



Does Terroir Matter?

REVISITING A SOMETIMES VEXING, ALWAYS INTERESTING TOPIC

TERROIR, I HATE to say, has not mattered for a long time—at least not to the commercial wine industry. In my April/May column, I explored the regrettable reality that on-premise professionals rarely prioritize terroir on their lists, as the vast majority of wines are sold on the basis of brand and varietal identity. Appellations may be notated on labels, but more often than not provenance has little to do with what's in a bottle.

The issue extends to the production itself: New World wines are increasingly made the same way no matter where they are from. Most Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignons, for example, have long ceased to aspire to standards set by Bordeaux's Grand Cru classification system, which has always celebrated the distinctions among communes and individual châteaux—despite being under the pressure, over the past 30 years, of prevailing scoring systems.

This past June in the *Napa Valley Register*, even veteran journalist Dan Berger—who has always aimed to cultivate a conventional, varietal-focused taste in wine among his readers—decried how “Cab became so malformed . . . [with] far too much sameness” resulting from the use of “high-tech gadgets . . . so we can standardize all reds . . . to be dense . . . the darkest and most concentrated.” Like the old fogey that he is, Berger recalls that “decades ago, our Cabernets from different places differed from one another. . . . What a delight!”

Producers, of course, have brought this upon themselves: Live by the 100-point sword, die by 100-point sword. But as I mentioned in my previous column, restaurant sommeliers have it within their power to remain arbiters of taste when choosing products for their wine lists. They can select Pinot Noirs, Chardonnays, and even Cabernet Sauvignons based upon sensory distinctions related directly to appellations and vineyards.

Austin, TX, sommelier Krista Church tastes Zinfandel in an old-vine vineyard in the Lodi region's Mokelumne River AVA.



PHOTO: RANDY CAPAROSO

The commercial wine industry makes it harder and harder to do that—as do distributors perpetually driven by their sales quotas—but it is still possible to find terroir-focused wines with a modicum of due diligence.

That said, selecting wines on the basis of terroir rather than branding or technique can also be challenging for one's palate. I recall a piece in the old *Sommelier Journal* (September 2010), “Oregon's Cellar Crawl Collection,” in which we asked five experienced Portland sommeliers if they could tell the difference between winemaking and site in a blind tasting of 25 Pinot Noirs made by five of Oregon's most prestigious winemakers, each of whom produced wine from grapes picked at the same time from each other's vineyards. Individual winemaking styles, however, made such a huge impact on sensory qualities that all but one of the sommeliers mistook the differences between styles to be the differences between vineyards.

In fact, sometimes it's the eye of the beholder, not winemaking techniques, that blurs distinctions. In another *Sommelier*

Journal report on Sonoma Coast Chardonnays and Pinot Noirs in June 2011, there was one ultra-dark, almost ferociously fruit-forward Pinot Noir that was summarily dismissed by five panelists for being “over-extracted” and “obviously manipulated.” One Master Sommelier (there were three on the panel) described this wine as “anything but natural.” That particular Pinot Noir, though, was crafted by a winemaker who is well known for his obsession with minimal intervention. It wasn't the wine that was manipulated, it was the panelists' mental assumption of what constitutes manipulation!

Indeed, since when are terroir-focused wines supposed to be predictable? By definition, they *should* be vexing, confounding, and occasionally shocking. The more natural the style, the more unpredictable the results. By that point, it goes without saying that while many of our so-called “best” wines are sadly no longer defined by terroir, many of our most interesting wines still are. We may not always recognize facets of terroir in the wines we taste, but we can at least support the concept by prioritizing it in our selection process. *sj*