

TERROIR

Today I want to explore what terroir is, the history of terroir, the components of it and how it may affect the crops we grow. Other factors include can we possibly influence terroir in our gardens here in New Mexico.

Definition: What does terroir mean literally in french?

Land

“Terroir” pronounced *ter wahr*, is a French word that signifies the natural conditions like soil composition, elevation, sun exposure, climate, and other unique characteristics.

It was originally applied to French wines. But it doesn’t have to stop at wine. This can apply to other things like cheese—for instance the soft gooey cheese called Brie comes from the area of Brie France and Camembert cheese comes from the Normandy region of France. They both use cow’s milk and one difference is Camembert cheese has about 65% fat in it while Brie has 45% fat.

History

It began with wine, and like so many wine-related things, Over the generations, we learned more and more about how these conditions — the climate, the soil type, the elevation — shaped the resulting wines.

The concept of terroir developed over the centuries as the Benedictine monks started observing the unique characteristics of their vineyard (called microclimate.)

They noticed the distinct flavors of the wines made from the same grape variety but in different regions and started using the term to define the unique characteristics of the soils.

It is said that the monks even went as far as to taste the soils and determine if the microbes were favorable for the grapes.

Over time, with these observations, wineries started labeling their wines according to the area of production, giving rise to the appellation system.

Terroir And what is The Appellation System?

The appellation system distinguishes the unique terroir of the different wine regions

What is the difference between AOC and appellation?

AOC – Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée – is a French label

AOP – Appellation d’origine Protégée – is European label.

But both refer to the set of rules a wine needs to comply with in order to be labelled after a given appellation in France. Terroir was used as a way to account for the place-ness of a particular wine. In other words, the many conditions at play that make [Champagne](#) uniquely Champagne and [Burgundy](#) uniquely Burgundy. Over the generations, we learned more and more about how these conditions — the climate, the soil type, the elevation — shaped the resulting wines.

Appellation systems, such as the French AOC systems, have developed around the concepts of "unique wines from a unique area". These systems have also developed into protected designation of origin across the European Union so that, for example, winemakers from outside a region like Tuscany cannot produce a Sangiovese wine and call it a Chianti. While the wine may be made from the same clonal variety of Sangiovese grapes, in the same soil composition as found in the Chianti region with winemakers using the Tuscan method of production, there is an assumption that the two wines will be different due to terroir.

Hatch Chiles are another example for me closer to home. If I grow a Hatch green chile here in New Mexico, it will have certain attributes. If you grow the same chile in say New York, it won't taste the same. We have very different soils than in NY and different climates, water, etc. Also if I grow it in southern NM or Northern NM it will be different.

Different people have different ideas on what elements constitute *terroir*. *Terroir* includes the following four major components of terroir—climate, soil, terrain or topography and organisms in the soil. Let's break it down:

1. Climate

Climate: both macroclimate (average temperature, amount of rainfall and sunlight in a general area) and microclimate which refers to the climate of a particular site.

A wine region with a warm climate during the growing season produces grapes with high sugar levels, resulting in high alcohol wines. Wine grapes grown in cooler climates are more acidic.

New World wine regions are usually warmer than Old World wine regions. That's why Cabernet Sauvignon. Most think of terroir as it relates to the land and weather, but those are very large categories as land includes soil, altitude, slope, drainage, orientation, etc. while weather includes both macro and microclimates, temperature, moisture, seasonal timing

Another example, wines from Medoc (Bordeaux) are more acidic than the Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon. The quality of each vintage also depends on factors like distance from the sea, sunlight exposure, precipitation, and more.

2. Soil

Soil: its physical and chemical composition, depth, texture, layering, origin

The unique soil composition of a vineyard adds complex flavors to the wine and affects its tannin and minerality due to the organic sulfur compounds in it.

3. Terrain or Topography

The region's terrain (the elevation and steepness of the vineyard) plays a vital role in the ripening of wine grapes.

The higher the elevation, the cooler the climate, and the higher the sun exposure and the acidity of the grape.

4. Organisms In the garden

Local flora and fauna: aromatic compounds of the surrounding contributing to the overall taste profile. Different strains of yeasts yield specific and distinctive flavours that also influence the aromatic profile especially in wines

Flora and fauna (including microbes) of the region also affect the ripening periods and concentration of the flavors.

I want to include a 5th component

5. Agricultural Practices or human factors

It relates to agricultural approach, which also includes the farming practices as well, including pruning, cultivation, irrigation, and anything else that is done by the farmer while growing the crop

How a garden is farmed and cared for can have a dramatic impact on the terroir of the site. While people have little control over the weather, they have much control over what they put into and take out of the soil.

Farmers who use chemicals such as pesticides and herbicides may have more disease-free plants, but as these chemicals leach into the ground they can also inadvertently harm or kill beneficial animals and organisms that are vital to the ecosystem. This can lead to dead soils that don't have enough nutrients or oxygen for the vine to thrive.

Farmers who work organically, preserve our area's incredible biodiversity, making for healthier plants that produce clean fruit year after year. These stewards of the land use organic compounds like manure or compost to ensure the vine has the nutrients it needs and natural methods to control pests and weeds.

How this applies to your own garden

Plants don't grow the same in every garden. How they grow depends on your **Garden Terroir**. It also affects the yield you get, the flavor of the crop and much more.

Though the altitude, temperature, and precipitation may be the same in both your garden and your neighbor's, the produce that is harvested will have different flavor profiles. The amount of sunlight and the soil type will affect the taste of your produce. Now we can't plan for the amount of sunlight or rain our plants receive, or the altitude of your garden, or the climate in your area, all terroir components. However, there is one variable that you can control. The quality of your soil. Planting your produce in a higher quality soil will give the fruits and vegetables a very rich flavor. Your neighbors will all be wondering what makes your fruits and vegetables taste so much better than theirs.