

Chicago Tribune

LIFESTYLES

Terroir is more than the land

Beyond vineyard, soil, subsoil and weather, the human impact matters

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"Terroir" seems a lofty term in winemaking, perhaps because it comes from the French, but its meaning in English is strictly down-to-earth, [trading](#) on the cognate "territory."

For us, "terroir" means the vineyard, its soil and subsoil. When we expand on the notion, we merely conjure a "Truman Show"-ish dome and include the weather (around the soil), the aspect or tilt (of the soil), the life forces (in the soil) and so on.



Three bottles of wine, Truchard, El Paj...

But we forget — I forgot until a wise winemaker taught me otherwise — a significant aspect of "terroir": the humans who work it, especially over time.

"People influence terroir," says Steve Rogstad, winemaker at Cuvaison in Sonoma's Carneros district in California. "Just as in Burgundy, all that collective experience over a long time — with the vines, the soils, the farming — it's all part of what makes the place," he says.

What follows is talk by other wise winemakers about the human touch on terroir, a story of sorts in steppingstones.


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What winemakers say

"People generally think of terroir as everything about a site that doesn't have to do with humans. But there's a difference between the land before you've planted it and then after. What humans do to the land always affects the terroir or brings out aspects of the terroir that the terroir can't do on its own."

— **Kale Anderson, winemaker at Kale Wines and director of winemaking at Pahlmeyer**

"Since 1971 I've had the opportunity to plant over 400 acres of vineyards in this special place (the Santa Rita Hills). I've reflected on this. I had been introduced to a beautiful Volnay (a red Burgundy) by a shipmate in the Navy. If I could [find](#)  the place to make that same texture of velvet in a pinot noir, well. ... What jumped out at me was this transverse mountain range near Santa Barbara, where the marine influence was more critical than any other place in California, and there I also found the right soil."

— **Richard Sanford, winemaker, Alma Rosa Winery & Vineyards**

"It's more the 'gestalt.' A vineyard is an artificial construction after all. Vines do not grow in rows and on trellises and produce tiny clusters of pinot noir at 2 1/2 tons an acre. The terroir is a combination of innate characteristics plus all the things about it that can be manipulated and changed. Of course, if you have too much human intervention or too little, you don't get [the best](#)  from the site. You can even destroy it."

— **James Hall, founder and winemaker, Patz & Hall**

"We have 400 acres in vine, on seven distinct soil types, with many different subsoil types, some planted beginning in 1974. So we've had to choose where to plant; location trumps clone. The zinfandel, for instance, goes up in the northern corner where it's warmer, a volcanic outcropping of Mount Veeder, Napa Valley, in Carneros."

— **Anthony Truchard, general manager, Truchard Vineyards**

"In the vineyard, there is gravel, then sand at 30 centimeters; that is for merlot. Then there is gravel and clay at 80 centimeters; that is for cabernet (sauvignon). We decide what grapes to plant where, but the soil tells us too."

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— **Thomas Duroux, general manager, winemaker, Chateau Palmer, Margaux**

"The [best](#) vineyard work is not reactive but proactive, holistic, like health care. That's why we practice biodynamics; it's a closed system that builds up the soils. You want the soils to be healthy so that they can, in a sense, handle a cold; not so you have to 'treat' them for the cold."

— **Jeff Cichocki, winemaker, Bonterra Organic Vineyards**

"Scientific and technical knowledge is always helpful, but it is in the use of these where problems arise. For example, if you choose your harvest date while you're in the office, you will be way off. In the end, the final decision when to pick is to go into the vineyard and touch and taste the grapes."

— **Eric Kohler, technical director, Domaines Barons de Rothschild**

Humans working the land

The story of humans working the terroirs where their wine grapes grow is a long one.

It is 700 years of Benedictine and Cistercian monks mapping the thousands of vineyards of Burgundy; of more monks forming and planting the vineyards of Bierzo in Spain; of Spaniards and more monks marching up the Mission Trail of California, planting vines as well as crosses.

It is winemakers selecting which clones of grapes to plant where, whether to water, how to prune or trim or splay a plant — all that and more, all human work, human decision, human interaction.

Yep, the hills are alive, all right.

Recommended wines

2012 Truchard Vineyards Roussanne Carneros, Napa Valley, California: Like a northern Rhone version, that is cool climate, therefore less oily or waxy than many from warmer climates in California; fine acidity and a wisp of honey lines the edges of white peach (not apricot) aromas and flavors. \$18-\$20

2011 Losada "El Pajaro Rojo," Bierzo, Spain: All-mencia grape; waves of aromas of red-black fruits, juicy finish. \$17

2010 Kale Wines Syrah "Alder Springs Vineyard," Mendocino, California: It's cool-climate syrah, so you get brown spice and the snap of cedar atop the tar and composted blue-black fruit. \$45

If your wine store does not carry these wines, ask for one similar in style and [price](#).

Bill St John has been writing and teaching about wine for more than 40 years.