

Writing Sample: Journalistic/ Blog Article



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Terroir Talk: Tasting the Earth in Your Wine

In terms of wine jargon, “terroir” is a term that is trending amongst oenophiles and befuddling wine novices. Though the frilly French pronunciation threatens to scare you off, it’s actually a useful term that will help you become a savvy wine drinker – and earn a few wine vocab points along the way.

Terroir is a French word that comes from the Latin root meaning “earth” and refers to the collection of environmental elements that give wine a sense of place.

Though the term was tossed around in the 17th Century, terroir became a hit in 1831, thanks to Dr. Morelot, a wealthy landowner in Burgundy. Morelot did not understand that if all the wines in Burgundy were made in essentially the same way, how it could be that there were differences in quality. He claimed that the difference in quality and taste came down to geography (and geology).

From that point on, wine quality became inextricably linked to the quality its vineyard of origin. Vineyards across France and the Old World were labeled with legal appellations, a coding system that marked certain areas for quality and left others out in the economic cold.

New World winemakers have bought into this “terroir talk” to some degree: micro winemaking regions are given official names and unofficial reputations regarding their quality potential. However, the role of the winemaker and the varietal hold a greater importance than they do in the Old World.

To talk about terroir is to talk about the conglomerate of different elements that influence how a grape grows on the vine (and therefore, influence how the wine will taste when it eventually reaches your glass). The term refers to the climate, soil, altitude & terrain, and human influence. Think of it as nature and nurture – all the factors that shape the wine from a wee grapevine seedling to a masterpiece bottled in the cellar. Here is a breakdown of all that terroir encompasses:

Climate influences how much sunlight and precipitation the grapevine receives. Sunlight affects sugar and acid levels in the grape itself, and precipitation affects how much the vine can grow and produce.

Soil type can be anything from rock to clay, from limestone to granite, and everything in between. It impacts how the roots grow and how much access the vine has to minerals and water.

Altitude & Terrain include a vineyard’s elevation, geological features (whether it’s near a mountain range, located in a valley, close to a large body of water etc.) and natural fauna, all influence the region’s terroir and the grapes it produces.

Human influence is the final, and sometimes forgotten, factor. Certain regions are rich with winemaking traditions that are centuries old, others are just beginning to establish themselves. Regardless, human influence affects how the grapevine is cultivated, what technology is available and utilized, and what winemaking practices are implemented in the winery.

The question then becomes, why does any of this matter? It matters because terroir is what gives each wine a sense of place – a kind of sensory fingerprint that gives the drinker clues to its origin and to how it was made.

In the wine glass, terroir shows up in many different ways. At times it can be measured in density or alcohol levels, at times it can be sensed as a kind of minerality, a chalkiness, stony flavors, or forest aromas – the range is as wide as the earth itself. And at times it can be felt – as simply an ephemeral impression.

Professionally trained wine drinkers use terroir clues to guide them in blind tastings and to evaluate the “tipicity” of a wine, that is to say how typical the wine is of its region. They may ask themselves: Is the wine made from a grape variety typically grown in that geographical area? Does it follow the traditional winemaking style of the region?

However, terroir isn’t only a new buzzword for thirsty wine lovers, it’s a critical concern for winemakers when it comes time to buy or plant a vineyard. Winemakers will meticulously study the earth, the weather patterns, and the local traditions – all to

determine what kind of terroir they are truly buying into.

Whether you can taste terroir depends heavily on how the wine was made and how your palate and nose have been trained to identify the signals. Though terroir is quickly gaining airtime in wine conversations, there are some winemakers that don't buy into the geographical hype. Instead, they believe that great wine is born in the winery itself, regardless of where the grapes come from. Therefore, the question becomes whether you will pay attention to the next wine you uncork, and look for the "taste of the earth" that is terroir.