechanical harvesting".

As early as 1986, the members of the Lantignié wine-growers' association were thinking about repositioning the village's wines on the quality scale, at the very moment when their neighbors in Régnié-Durette decided to become a wine-growing district in their own right. Lantignié wine-growers were faced with the question of whether to do the same, or instead adopt some intermediate solution that would allow Lantignié to express itself fully. Consequently this notion of a quality upgrade is no novelty for the village, which has important trump cards at its disposal.

It is interesting to note that the 1988 general assembly of Lantignié wine-growers resolved that promoting wines "is now an important task for wine-growers, who must devote an increasing part of their time to this activity". In his written account of that assembly the president of the wine-growers' association urged his colleagues to continue producing nouveau wines without however neglecting Beaujolais-Villages "preferring wines for ageing: robust, with a strong color, more steadfast than smooth", a major concern for the village's wine-growers.

In the 90's gloom persists among wine-growers due to the loss of image caused by young wines and by a wine glut.

Lantignié is something of an exception to this slump, since one fourth of its output is sold as bottled wine, which is synonymous with high added value on the part of the producer. On the other hand many farmers are considering sustainable agriculture, which would allow the district to gain prominence in the wine market.

At the same time, work is done to limit soil erosion, in particular by mulching some vineyards in order to preserve soil quality.

In the third millennium the mood is one of optimism, especially thanks to the opening of new export markets for Lantignié's output, especially in Asia.

The year 2002 saw the start of an event for wine tourists: «[Les Charois Gourmands](#)», a stroll through the vineyards while tasting the village's wines and the regional cuisine. This event is still held today and assembles between 1000 and 1500 people each year around the village's central concern, its wines. The group that organizes the event has since joined the Confraternity of European Gourmet Paths, which includes organizers of similar events throughout Europe, notably in France, Germany, Switzerland and Italy.