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Terroir

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Abstract

Terroir is a French word that means land or soil but carries a strong cultural and anthropological significance. It is commonly related to the French identity and its wine-producing territories but has drifted towards other cultural contexts. Terroir was originally understood and applied to the production and consumption of wine but it is now used to refer to the terrain, climate, geology, and sociocultural conditions that impart special characteristics to a diverse range of food and drink products. Marketing could reduce the concept to a mere advertising label, or just use it in storytelling promotional claims, but terroir cannot be limited to a simple commercial perspective. Although physical conditions are important, terroir is, also, a social and communicative construction, a product of the interaction between communities and stakeholders and their desire to explain important intangible values of product and place.

Introduction

Terroir is a French word with strong cultural resonances, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to translate it into other languages. Therefore, in different languages the original word *terroir* is often used. In short, it means land, earth (*terre*), soil, but more broadly it refers to the conditions under which specific foods or drinks are produced in places which confer upon them particular characteristics that consumers should be able to appreciate. Terroir is traditionally applied to vineyards and wine and the Cambridge Dictionary (2023) defines it as “the special character that a wine is thought to get from the particular place where the grapes were grown to make it”.

The concept originated in the Middle Ages and historical readings attached the notion to French identity (Parker, 2015). Before being considered a valuable label to market wine and promote food product origins, it had a pejorative meaning, expressing the “earth taste” of local and poor-quality wines (Matthews, 2015). However, the development of specific regions like Champagne and promotional storytelling around the product (Guy, 2003), contributed to current understandings of the notion.

Current issues

There are diverse approaches to defining terroir, but there is consensus that both physical and sociocultural aspects of wine and food production need to be considered. Although some orthodox understandings can be reluctant to see its application outside the wine industry or the French context, in practice, there is a growing use of terroir applied to a diversity of food products, in different cultural and geographical contexts.

One influential work in the geological and oenological study of the French terroir was by James E. Wilson (1998). Agronomic and viticultural elements are of relevance and, for a long time, some researchers have remarked on the importance of soils, climate, mineral supply, or geological elements (e.g. Falcetti, 1994; van Leeuwen et al., 2018), although others emphasise ripening conditions and water availability for the plants, rather than the minerality of soils (e.g. Meinert, 2018).

For marketing purposes, terroir is considered as differentiating a product, communicating authenticity, or attaching food to a genuine place of production; here we find interconnections with the notions of geographical indications. This can provide opportunities for raising prices, an added value that can be transferred (but not necessarily) to primary producers. In this sense, terroir can be seen as an elitist, gourmet device to which only wealthy consumers could have access. It can also drive the reduction of terroir as part of place branding strategies. However, although the relationship between terroir and market rationales can be highlighted, cultural and geographical complexities play a role in its constitution. Here, Charters (2006) remarks that place marketing is just one of the elements in the definition of terroir, among others like viticultural environment or place as identity.

Socio-cultural, anthropological, and geographical perspectives on terroir stress the importance of human factors and the sociological construction of terroir (Moran, 2001; Demossier, 2011; Unwin, 2012). “People are responsible for the idea of terroir”, remarks Warren Moran (2006:1), reflecting on the human factors attached to the concept. Here, the cultural and sociological nature of terroir has a preeminence over physical conditions. As such, its socially constructed value can be an important part of the contribution of

speciality foods and drinks to rural development strategies (Prévost et al., 2014) which utilise ideas of gastronomy and may be linked to the promotion of ‘alternative’ food networks. Finally, terroir can be also considered a communicative object social interaction, so it would require a “will for terroir” from producers to consumers (Castelló, 2021). This idea implies a need for individuals, rural communities, and institutional agents to believe in and positively promote a collective idea of terroir as commons, as a collective good.

Future concerns

Because terroir is such a complex and multifaceted concept, it is used and manipulated in many different sectors with diverse purposes. One concern from marketing studies revolves around ‘terroir awareness’, or how consumers appreciate terroir in products and whether this could influence their purchase decisions. Terroir risks being reduced to marketing, using storytelling tools to increase value and justify higher prices. Another growing issue is related to better translation of the market value of terroir to local communities and rural areas, thus promoting rural development. Intermediaries and supply chain complexities can mean that the efforts put in by communities and small producers in the construction of terroir go unrewarded. Here there is the peril of the commodification of terroir or its appropriation under straightforward unidimensional marketings premises. The frictions between environmental sustainability and market, production systems – intensive vs extensive – and food quality, and distribution and supply chain complexities are shaping the current understandings of terroir. In that sense, and in a similar way to what can happen with geographical indications and other food labels, a more culturally embedded and commonly understood notion of terroir is needed

at all levels. Overall, terroir can be a valuable sociocultural object which generates a return for rural communities, or it can become another advertising device put to the service of consumerism and the global markets.

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Further reading

Trubek, A.B. (2008) *The Taste of Place: A Cultural Journey into Terroir*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.

This book offers a cultural approach to the term and provides a grounded analysis to food and cultural debates and the links between taste and place. It is an entertaining and, at the same time, scholarly insightful discussion around food, culinary issues, and terroir realities.

Patterson, T. and Buechsenstein, J. (2018) *Wine and Place: A Terroir Reader*. Oakland (CA): University of California Press.

This book examines the pros and cons of the concept of wine terroir. Not necessarily addressed to an academic public, the authors propose a “definitive definition” with ten influential elements “that shape terroir”: soil, site, climate, weather (seasons, etc.), inputs (irrigation, etc.), the human element, biotics, grapevine (varieties, etc.), yeast and wine (as expressed in flavour).