



A Sense of Place

The Struggle to Maintain Identity in a Globalized Wine Market

BY ROBYN ROEHM CANNON

If you've ever stuck your nose in the bowl of a wineglass and inhaled the heady scent of tobacco, saffron, cola, sun-dried tomato, old tanned leather, or vanilla, you already have knowledge of the age-old French wine-making term *terroir*.

What Is Terroir and Why Does It Matter?

Like a person, each wine is shaped by its experiences: in the vineyard, in the winery, and in the bottle. Terroir (pronounced *tear-wa*) is the word given to the part of a wine's experience that is determined by place, the distinct personality a wine expresses when the natural characteristics of the grape from which it is made shine through. Think of it as the fingerprint of the earth on the grapes that have grown there and the wine they become—and the reason that all Chardonnays or all Cabernets don't taste the same.

But exactly what constitutes terroir is controversial. Those who support it believe that a great wine expresses its origin through the soil and microclimate. In addition, altitude, slope, the amount of moisture or sunshine to which a vine is exposed—even yeasts that are indigenous to any particular area—are major determining factors of a wine's quality. Their opponents think that grape varieties and what's done in the winery are the crucial elements.

Ancient Techniques Challenged by Technology

For centuries, natural winemakers at French and Italian estates have proudly defended the unique terroir of their specific parcel of land, with an aim to allow their wines to express these characteristics as purely and honestly as possible. Throughout the generations, they've fought to preserve personality-driven wines and have eschewed any attempt at manipulation, even if the result would be more widely received by influential critics and more popular in the marketplace.

But with the advent of technology and an ever-growing interest in wines that emanate from all parts of the globe, terroir in its classical sense is becoming increasingly challenged.

Add to the mix wine consultants such as “flying winemaker” Michel Rolland, a rock star taste master who hails from Bordeaux, France, and has a major role in the production of more than one hundred properties worldwide. Nearly every place one could point to on the globe—including Hungary, Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, Morocco, South Africa, Chile, Mexico, the United States, and even India—has had dealings with Rolland and his wine-making techniques, which have been highly influential in developing the international palate of today's wine consumer.

Filmmaker and trained sommelier Jonathan Nossiter delves deep into the globalization of the wine-making and wine-marketing industries and the profound effect that new-world wine-making practices have had on terroir in his 2004 documentary *Mondovino*. It's an interesting look at how European winemakers are pushing back against those who are conceived to be homogenizing the industry by creating wines that are essentially identical and which, in a blind tasting, could not be distinguished from each other.

Nossiter further explores the vast influence that critic Robert Parker and publications like *Wine Spectator* have in the industry, revealing that there are numerous European wineries that alter their vintages through scientific innovations including

“micro-oxygenation”—a favored technique of Rolland's that allows a winemaker to zero in on a particular blend of flavors and then consistently repeat it—to obtain characteristics that earn high ratings.

By contrast, the mystique and importance of terroir are defended in interviews with French and Italian winemakers who are small, creative, and passionately resistant to international pressures. “A great wine springs from love, humility, a communion with earth and time. It takes a poet to make a great wine,” says Aime Guibert, whose ancestors have been making wine on the same parcel of land since the Middle Ages.

Room for All Views

In spite of the outcry that all wine is converging to suit a uniform American taste, more vineyards are producing more wines than ever before—75,000, according to Lawrence Osborne, author of *The Accidental Connoisseur: An Irreverent Journey through the Wine World*—to challenge the palates of an expanding wine-guzzling population.

In Woodinville, Washington, the Washington Wine Commission named Willows Lodge Wine Director Jeffrey Dorgan Sommelier of the Year in 2009. Dorgan has a clear understanding of both sides and a hopeful attitude about what's going on in his state.

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decade ago,” says Dorgan. “But I'm not such a purist. There's so much diversity with the grapes, the soil, and the knowledge that's available today. I see a definite commitment to sustainable practices that supports pristine soil and terroir as a natural byproduct of vineyard-specific wineries.

“To me,” he continues, “what's exciting about wine is that in addition to a sense of place, there's a place for everything. I love that.” ☺