

@ THE WINERY

TERROIR

You have probably heard of the term '*terroir*', but what does it mean and is it important?

It comes from the French word *terre* ('land') and can be very loosely translated as 'a sense of place'. *Terroir* is used to denote the special characteristics that a particular vineyard or region has - climate, soil, topography and viticulture practices.

Traditionally in France there was a belief that the role of a winemaker was to bring out the expression of a wine's *terroir*. The French word for winemaker, *vigneron*, is more aptly translated to 'wine-grower' rather than to 'wine-maker'.

The whole French 'appellation' labelling system emphasizes the region and vineyard much more prominently than the grape variety. A wine from one side of the road could be much less expensive than one from the other side of the road, simply because it was 10 metres outside the region's boundary.

These days, although the French 'appellation' system is still used it has become less important and France, as part of the EU, is moving more toward the way Australia and other 'New World' producers label wines - by variety (mandatory), then region (optional).

So is there any real place for *terroir* in modern winemaking?

Some examples will put it into perspective. Two ultra-premium Australian Shiraz wines are Henschke 'Hill of Grace' and Penfolds 'Grange'. 'Hill of Grace' is made from grapes harvested from a single vineyard, but 'Grange' is a blend of wines from various vineyards.

The 'Hill of Grace' wines will vary from year to year, depending on the season in that vineyard. The 'Grange' winemakers on the other hand believe they can produce the best wine by having the choice of grapes from a range of vineyards. Two different approaches and both equally valid.

Another example is Tempus Two. This winery does not have any vineyards at all, nor do they buy grapes just from their own region. As they say themselves, 'sourcing the best fruit from around the country'. This approach is fine as well, but is light years from the original French concept of *terroir*.

So the conclusion is yes, *terroir* is an important element in growing quality grapes and 'great wines come from great vineyards'. There are over sixty wine-growing regions in Australia and each of them has a unique *terroir*, often producing varieties with distinct regional characters. But whether the wines are any good is ultimately up to the winemaker.

Warwick Adams

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