



TERROIR AND CRU: AN EXPLORATION

By Steve Heimoff | October 18, 2012

I read this piece on J winery by Richard Paul Hinkle and it got me thinking about those vineyards in California I think show distinctive and consistent terroir. I'll mention a few of them shortly, but first, a discussion.

We've talked about terroir on my blog before, but not for a while. It's always a topic guaranteed to make you think! My definition of terroir is the totality of the physical things that impact the vineyard: climate or weather, soil and drainage, elevation, orientation, wind and light exposure, things like that. These are the "nature" part of the grape, as in "nature and nurture."

The "nurture" part is what the winemaking team brings to the terroir. The viticulturalist does all kinds of things, from trellising to pruning. The enologist has the final stamp on the wine, all those intricate fermentation and aging decisions. Together, these two things—"nature" and "nurture"—comprise what Emile Peynaud, in *The Taste of Wine*, calls "cru":

[Cru] is a complex notion because it combines a whole group of activities that are essentially different: agricultural, in part industrial, always involving processing, and even commerce.. In Bordeaux...the cru...is the wine-producing property, the chateau...The Bordeaux cru...combines the three activities of production, processing and marketing."

[Forgive the ellipses: Professor Peynaud's style of writing demands concision or, at least, his English translation does.]

Because terroir is so intricately wrapped up in the notion of cru, it is possible for a great property to not live up to its potential, due to neglect by its proprietor, or perhaps the inability to properly finance it. It would be a mistake to judge a winery's output inferior in substance: if it is not doing as well as its neighbors, it could be because the terroir is wanting, in some way, but it could also be because the human aspects of cru have been degraded. Over-production of the vines is a common form of degradation of the cru.

On the other hand, a poor terroir cannot be compensated by superior human factors. It is impossible for great wine to come from patches of earth that are simply incapable of producing it, for whatever reason (too hot, too cold, poor drainage, etc.).

Most of the wine I review is merely good, ordinary stuff. It's impossible to know exactly why a \$75 Napa Valley Cabernet earns only 87 points instead of 97. It could be that the terroir is not superior. It could be due to failures in the cru or human aspects. It could be a combination of both. A critic cannot know these things without undertaking a comprehensive survey of that property, which obviously is impossible in every case.

What is possible, however, and delightful as well, is to study that handful of vineyards that out-perform on a consistent basis. Vintage after vintage they offer the greatest wines. In these cases, we have to conclude that both the terroir and the cru are working in perfect harmony and at the highest levels. This is the happiest circumstance in winedom, because it represents the pinnacles toward which all other wines, *from that region*, should aspire. (*“From that region”* is in italics, because it would be absurd to say of a Burgundy Pinot Noir that it should aspire to be a Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir. And vice versa. Nor does this mean that every Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir should aspire to be, say, a Failla. But every Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir should aspire to be a great Sonoma Coast Pinot Noir.)

I'll mention just a few of the vineyards that, in my opinion, bring together this fortunate union of terroir and cru. In the Russian River Valley is Williams Selyem's Estate [formerly Litton Estate] Vineyard. We know from history that this stretch of Westside Road, in the so-called Middle Reach of the valley, is one of the great places to grow Pinot Noir in the New World. It seems to be a combination of the cool, foggy nights and mornings that preserve vital acidity, the days that are so reliably sunny and even warm after the fog burns off by mid-morning, and some quality of the soil, which is very stony. I think also that the vineyard's location, on slightly sloping ground midway between the higher hills and the sands along the river's bank, plays a key role. One has to assume, as well, that winemaker Bob Cabral understands his fruit intimately, and owner John Dyson is prepared to make the necessary investments. That is a true coming-together of terroir and cru.

Another great vineyard for Pinot Noir (as well as other varieties) is **Bien Nacido**, in the Santa Maria Valley. The overall conditions are of a cool climate, with the valley's well-known transverse orientation bringing chill and overcast moisture in directly from the ocean every night. Here again we have a situation wherein the fog burns off by mid-morning with the reliability of a clock; nor do the daytime temperatures get as warm as, say, in the Middle Reach. **Bien Nacido also is famous for the quality of its viticulture.** Dozens of wineries buy grapes from the vineyard. Not all are entirely successful. Not all have access to the best blocks, for Bien Nacido is a very big vineyard. Not all bring the most creative cru to the wine's production. But a Bien Nacido Pinot Noir always is a compelling wine and, more often than not, a great one. Here again, we have the fusion of “nature” and “nurture” it takes to make unforgettable wine.

The best wine book to write in California would be one exploring the state's greatest wines through the lens of terroir and cru, including the person of the winemaker. Winemakers often say modestly that the wine is made in the vineyard and all they do is accompany it on its journey to the bottle. That's true in one sense but false in another. Such a book also would explore Prof. Peynaud's seemingly strange remark that “marketing” is part of the cru. What can this possibly mean? I may write that book someday.