

Terroir:
What Is It And Why Does It Matter?

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The term *terroir* is a French word used by viticulturalists, enologists, winemakers, sommeliers, and wine enthusiasts in general to refer to a characteristic of wine that describes the location, culture, and heart, or the “soul” of the wine. *Terroir*, loosely translates to “a sense of place,” in that when one “tastes” the *terroir* in a wine, one could geographically explain where the wine originated (Wikipedia). In other words, during the process of growing the grapes, to making the wine, characteristics are defined in the final product that can be caused by the soil and climate, the tools and practices in the vineyard, and even the love that the producer puts into the wine (Sommers). However, over the past 100 years or so, *terroir* has come to mean much more than just the geographic location of a wine (Swinchatt, Howell). It has become the cause of much controversy, can control the wine market, and also sometimes defines certain wine regions. This essay seeks to explain how *terroir* affects wineries on a local and global basis through sales, controversies, and legalities.

The word *terroir* is often found in italics because it is a “borrowed word” from the French language (The Definition of Terroir). However, since the creation of the New World in the wine industry, *terroir* has practically been fully adopted

into the English language by wine enthusiasts. The “New World,” as most Americans learned in elementary school refers to the discovery of North America and South America by the Europeans. In the context of this essay and the context of the wine industry, the “New World” takes on a similar meaning. It refers to the places where wine is produced (Argentina, Australia, South Africa, the United States, etc.) in comparison to the traditional, “Old World”, European countries where wine is produced (Italy, France, Greece, etc.). *Terroir*, can be the reason why a sparkling wine made in the Champagne region of France can cost an awful lot more than a sparkling wine made from the same grapes, using the same process, made in California. The reason for this is that wine enthusiasts believe that there is a real value in the *terroir* of a wine.

Today, there are many factors that determine the price of a bottle of wine. These factors include obviously the quality of the wine, the cost of the processing and packaging, and even more now the reputation of the winery, which can be determined, at least in part, by critics such as Robert Parker. Robert Parker is the world’s most famous wine critic and has written over 11 books about wine as well as 7 editions of “Parker’s Wine Buyer’s Guide.” (Wikipedia). Parker, in the most recent edition of his guide, not only gives a list of factors that can determine the characteristics of a wine, but also gives his take on *terroir*, and how it can affect a wine.

“I do believe it [*terroir*] is an important component in the production of fine wine. If one is going to argue *terroir*, the wine has to be made from exceptionally low yields, fermented with only the wild yeasts

that inhabit the vineyard, brought up in a neutral medium such as old barrels, cement tanks, or stainless steel, given minimal cellar treatment, and bottled with little or no fining or filtration. However, I would argue that the most persuasive examples of terroir arise not from burgundy but, rather from Alsace or Austria.” (Parker p. 33)

It is clear that Robert Parker, one of the most influential voices in the world wine industry has little appreciation for natural *terroir* because according to him, terroir can be easily manipulated. However, to people who may have land that they deem high in value or just winery owners on a much smaller scale, *terroir* can mean much more.

Aimé Guibert, a French vineyard owner, and part of the resistance to Mondavi in Aniane, Langudoc, France, believes that “a great wine springs from love, humility, a communion with the spiritual... with the earth and time. It takes a poet to make a great wine.” (Mondovino). Guibert was a part of the small community in France who resisted the purchase of land by the Mondavi family. Robert Mondavi, possibly the biggest name in the world wine industry, with certainly one of the most productive wineries in the world (120 million bottles/year), had a clash with this small town of Aniane (Mondovino). The event later became known as the “Mondavi Affair”. Basically, the Mondavi Corporation was interested in purchasing land in the vineyard rich area of Aniane, France, in hopes to build a winery and produce extremely high quality wines based on the *terroir* of the land. However, the land was not private, but communal and the community in charge of it was resistant to the big “American-owned multinational corporation” (Barthel-Bouchie). The mayor

of Aniane at the time had made deals with the Mondavi family and appreciated their presence. But the community members did not approve. They elected a new mayor, and with his assistance, refused Mondavi the land they desired. In the film *Mondovino*, Tim Mondavi, son of Robert, explains that they realized that they simply were not welcomed and sought other sources to expand their winemaking practices. His brother, Michael Mondavi also points out that the new mayor that Aniane elected was communist as if that supported the argument that the locals there are “foolish peasants.” (*Mondovino*).

Doug Fabbioni, owner and winemaker of Fabbioni Cellars in the greater Washington DC area, shares Guibert’s view of making wine. He says, “Balance the grapes on the vine, balance the wine in the glass, balance the land where we live and balance the life that we lead.” Fabbioni, also living in a relatively small, not widely recognized area, that however happens to be well suited for growing grapes, is on the natural *terroir* side of the argument, in the sense that he believes that more personal winemaking, produces better wine. Which is in opposition to the Parker idea that all wine characteristics can be created by different wine practices. These two opposing sides have created what has been referred to as the Wine Wars, of which the “Mondavi Affair” is a perfect example.

Michel Rolland, another huge name in the world wine industry, and possibly today’s most influential winemaker, is another avid believer in science over spirit when it comes to winemaking. Rolland has over a hundred clients that he gives winemaking advice to and has an unbelievable amount of influence over the world tastes of wines not only because of his reputation but because his clients are usually

extremely large and popular (Who is Michel Rolland?). Because of this great influence, it would appear that many major wine names are simply becoming Rolland wines instead of wines that have true *terroir*. I don't think it is by coincidence that Jonathan Nossiter, in his Mondovino film, highlights pictures or framed works with Ronald Reagan owned by Parker and Rolland when he interviews them (Mondovino). Reagan, being a supporter of big business and creator of Reaganomics which would certainly support the globalization of the wine industry by wineries such as Mondavi or Rolland's clients as compared to small wineries such as Fabbioni Cellars (Wikipedia). In a sense, natural *terroir* is the idea that relatively small, tenderly cared for vineyards and wineries produce the best wines. At least though, this is the apparent opinion of many small vineyard and winery owners.

I believe that Mondavi, Rolland, and Parkers' influences on the world are clear examples of George Ritzer's idea of McDonaldization. Ritzer explains the globalization of world culture through the example of McDonalds, one of the biggest and widespread corporations on Earth (Ritzer). Mondavi, although not nearly as large as McDonalds, is a multi-national corporation, and just like Rolland, hopes to McDonaldize or put their own spin on other cultures instead of the *terroir* that exists. Ritzer's book outlines the process in which McDonalds has essentially changed the way eat-out food is experienced on a world scale from local restaurants to immensely popular, American owned restaurants that not only destroy the previously popular local joints, but also make their customers unhealthy and unknowledgeable (Ritzer). Robert Mondavi, Michel Rolland, and Robert Parker, by

having such influence, are in a way, doing a very similar thing. They are making it difficult for small wineries to stay in business; they decide what the world's wine will taste like; and they remove not only the natural *terroir* from wines of certain localities, but also the general public's knowledge of the *terroir*.

Terroir, as discussed throughout this essay, is the sense of location, and clearly there are people out there that put great value in their location. Some to the point of fighting legal battles for it such as in the "Mondavi Affair". The idea that the specific location of the production of wines creates specific characteristics has led to the passing of The Napa Declaration on Place; a pact that "protects" the reputations of not only certain *wine* names but also names of other drinks (Classification of wine). For instance, to produce a wine called Champagne, not only does one have to follow strict production guidelines such as what grapes to use and how the wine is processed, but also the wine also *must* be produced in the Champagne region of France. This rule, in theory, protects the reputations of Champagne producers by not allowing producers outside of this specific region to make a poor wine and call it Champagne. This same legislation goes for Port, Sherry, Cognac, Scotch, Bourbon, Chianti, etc. Producers wishing to make alcoholic wines and spirits similar to these listed are more than welcome to, but are forbidden to use the name on the label unless they are produced in the respective locality to protect the *terroir* (Wikipedia).

This has influenced Virginia Alcoholic Beverage Control legislation to restrict the small, but growing, wine industry in Virginia. Unfortunately, the specific ABC legislation is inaccessible without purchasing a Code Book, so I cannot provide

specific evidence. However, I know for a fact, being a part of the wine industry in Virginia, that regulations have become much more stringent in recent years regarding varietal names on wine labels. For instance, to have the name of a wine as “Cabernet Franc,” the wine must consist of at least 85% Cabernet Franc grapes and the name may only be “Cabernet Franc.” There may be no prefixes or suffixes to the name “Cabernet Franc.” This created an issue for the former Windham Winery, in Hillsboro, Virginia, when they changed the label for their widely popular, “Hope’s Raspberry Merlot” wine. Despite getting approval on the original label, when Windham changed their design, they were required to get the new label approved, but alas the law had changed. This prevented the winery to refer to the wine as “*Raspberry Merlot*” because of the affect that the wine could have on the name “Merlot.” Windham, who also had trouble with their *winery* name, now Doukenie Winery, was forced to change the name of their popular wine to “Hope’s Legacy.” (Doukenie). The VA ABC is able to regulate this by requiring all labels on wines produced in Virginia to be approved by the ABC in order to protect the reputation of the *terroir* of certain titles.

In conclusion, *terroir* is a not merely a word, but a lifestyle, and a business philosophy as well. *Terroir* is the reason for people to fight and protect their land, it determines culture, it backs legislation, it is the spirit of the Earth and Man within a wine. From Robert Mondavi, to Doug Fabbioni, nearly all winemakers agree that *terroir* is an existent tangible thing, it is what creates the sense of land that makes *terroir* such an interesting, controversial and widely used term in the world wine industry.

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