



Worth the Trouble

PRIORITIZE TERROIR TO SET YOUR WINE LIST APART

WE ALL KNOW that wine is made in the vineyard. So why is it so hard to run wine programs that reflect this fundamental truth?

As sommeliers, we're aware of the key differentiating factors of place; they guide us in blind tasting. We may start by identifying grapes, but it's the sensory attributes resulting from terroir that lead us to our logical conclusions.

The rubber meets the road, however, when we are sitting at tables that, for most of us, are hundreds or thousands of miles from the nearest vineyard and choosing bottles to put on our lists. This is when an evaluation of wines on the basis of origin becomes difficult or nearly impossible for the vast majority of wine professionals.

Let me give you an example: Not too long ago, I sat down to a blind tasting of Chardonnays from the Santa Cruz Mountains with some of the most respected wine journalists in the business. Virtually

all the panelists expressed a preference for wines that tasted the way Chardonnays are "supposed" to taste, exhibiting a sense of richness and fullness, balanced acidity, proportionate oak, and so on.

After a few minutes I realized the absurdity of it all. Not one of these experienced professionals were singling out wines for attributes typical of Chardonnay grown in the Santa Cruz Mountains: minerality, lightness, elevated acidity, and a prudent use of oak. They were giving the highest scores to wines that tasted most like Chardonnays grown in other places, such as the Sonoma Coast, Carneros, the Côte de Beaune, and the Hunter Valley—anywhere but from the high-elevation vineyards of the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Not that I blame them. The entire industry is, seemingly, engrossed by varietal correctness, among other standards of quality unrelated to sense of place. A typical restaurant wine list may include wines from many regions of the world,

but most of these wines are chosen for their balance in terms of oak, fruit, tannin, acidity, and so forth; for their intensity; and/or for their adherence to favored styles—in short, for everything but terroir.

Why go to the trouble to prioritize terroir as a criterion for list inclusion? For one reason, because we know it's right. Sensory qualities expressing origins are what distinguish the finest wines of the world. Number two, when we go to the trouble, we have a better chance of getting our guests to appreciate authentic wines. Think of it. If chefs are judged by how well they source authentic ingredients, why not sommeliers?

Good question. It is true that most of the restaurant industry does not operate by such lofty standards. The vast majority of guests might not recognize an authenticity-based wine list if it hit them upside the head. But as with cuisine, they can taste it, and that's why it matters. **SJ**