

Thoughts on Terroir

Last Sunday I was sitting in church, engaging in a little creative mind-wandering, as is my habit whenever I find myself sitting in a pew. It happens that in matters spiritual, I'm a staunch agnostic - on a good day. So a certain lack of attentiveness in church is something I feel entitled to, especially when it comes to listening to all those disquieting accounts of the Israelites trying to cope with the vengeful and capricious God of the Old Testament.

This publication is not the appropriate forum for discussing intensity of religious belief, or lack thereof. But the notion of agnosticism may in fact have some application to the world of wine.

Let me elaborate. I'm not proposing that wine may, or may not, exist - we'll leave that to the professional philosophers. Let's say we start with the assumption that the thing I turn grapes into, and you and I drink, has enough tangibility to allow us to get it from the bottle into the glass and thence to our mouths and, ultimately, blood streams.

What I really want to focus on is one of those fuzzy, attractive concepts that are being batted around a lot these days among people who talk about wine to excess instead of just drinking it. The topic: *terroir*.

Most wine geeks know that *terroir* is a French concept - far more than just a term - without a real English-language equivalent. A person whose job it is to wrestle with semantics would define *terroir* as "the totality of soil, topographical, temperature, rainfall and hydrological influences, especially as they relate to wine quality." Some clever English-speaker, making use of our language's ardent love of the neologism, recently condensed this clumsy bunch of words into the single term "somewhereness," which I think is a very fetching way of describing something that is essentially foreign to our minds.

No one talks about *terroir* more than the French, of course. To their way of thinking, *terroir* is that to which all notions of a wine's uniqueness can be traced. A first-growth claret will always be superior to wine from the lesser-ranked property a few hundred metres up the road because the site on which its grapes are grown has long been accepted as superior. The distinct tannin structure of a Cote d'Or Pinot noir owes its unique mouthfeel to the distinguished provenance of the grapes from which it was made. And so on.

Overall, *terroir* has had less success as an export commodity than other quintessential French inventions, like croissants or lingerie or Brigitte Bardot. Nevertheless, an increasing number of California winemakers and grape growers have added the word to their lexicons, and are making bold attempts to discover their inner *terroirs*. The more vocal of them have even banded together to call themselves "Terroirists," a nice reference both to their favourite topic and the enthusiasm with which they spread the gospel.

Now, I would be one of the first to attest that the site on which grapes are grown has an enormous influence on the qualities of the finished wine. Challenge that assumption by planting some Pinot noir grapes in a patch of heavy clay soil, or on a slope that gets too much icy air, and the wines from those grapes will never rise beyond the pale and vapid. And conversely, it should be clear to everyone by now that the great wines of the world *always* arise from great sites.

But in my experience, a lot of so-called terroir effect has to do simply with variations in soil fertility and winemaking practices. Many “single-vineyard” wines I have tasted are indeed unique, but only in the worst sense of the word. That unique character can, alas, be traced to low-to-moderate levels of what should be recognized as winemaking defects.

I once spent an afternoon tasting the vineyard-designated Cabernet and Zinfandel bottlings of a well-known, high-end California producer. Each wine was indeed different, and the idea that these differences was directly traceable to terroir a seductive one. But I came to the conclusion that while site did indeed influence the final wine quality, things weren't quite as neat and tidy as the Terroirists would have us believe. One wine had a trace of earthiness, another had a distinct barnyard aroma, and a third had the telltale sharpness in the mouth of too much acetic acid.

All the individual parcels of grapes were presumably treated in essentially the same way. So where did they acquire their dubious unique personalities? One explanation lies in the nutritional limitations of the soil itself. Certain sites have low soil levels of nitrogen, for instance. The juice of grapes from these sites will also be low in nitrogen, which happens to be one of the essential nutrients for yeast growth. Too little nitrogen in the fermentation, and a minute amount of hydrogen sulfide is produced by the stressed-out yeast cells. The finished wine often ends up smelling vaguely of earth, beef, or coffee. A simple leap of faith is all it takes to believe that this wine is “expressing its terroir.”

It's not just soil composition that can cause a wine to veer alarmingly towards unpalatability. *Brettanomyces*, an insidious spoilage yeast that affects red wines the world over, has only recently been recognized for what it is – a microorganism which more or less diminishes wine quality.

The particular aromas associated with a wine tainted with “Brett” are customarily described as resembling horse sweat, the grosser corners of a barnyard, or a rubber hose. Brett smells have nothing to do with terroir. Yet many decades of received wisdom, from before the days of crackerjack wine microbiologists, have a large number of people convinced that these very same smells are a sure indicator of the wine's distinct geographical origin.

Once winemakers recognize defects such as these and take steps to eliminate them - as more and more of them are learning to do - then the terroir distinction is often dramatically less evident. When grapes from a certain site are low in nitrogen, then supplemental nitrogen, used the world over, allows the yeast cells to convert sugar to

alcohol cleanly and happily. *Voilà!* No earthy or beefy smells. But *merde alors!* What has happened to the expression of terroir?

This process can work in reverse, too. Suppose you, as a winemaker, have left your Cabernet in oak a little too long, and it now smells like wood-chip tea. What to do? *Pas de problème*: allow it to develop a Brett infection. Suddenly the oak no longer smells like it is “planted” on the wine, and – yes – your Cabernet smells and tastes astonishingly like a classed-growth Bordeaux. Any competent New World winemaker wishing to pay lip service to the motherland can dial up the “French” character of his or her Cabernet simply by letting the wine get a little Bretty.

Or suppose you are a Bordeaux winemaker with a penchant for mischief. Take your Cabernet and Merlot grapes and make them into wine, only this time keep the wine from developing a Brett infection by careful attention to cellar hygiene. Uh-oh...this wine smells and tastes exuberantly fruity, like some inferior New World product. No terroir can be detected.

Sounds like an outrageous thing to do, right? And yet many wine writers these days complain that one of the great tragedies of modern winemaking is that terroir effects have become blurred. They state that modern, technology-based winemaking, carried out by worldly and highly trained practitioners, is resulting in a tsunami of clean, fruit-driven wines utterly lacking in a distinctive personality. What they are really saying, without knowing it, is that there is a dramatic increase in the number of well-made wines on the market. We have never been so fortunate.

I have tasted red wines in Bordeaux, made by less tradition-bound winemakers who took great care of their wines as a matter of course. Cellar hygiene, far from being some New World neurosis, is a priority for them, as is a deep acquaintance with microbiology and chemistry. Certainly their wines did not resemble classic Bordeaux. But ironically enough, with the spoilage characters absent, the wines were intense, fresh, and delicious, and *they even expressed some stamp of the soil from which they arose.*

OK, I concede that terroir exists, so as a concept maybe it is beyond the reach of true agnosticism. Well, the analogy seemed to make sense last Sunday. But I still feel the need to be skeptical about the confidence and bravado I hear these days concerning terroir as the ultimate predictor of wine quality and uniqueness.

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