

A SENSE OF PLACE: THE FUTURE OF TERROIR

This event has been created in honor of Robert Mondavi Winery's 40th Anniversary. Education, innovative thinking, and sharing ideas with the larger wine community have always been keystones of Robert Mondavi's philosophy. This seminar is intended to add critical thinking to an important and enduring theme in our understanding of wine: terroir.

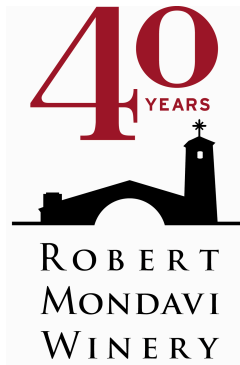
Moderator: Doug Frost, Master Sommelier, Master of Wine
Genevieve Janssens, Director of Winemaking, Robert Mondavi Winery
Dr. Xavier Choné, Terroir Specialist
Joshua Wesson, Chairman and Executive Wine Director, Best Cellars

Any discussion of terroir must begin by acknowledging that there are strong differences of opinion regarding the definition of terroir. Rather than argue for or against any one definition, a greater understanding may result from reflecting upon the disparities among these viewpoints.

To begin the discussion terroir may be used to describe a place's potential ability to express, under certain conditions, a unique combination of characteristics (organoleptic and others), which may evoke the sense of place in a wine. In order for terroir to be expressed, proper husbandry of the vine and wine is required. Terroir by itself is only a set of potential expressions.

We will discuss Terroir from three aspects: terroir as defined by its specificity of place; terroir as a potential set of flavors and aromas; and terroir as an indicator of quality.

We welcome your input at the close of our seminar to contribute your own questions and comments to our discussion.



A SENSE OF PLACE: THE FUTURE OF TERROIR SEMINAR WINES

Flight One: White Wines

- (1) 2003 Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, New Zealand
- (2) 2003 Didier Dagueneau Pouilly Fumé Pur Sang, Loire Valley, France
- (3) 2002 Robert Mondavi Winery Fumé Blanc Reserve To Kalon, Napa Valley, California
- (4) 2002 Château Haut-Brion Blanc, Pèssac-Leognan, Bordeaux

Flight Two: Red Wines

- (5) 2002 Robert Mondavi Winery Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve, Napa Valley, California
- (6) 2002 Château Margaux, Margaux, France
- (7) 2002 Almaviva, Puente Alto, Chile

Barrel Sample

- (8) 2005 Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon To Kalon Lot, Napa Valley, California

PERSPECTIVES ON TERROIR

DOUG FROST

MASTER SOMMELIER, MASTER OF WINE

Terroir is laden with more meanings than a Shakespearean play and should hardly be reductively defined as simple earthiness. Mere earthiness in a wine should be delineated from terroir in that the flavors of “earthiness” are more often a sign of winemaking choices than of a sense of place. For this writer, it is only a slight exaggeration to smirk that terroir might be translated from the French into the word *Brettanomyces*, if earthiness and terroir are to be seen as synonyms.

They are not. Terroir is a word that implies, for most authoritative sources, a particular place with attendant characteristics. The use of the word “terroir” is most commonly understood to describe a place’s potential ability to express, under certain conditions, a unique combination of characteristics (organoleptic and others), which may evoke the sense of place in a wine.

Terroir can be viewed from three aspects: terroir as defined by its specificity of place; terroir as a potential set of flavors and aromas; and terroir as an indicator of quality.

Terroir as a Place

Typically, there is little disagreement as to this concept of terroir. Terroir can be simply translated as “terrain;” in the case of wine, a place where grapes are grown for wine. Many English language authors will concur that terroir therefore includes geographic factors such as vineyard location, altitude, microclimate, angle and aspect towards the sun, exposure to the elements, proximity to bodies of water, hills, forests and other influencing features, as well as soil pH, soil depth, drainage, textures and components.

Indeed most New World winemakers are content to define terroir as microclimate, with some even simply regarding the word as meaning “soil.” Old World winemakers are often frustrated by the limitations implied by these simple definitions.

Old World winemakers often argue for two additions to this list of possible meanings: the influence of living flora and fauna (including humans) in this equation, and the ability of terroir to be expressed as a commonly observed series of flavors and aromas, when winemaking is skillfully applied to that end.

Larousse defines terroir in such a way as to make it possible to take into account not only physical characteristics but specific habits of viticulture, other agricultural products, even the culinary habits of the locals.

Terroir as a Flavor

Dan Berger, in a recent article, describes terroir's most obvious presence as manifested in vintage variance. He also asserts that "wines of a truly distinctive terroir (such as cool-climate Merlot or Syrah) rarely score as well as wines that deliver a richer, more homogenous set of characteristics." He makes the relatively non-controversial statement that many New World winemaking techniques tend to produce wines "with no regional character, that have outrageous alcohols, higher and higher pH levels and a plethora of wood to steroid-ize wine."

But then he drives to a key point in this discussion. "Let's be honest about it," he writes, "real terroir character occasionally calls for a bit of education."

This demand for education of terroir strikes many as elitism. Yet, to this writer, the simple truth is that certain places can express themselves in wine and that the first time one tastes a wine that shows such unusual characteristics, many are unlikely to enjoy the experience.

There is nothing wrong with that response; children also tend to dislike new and unusual flavors. And as with children, familiarity or repeated exposure to certain tastes usually results in a far happier response to those flavors.

Terroir as Quality

Those who favor terroir tend to find its attributes most favorable. Nothing unusual in this; value judgments lie implicit in all wine arguments. Most advocates of terroir believe any sensory presence of terroir automatically confers excellence. That stance may be debatable, but certain combinations of aromas and flavors can confer rarity, because they are rarely found.

For some British authors, terroir also confers the notion that the longest-lived wines of a particular variety or style are possible only in particular places, in certain terroirs. Perhaps the notion could be challenged by noting that longevity is no longer a practical measure of a wine's excellence, but that would not refute the claim for certain terroirs' primacy.

Larousse's definition not only takes into account the contribution and influence of creatures in the region, it also defines terroir's potential negative impact. Terroir, in this sense, doesn't necessarily result in a better wine. Indeed, it is possible to describe terroir as having a deleterious effect on certain wines, certain grapes and certain styles.

But most wine writers and marketers are intent upon describing terroir as an indication of goodness; that the best wine is that which shows the best quality and therefore expresses terroir.

Perhaps terroir has been asked to carry an unreasonable amount of baggage, but it seems to describe a foundational element of wine.

GENEVIEVE JANSSENS
DIRECTOR OF WINEMAKING, ROBERT MONDAVI WINERY

What is *Terroir*?

Terroir is a concept that explains “uniqueness.” A French word, the Larousse dictionary defines “terroir” as an area, one which takes into account some specific cultural traditions. In the everyday French vocabulary, this word is associated with agriculture and food traditions.

In the 18 Century, Vauban wrote “the best terroir is not different from the worst if it is not cultivated.” The expression of terroir is also linked to human choice; it represents an ambition and an investment which is not limited to the “soil.”

Terroir is a complex relationship between: the soil, the vines (i.e. rootstocks, varieties, and vine density), the weather, the sun, the climate, and of course, people. The primary role for people is to optimize what nature provides. It requires that we understand how the soil and the plant system function and interact.

Terroir is the geographical, biological and human aspects all combined together. It requires long-term experience and research in order to understand the equilibrium and the uniqueness of a site. Each year, we need to identify and evaluate the elements of this equilibrium, which vary from year to year and from one season to the next, and then utilize all these elements to create what we think is the best wine produced in a particular moment.

At To Kalon Vineyard, we are the trustees of all the elements of terroir:

- Soil – To Kalon Vineyard is our Boss, we do not own it; we are just passing through like many other generations.
- Experience – Nothing is luck. For great wines we need to combine the generosity of the land, the complexity of the climate and soil analysis.
- Knowledge – More than a century of intense research in winegrowing and winemaking will show us the way for To Kalon’s future.
- People – It is our privilege to care for this land, and we honor it by making sure it remains a viticultural treasure for many generations to come.

That’s what I call *Terroir*.

DR. XAVIER CHONE
TERROIR SPECIALIST

To quote Vauban on terroir (Vauban was a military planner for Louis XIV "le roi soleil") is: "*Le meilleur terroir ne diffère en rien du mauvais s'il n'est cultivé.*" (*The best terroir does not differ from the worst if it is not cultivated.*)

This quote stresses the fact that terroir cannot be reduced solely to environment (soil and local climate). In other words, without human efforts and investments, terroir is nothing. There is a pilot guiding terroir—as well as a copilot and a crew—who gets you through every vintage (gently if possible) even when faced with uneven climate conditions.

Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1788 from France: “The four best Bordeaux wines are Margaux, Lafite, Latour and Haut Brion.” This is still true in 2006.

Terroir for the French represents continuity, consistency in high quality over several years, and sometimes over centuries. Terroir needs exceptional soil and climate, but these are not sufficient elements. To express terroir, the *viticultueur* should utilize almost perfect vineyard techniques, the results of empirical thinking and experience: elements such as narrow spacing between the vines, and varietal and clonal selection.

Terroir is all about human intervention (vineyard manager and winemaker) to organize three main parameters: perfection and adaptation of the harvest, winemaking processes, and aging to the vineyard’s ability.

There are many terroirs in France, but the winning combination of these three parameters is never the same. Shuffling the deck of these three parameters has to be done to reach the best wine possible.

Terroir is truly a worldwide concern – and an evolving one.

JOSHUA WESSON
CHAIRMAN AND EXECUTIVE WINE DIRECTOR, BEST CELLARS, INC.

Tilting the chapeau to Kinky Friedman, “A person who takes a simple idea and makes it tediously complex is referred to as an intellectual. A person who takes a tediously complex idea and makes it simple is called a genius. Condense the whole megillah into a line or two—then you really have something.”

Being a low-watt bulb when it comes to high-brow notions, I’m certain there’s not much I can offer to illuminate the dark science of defining what terroir is (or isn’t). What I can shed some light on is terroir’s relevance to consumers. In a line or two, my whole megillah on the mishigas surrounding terroir boils down to this:

Taste is the primary reason people drink wine and, in most cases, there’s no accounting for it.

If you accept this premise, then you won’t have much trouble agreeing with me that terroir doesn’t—and probably never will—amount to much more than a south-facing, well-drained, mica-flecked hill of beans when it comes to consumers expressing their preferences in the marketplace.

In fact, for a majority of wine buyers, the concept of terroir is meaningless—a valid, but distantly intellectual construct that, much like discussions of biodynamism and Mark Green’s political accomplishments, makes one want to drink anything more powerful but less profound than fermented grape juice.

Which is not to say that I find the concept of terroir to be meaningless. In its clearest expression, terroir helps us to better comprehend those elements that endow special wines with their specialness. It’s just not a consumer driver in today’s marketplace.