

## On the Subject of Terroir



By George Parkinson

We began the harvest of the 2025 vintage within the Lehigh Valley AVA in the first week of September. Inside our tasting room, a particular question arises from the visitors who are seeking new wine experiences and discovering our wine region for the first time. That question: What makes this place so special that many vintners have established vineyards in the area?

The simple answer is the terroir. Yet the subject matter is deeper and more complex than a simple word. In his book entitled *Terroir* (1998), author, geologist and wine advocate James Wilson defines the word on the opening page as follows: **“Terroir (tair-wahr) is a French term meaning total elements of the vineyard.”**

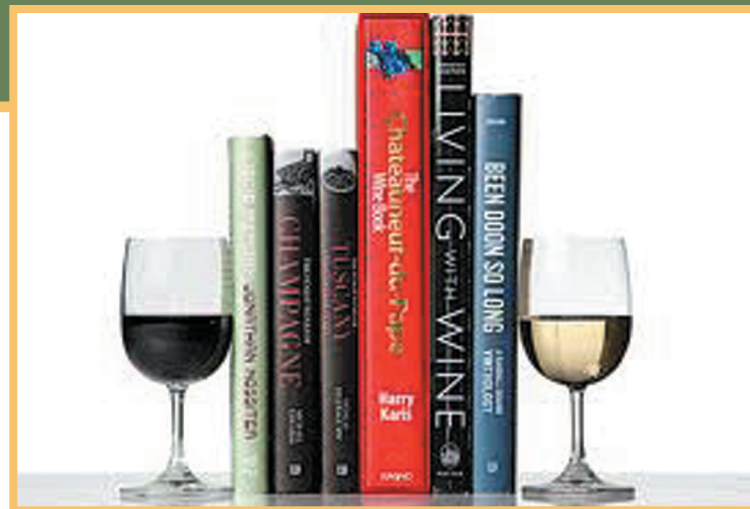
This book started a great debate among the camps of believers and non-believers. The question at the heart: Could a singular place on the planet be so unique that it rises above and apart from surrounding areas for the quality and flavors produced in the agricultural products grown in that location?

Terroir, simply translated as flavor of the land, has its roots within the early Roman beliefs and practices with the word **terratorium**. It is a thought that creates great controversy even today—that a segment of land could be identified by the flavors in the agriculture practiced in that place. Some do not believe it can be so different. Yet, even in this country, our federal government appoints 279 places with an AVA status identifying this uniqueness.

When wine connoisseurs speak of regions such as the Rutherford Bench, Saint Émilion, Tuscany, Gevrey-Chambertin, Rioja, Cachagua, Mendoza or Marlborough, it is with deep respect and an understanding of the quality of wines produced in these areas and the flavors these places are known for in the wines they produce. These and many other regions of the world have proven over time that the flavor, quality and nuances of the wines are representative of that place on the planet.

The concept of terroir takes into consideration the many factors that make up a region. The soil content, the average rainfall, the length of the growing season, the degree days, the diurnal temperature changes, the seasonal changes and the wildlife and natural elements within and surrounding that area. As mentioned earlier, when we speak of Napa Valley’s Rutherford Bench, the element of dust and dirt come into play. The wines produced here have a reminiscent quality about them that often shows an earthen, yes, dusty flavor note. Anyone who has been in this region during the hot months of July and August will note dust in the air here, and the finished wines often show this quality. Another example might be the wines of Spain’s Galicia region situated on the north Atlantic coast. There the land is cooler than most of Spain. There is more rainfall, and the white wines made from the Albariño grape have a slight saltiness to them. That note reflects the close location to the sea as much as anything. Yes, these are two singular examples using simple flavor or aromatic notes in wine; however, the science behind the concept of terroir goes much deeper.

It was the Benedictine monks of the 10th century—and more specifically the Cistercians or grey monks—who developed this sense of place in Burgundy. Beginning in Chablis and spreading across the Burgundian region, the monks identified two grapes that produced higher-quality wines than anything else grown in the region. Today, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are known as white and red



Burgundy for this reason, and one can distinguish a Chardonnay produced in Chablis from one produced in Meursault from one produced in the Macon, or a Pinot Noir from Nuits-Saint-Georges from one produced in Gevrey-Chambertin.

This sense of place shows up in the Chardonnay fruit grown in different California regions as well. While many believe Chardonnay is a neutral fruit that expresses the winemaker’s art more than terroir, I disagree. Simply taste the unfermented grapes from Mendocino’s Anderson Valley, and Granny Smith green apples speak out. The same fruit shows a Meyer lemon quality as one moves south into the Russian River Valley, and farther south into Carneros this grape shows flavors of a Golden Delicious apple. In Monterey, Chardonnay can show pineapple notes, and, as one wanders through Southern California’s Santa Maria Valley, these flavors become more exotic showing ripe papaya and mango.

It is the factors of soil, weather and length of growing season that produce different flavors in the fruit but do not settle on wine grapes alone. One will note similar differences throughout the planet,

making this quality of place so very important.

Our local wine-growing regions speak out with differences as well. From the Lehigh Valley AVA where I work to the Outer Coastal Plains AVA in New Jersey to New York’s Finger Lake AVA to Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley, the wines grown in these places reflect a certain unique quality that speaks of the land. It is up to you to follow the science and discover the different nuances of regional terroir. Start with an in-home wine party and taste through Sauvignon Blancs made in France’s Loire Valley and Bordeaux, Napa Valley, New Zealand and, yes, Pennsylvania. Try this with Cabernet Sauvignon made in Napa and Sonoma, Washington State, Chile and Australia. By doing this, you will see the differences, and, when you are feeling more adventuresome, go out and visit your local wineries. Make sure they are growing the fruit and that it is not purchased from outside the region, and you will find these same differences while exploring new places.

I hope you find adventure in every bottle and glass. May you have a safe and peaceful autumn harvest.

Cheers!

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