

From James the Sommelier – What is Terroir

‘Wine honors the soul, so honor it with yours’

What is Terroir?

Do you reckon wine has a soul? Interesting. Possibly. Ridiculous. What! I hear you, but bear with me. It's actually not so hard to imagine. Try and think of anything that conveys a subliminal message. Soul, jazz, art, ballet, all express an emotion or thought without actually doing so. The trumpet, the piano, the Mona Lisa, Swan Lake all create an emotive thought within those who experience them which develops into a perception or an idea.

Well, let me change your current perception about wine. The idea of terroir harbours the belief that each wine is unique and distinct based upon the region it is grown in. In other words, “the sum effects of the local environment on the manufacture of the product.” Terroir can be considered on a physical level but also a human level. The famous winner of the 1976 blind Paris Wine Tasting, Warren Winiarski, was quoted as saying ‘without people there is no terroir,’ pretty damning considering that his Californian ‘Stag’s Leap’ beat all that France had to offer.

So why is this in any way important? This whole idea could be deemed a tad academic for something which, on a consumer level, merely provides a catalyst for festivities. Not to wine growers themselves. In Burgundy, for example, *vignerons* (wine growers) believe that they are making Burgundian wine that happens to be Pinot Noir rather than drawing attention to their most famous grape. In France in general, wine labels emphasise the region, vineyard and appellation more than the grape and producer. Even the word ‘*vigneron*’ is translated as wine *grower* rather than wine *maker*!

Terroir Makes All the Difference

I suppose the relevance of this really transpires when the antithesis is mentioned. Areas where terroir is not upheld, nay protected, tend to produce very undifferentiated wines. Modern wines tend to eliminate the influence of terroir with heavy oaking, over-ripened fruit, pigment additives and other controls so that a heavily oaked, over ripened Chardonnay from California, for example, can taste the same as Chardonnay from South Africa, Italy or Australia. A shame, when you realize just what terroir can express in a wine.

Now, this does not span the world over but in areas of the world where terroir does take precedence you can imagine that you are drinking a reflection of their traditions and culture. In keeping with its upper society persona, a terroir-reflective wine acts as an ambassador for its region. Don't worry, you won't be considered a vegetarian vampire but can you now see how it might not be inconceivable that wine could be perceived as having a human nature?

TIPS: Try and notice the difference of various terroir-reflective wines and know that that difference is special!

For more information about wine join our wine classes at That Little Wine Bar, 54 Chow Thye Road,
George Town, Penang

Email thatlittlewinebar@gmail.com for details