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Le beaujolais nouveau est arrivé. (It's big in Japan)

By John Lichfield in Paris

Beaujolais Nouveau, hurried into bottles from grapes still growing on the vine 10 weeks ago, arrives in shops and restaurants in Britain and across the world today.

Does anyone care any more? Well, yes, the Japanese and Chinese do, unlike the British, or even the French. One of the most successful marketing gimmicks of all time - the creation of a taste for "instant" or "fast" wine - seems to have run its course, in Europe at least.

Sales of Beaujolais nouveau in France have fallen by half in the past 10 years. Sales in Britain, once a key Beaujolais market, fell by 30 per cent in 2004 and have floundered ever since.

"Beaujolais Nouveau Day", the third Thursday in November, once generated stunts and excitable headlines. There were car or balloon races, even elephant and rickshaw races, to bring the first bottles to Paris, Britain, Belgium and Germany. No more.

Beaujolais Nouveau remains popular in Japan. It is booming in China, where sales increased by 60 per cent, from a relatively small base, last year. It is even doing reasonably well again in the United States, after collapsing in 2003 when France declined to support the invasion of Iraq.

In France and in Britain - and in its other great European markets, Germany, Switzerland and Belgium - Nouveau will still be drunk in reasonably large quantities in the next few days but the great craze is clearly over.

In France, Nouveau was always something to share with friends. Bar owners in Paris complain that the French are just not in a convivial mood these days.

The end of the Beaujolais boom has left a bitter after-taste in the Beaujolais hills in southern Burgundy. Many producers complain that the creation of the Nouveau brand name - officially from 1951, but with worldwide success from the early 1970s - has finally rebounded against them.