

Book Review

Burgundy: The Global Story of Terroir

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Demossier, M. (2020). *Burgundy: The Global Story of Terroir*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn.

The notion of *terroir*, which lies at the core of this book, is a much-debated topic in the world of wine. The critical reaction to Mark A. Matthews's book, *Terroir and Other Myths of Winegrowing* (Matthews, 2016), was often fierce and demonstrated how devoted some wine writers are to the notion. It has a centuries-long history in France as a belief that specific places produced characteristic styles of art, language, and human personality and it is only recently, from the early 1900s, that terroir has been focused so closely on wine and has come to refer to the effects on wine of the environment in which grapes grow.

Definitions of terroir vary, but all include climate and mesoclimate, the exposure of the vineyard, and soil structure. Many definitions of terroir give emphasis to vineyard rocks and soils – limestone, slate, volcanic soils, and so on – which are claimed to exert a direct influence on wine style, including weight, texture, and acidity level. Some definitions of terroir include the human contribution to wine, such as the history of viticulture in a particular location or prevailing winemaking techniques.

Burgundy was the first major wine region to be associated with terroir, thanks to the work of its wine industry's leaders, generation after generation, constructing and reinforcing identities for the region and its wines that are inseparable from terroir. Burgundy is a complicated region with more than a hundred appellations covering not only generic Bourgogne wines but many small villages, each of which has a signature style of pinot noir and/or chardonnay. The variations are said to reflect the specific terroir of each village and its individual *climats* (small parcels of vines), the history of viticulture there, and the work of its *vignerons* – which originally referred to small-scale producers who tended their vines and made wine for a living. Religion is an important part of the mix – adding a spiritual dimension to the terroir story – because for centuries, until the French Revolution, most of Burgundy's vineyards were owned by religious orders and other Church entities.

This longer history of terroir in Burgundy is the backdrop to Marion Demossier's excellent study, which focuses on the early 2000s. It was clearly animated by the 2015 application to have Burgundy's vineyards and terroir given World Heritage status by UNESCO – an application in which Demossier participated as a consultant. Her account of the process occupies the last chapter of this book, but her work on the application (which was successful and includes the vineyards on the slopes between Dijon and Beaune as well as Beaune itself and the historic centre of Dijon) seems to have driven much of the research for the book. Terroir is clearly central to the book as the retitling of the second edition suggests: 'terroir' was absent from the title of the first edition (2018), and it would be interesting to know what motivated the change.

Demossier has effectively applied her skills as an anthropologist to deconstruct Burgundian terroir and its associated notions of authenticity and traditions. She writes,

“The Burgundy terroir story has never been altered radically, it is about history, God – or the monks – and the goodness of the soil. These ingredients form part of the social reconstruction of authenticity and the reinvention of tradition....” (Page 55)

As she suggests, the narrative of terroir in Burgundy mounted for the UNESCO application stressed continuity over rupture and projected the needs of the present to the past.

Demossier demonstrates how the narrative was originally constructed by the elites in Burgundy’s wine industry but over time it was reinforced by local wine societies and by outsiders such as non-French wine writers who readily took on board the image of Burgundy wine that the region’s leaders promoted. The enterprise assumed a global dimension as the primacy of Burgundy’s wines, in terms of quality and authenticity, was so universally acknowledged that producers of pinot noir and chardonnay throughout the world claimed to be making their wines in a ‘Burgundian style’. The local became the global.

The ‘global’ part of the book’s title takes the form of an examination of the ways in which terroir and its associated notions have been received in Japan and New Zealand. The latter is a particularly interesting study, based on Demossier’s fieldwork among the winemakers of Central Otago, a relatively new wine region now well known for its pinot noir wines. Here the notion of terroir is alive and well, and producers have free rein to grow grapes and make wine unhampered by the restrictions imposed on Burgundy’s producers by appellation laws.

Burgundy: The Global Story of Terroir is a fascinating exercise in probing scholarship and common sense. Demossier has excavated the modalities and strategies of terroir-thought and has brought the lessons of her target region, Burgundy, to bear on the wider world of wine. In doing so she has shown how the Burgundian notion of terroir was adopted and adapted so that the notion of wines’ having ‘a sense of place’ (code for terroir) has now become a mantra throughout the wine world.

How long this phase will last is a matter of conjecture, with the basics of terroir being questioned by soil scientists such as Mark Matthews and Alex Maltman – the latter in *Vineyards, Rocks, and Soils: The Wine Lover’s Guide to Geology* (Maltman, 2018) – and by historians such as Joseph Bohling – in *The Sober Revolution: Appellation Wine and the Transformation of France* (Bohling, 2018). These two titles were published after Demossier’s book was complete and they indicate just how relevant and dynamic Demossier’s subject is. For her painstaking analysis of the pivotal part Burgundy has played in the persistence, endurance, and global spread of the notion of terroir, we are indebted to her.

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