

Max allen writes about wine:

“PIETY VERSUS TERROIR”

Which has the more profound effect on a wine's character - the soil and climate in which the grapes are grown, or its maker's moral fibre?

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TERROIR, according to Malcolm Gluck in his new book, *Brave New World*, is twaddle. Well, I'm sorry, Malcolm, but I just don't agree.

Yes, using terroir as an excuse for inferior wine or merely to justify high prices is deplorable and should be exposed. And yes, in many cases, the French appellation controlee laws are indeed a 'superb wheeze to protect real estate values and maintain a bureaucratic stranglehold.'

But to *completely* dismiss terroir as 'utter fanciful poppycock' is surely throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Malcolm describes 'terroirists' as 'gullible fools (who) lap up this nonsense because they are dazzled by romantic notions ... instead of the evidence of what is under their noses. What else,' he asks, 'is required to make a judgement about a wine than that it is tasted?'

What indeed? And as far as I'm concerned, the last fifteen years' tasting from vats, barrels and bottles across this wide brown land has provided ample evidence that terroir is very much a reality here in Australia.

Of course there is plenty of marketing mendacity and hollow hyperbole in this industry just as there is elsewhere in the New and Old Worlds. But there are also countless examples of deliciously discernible differences in flavour, texture and quality derived from real variations in vineyard conditions.

Take the Hunter Valley. Grow a few rows of semillon side by side in the same vineyard, half the vines in sandy old riverbed country, half on the neighbouring red soil outcrops (a combination of soil types which is found right across the valley). Now, make the wines from each patch of dirt identically, and you'll taste the differences

immediately: the sandy-soil fruit makes wines that are leaner, tighter, longer-lasting, more profound - better, in a word.

How do I know? Because I've tasted the differences, time and time again, in bottle after bottle after bottle, in blind tasting after blind tasting.

Another famous example is Jeff Grosset's Watervale and Polish Hill rieslings - the former from red soils over limestone in middle of the Clare Valley, the latter from cooler, slatey soils to the east. I put these wines in blind tastings when the new vintages are released every year, and consistently the Watervale comes across as more fruity, more limey, more immediate, while the Polish Hill is tighter, more tightly coiled, minerally (I even wrote 'slatey' after tasting the 2006).

In his book, Malcolm describes the wines in similar terms, even compares the two to rieslings from the Rheingau and Nahe respectively, but then, bizarrely, says he believes the key to their unique quality is Grosset's personality ('piety and controlled vigour') rather than the distinct terroirs of the two vineyard areas. Personally, I find it easier to comprehend how soil and climate can have a more dramatic effect on grape composition than a winemaker's moral fibre.

Here's an even more specific example of Australian terroir. Sandro Mosele makes three single block pinot noirs from the Kooyong vineyard on the Mornington Peninsula. The blocks are only a few metres apart - and yet, again, they repeatedly, vintage after vintage, display their provenance in my blind tastings: the Meres (from a patch of vines surrounded by small dams which act as a moderating influence during the growing season) is the prettiest, lightest, with red fruit and, despite good length, the least complexity; the Ferrous (from vines planted in soil that's full of ironstone, which reduces plant vigour and results in smaller, more concentrated grapes) is darker, more black-fruity, more chewy; and the Haven (from the most sheltered patch of vines) is the most complex, floral and fruity, hedgerow-berry-flavoured, more structured.

Yes, that these pinots are all excellent has a great deal to do with the fact that they were made by a very talented, fastidious, imaginative bloke who knows how to get the best from his fruit - and who would, no doubt, be a jolly amiable luncheon companion for Malcolm the next time he's in Australia. But ultimately, the quality and uniqueness of what Sandro - and Jeff - make comes from the place where the grapes were grown. You can't have one without the other.

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