

TALKING ABOUT TERROIR

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Abstract

When talking about terroir, scientists and lay wine tasters, very much including wine journalists and wine growers, too often talk past one another. “Terroir” may be among the most irritatingly vague and slippery words in the wine growers' and wine critic's vocabulary, but scientists, too, seem conspicuously unwilling to render this notion more precise; and if a shared and mutually useful concept cannot be achieved, how can we reach genuine agreement or disagreement in our claims about terroir, let alone address or mitigate one another's perplexity?

Moreover, it often appears as if parties to alleged explications of terroir fail even to agree on the phenomenon that demands explanation. Wine tasters are frustrated with scientists who make no attempt to account for but instead treat as implausible or debunk claims for organoleptic experience of wine as varying with regularity and predictability depending on site and soil type. Entire books have been written about vineyard geology under the rubric of terroir without accounting for how rocks might actually influence taste. Specialists often advise on where best to plant wine grapes seemingly oblivious that “best” can make sense only if location somehow ultimately influences taste. Yet scientists can be forgiven their frustration with and dismissals of utterly implausible pictures that wine tasters have painted for themselves about how soil and site might influence taste.

Examples will be offered of some common conceptual pitfalls into which both scientists and laity stumble when discussing “terroir.” Treating this term as by its nature evaluative undermines attempts to define site potential; treating it as encompassing anything that might impinge on the eventual character of wine including viticultural and cellar practices renders it so all-encompassing that it fails to mark any significant distinction. Positing something called “minerality in wine” trades on equivocation and conceptual muddle.

It will be proposed that “terroir” be defined as those constraints placed on (or opportunities afforded) a vintner and the eventual flavors of his or her wine by the location in which that wine was grown. Several senses of terroir influence consistent with that definition will be explicated, each differing in scope and in the role assigned to grape variety and vine genetics. It will be argued that the notion of wine as exhibiting terroir character and tasters' ability to discern characteristics causally associated with site are neither more nor less problematic than the analogous notion of vintage character or its identification as predicated on the influence of weather on vine metabolism, fruit maturation and ultimately flavor. It will be suggested that much more scientific research should be devoted to measuring how much or how little such ability tasters can develop, as opposed to imagine themselves possessing, because this will circumscribe investigations into how site influences flavor and determine how relevant place is to pedigree.

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