

TERROIRISM

There is no doubt that wine is fascinating stuff, but unfortunately this makes it prone to mystique and over-complication. Terroir is a good example. Mostly you will read that this is a French term that is difficult to translate into English, and endless articles have been devoted to defining it. I think it is a rather obvious concept really. Terroir means that every patch of dirt is different, and this can make every wine taste different. It is not at all restricted to wine either, the same thing may be true for coffee, honey, cheese or chickens, but winegrapes seem to be an especially expressive medium. All other things being equal, wine made from a patch of clay on a south-facing slope will have a different character than wine made from rocky soil on the other side of the valley, and so on. Easy isn't it?

Scepticism is warranted though, for how often will all other things be equal? One block may suffer some botrytis infection in the vineyard, or be picked too late, or be fermented with a different yeast strain, and all these influences will obscure the effect of the site. And then of course, both blocks may be blended together and even with grapes from a completely different region, so that the site speaks not in a clear voice but in a confused babble. If there are so many ways in which the influence of terroir may be obscured and lost, how do we know that it really exists?

In 2002 I was lucky enough to work the vintage at Domaine Pierre Damoy in Gevrey Chambertin (Burgundy). Each day we would pick Pinot noir grapes from different parcels of land, which have been distinguished from each other over centuries of experience (the Clos de Bèze was planted in AD 630). Every wine was made in exactly the same way, with the single exception that the Grands Crus went into a higher percentage of new barrels than the lesser wines. Yet tasting them all side-by-side, they were quite different wines, and some of the differences were consistent from year to year.

Even if the influence of terroir is real, it is fair to ask if it is important or even desirable. The answer depends a lot on one's point of view. The Casella family of the Riverina have made their yellow tail brand Australia's biggest export success story, by divining what the American palate likes and making millions of cases of wine to suit. It is an awesome feat and demonstrates the power of making wine to suit the consumer rather than the producer. You can be sure that terroir is completely irrelevant in this story.

At the other end of the price scale, terroir seems pretty irrelevant to Penfold's Grange as well. Blended from different vineyards and different regions, it is made to a style, with significant inputs from new oak and powdered tannin. While it is made from the very best grapes to be found, it is supposed to taste like Grange rather than expressing the character of any particular site.

I think these examples show what does make terroir interesting – in a mass-production sort of world, diversity, personality, character and subtlety are all precious qualities. Nature is far more imaginative than any winemaker, and a single vineyard wine is our chance to listen to her.

Mount Majura Vineyard is planted on a small patch of red volcanic soil that contains limestone, and is up on the side of the hill facing the morning sun. Obviously we're working hard in the vineyard and the winery to make the best wines that we can, but what pleases us most of all, is to find that the wines have character, that they express the site where the vines have their roots. The Vineyard is open every Sunday, so please come and be introduced if you haven't already.

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Mount Majura Vineyard