

Typically Terroir

Georges Meekers

Terroir, which loosely translates from French into the less emotive word 'terrain', is a meaningful term in the making of a top notch wine but it means many different things to many different people.

Terroir has never been a simple concept. Often it refers to the soil itself, which is said to determine the taste of wine. To some it's simply an 'earthy' flavour or a 'mineral' quality found in some wines but alas not in many. To others terroir is every facet of the vine's environment that leaves an imprint of place on the liquid.

Another more holistic concept includes also the local influences of nature on grapes as well as the nurturing by grape growers and processing by winemakers.

When advocates of the concept defend terroir, there is always an element of the mystical, this singular character that comes from the locale, an emanation of the natural forces. But, whereas believers take terroir for the Holy Grail, sceptics deny its existence completely. However, just as we cannot lay our hands on the legendary Chalice, terroir itself, too, eludes us and it is doubtful whether one will ever conclusively prove its existence.

Habitually the case for terroir is presented as a romantic affair whereby the relationship between soil and wine is simply accepted – not trialled. But, does soil wield its clout?

Few wine drinkers seem to take issue because they simply experience it that way: a whiff of gunflint in Sancerre grown on silex soils, a taste of graphite in the wines from the schists soils of Poirat, Spain, a speckle of volcanic ash in Piediroso from the flanks of the Vesuvius, a unique salty quality in top-notch Merlot from the Maltese Islands.

But anyone who holds the view that the uniqueness of wine simply lies spades deep, rooted in the bedrock and soils, finds himself rapidly in quicksand. Any pure line from the soil to the wine, which is what the general claim of terroir is, is highly debatable, if not entirely romantic.

The idea that you can literally taste the soil, such as wet slate in a glass of German Riesling, is just not true. There's no direct dispersion from the slopes of the meandering Mosel to your palate. When describing such purity found in wine one obviously uses the language of evocation. However, in a literal way it is scientifically impossible to taste the earth.

Mineral flavours don't gush directly from Kimmeridgean limestone into a glass of steely Chablis, not any more than horse manure smells through in biodynamic wine.

Minerality in a wine isn't a gauge of the mineral content of the soil. It's more likely caused by increased levels of sulphur compounds.

Our planet may have its own oeno-erogenous patches or places where the wine that emerges is just exhilarating. It's true that ideal vineyards are located on poor and well drained soils that match the grape variety in a happy threesome with a benign climate.

Obviously, geological factors do influence the character of a wine from a particular region, but soil exerts its influence indirectly. All things being equal, different soil types bring out different flavours from the same grape variety. Yet how the soil of a vineyard can influence the ultimate taste of the finished wine remains unresolved. Explanatory biochemical pathways are unknown.

Terroir shows in a wine as aromas and flavours that sprout not from the dirt per se but from complex processes of plant metabolism which manage to mimic descriptors associated with it. What's more, there are other important factors in play, too. Studies show that micro-organisms like yeasts, the winemaking processes as well as the wine's ageing regime largely influence the taste of a wine and often are responsible for the characteristics wine tasters hold to be evocative of terroir.

In other words, when examining the forces of nature and the creativity of man responsible for the way a particular wine tastes, there are just too many variables to be able to attribute recognisable characteristics reminiscent of terroir to either natural conditions on the one hand or the intervention of vigneron and vintner on the other.

Be that as it may, it's not because one cannot put one's finger on it, that terroir doesn't exist. On the contrary, every wine region probably has its own. But, as is the case with the search for the mystery of the Holy Grail, its significance lies in the exceptional properties of the liquid – not in the discovery of the cup.

For terroir to exist we must be able to taste it and wine enthusiasts as well as expert tasters persistently put forward they can indeed detect the signature of a place in the wines it brings forth. Although none exposes irrefutable causation, numerous wine tasting notes are presented in evidence. It may not be the scientific method, but this kind of testimony can be compelling, especially coming from good, trained palates.

Maybe then terroir is better understood not as an encircled piece of land or the mysterious workings of flora and fauna but as significant and meaningful organoleptic characteristics that are almost impossible to replicate and which one attributes subsequently to extraordinary places and people.

Consequently, it's conceptual. Terroir is conceived in the collective mind of a loose group of wine tasters who are able to relate the distinctive taste of a wine to its provenance based on their previously gained tasting experience. Wine drinkers may not need to be administered classical conditioning like Pavlov's dog to trigger it, but apparently terroir needs pointing out to the novice wine drinker so he can recognise it.

By themselves few amateurs would dare rave about the “decadent, even raunchy smell”, as Robert Parker calls it, of some of France’s greatest pinot noirs. But when having been exposed repeatedly to this typical characteristic, many initiated wine lovers will follow suit and link it with great red Burgundy. Still it will be impossible, though, to trace back this quality to the soil, clone, climate, vineyard husbandry or cellar practises.

So, when assessing a wine’s flavour, terroir presents itself as an acquired taste.

Searching for terroir in a bell of wine is not about unravelling the liquid in threads of somewhereness (flavours originating from the physical environment of the vine) and someoneeness (those qualities instilled by man). It’s about singling out a rather unique added value to the wine’s style that is expressive of provenance of place and people.

As such it’s an acquired taste for typicalness (TP1) defined by the significant difference in taste which becomes apparent when a wine from a certain place (W1) is tasted comparatively against a number of other wines (Wx) congruent in style (S) as a result of the influences of nature (N) and human intervention (H) over a number of vintages (V).

$$TP1 \equiv |W1 - W_x| / S \sim (N+H)^V$$

This working definition may help delimiting the term typicalness which should prevent it from becoming another polysemous term.

It doesn’t put the existence or the influence of terroir on trial. The term typicalness recognises science has uncovered the importance of the earth beneath the vine but falls short of tying an umbilical cord between the flavour of a wine and its place of birth.

But, above all, typicalness puts taste back in the centre of the equation, which is just as well. After all, isn’t wine all about just that?