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Translating terroir into wine

«Terroir» is considered to be the primary aspect differentiating quality wine from mass-produced bottlings. But what does it imply and how can Ningxia learn from the experience of world-class wine regions around the world? Bernard Burtschy offered his definitions of terroir.

"Terroir is everywhere, it is in vogue", he exclaimed as a preamble to his interpretation of the often elusive characteristics that separate the wheat from the chaff of the wine world. Seeking to dispel dismissals of the concept by the likes of economic professors Gergaud and Ginsburg, he did, though, define the boundaries of terroir as being beyond natural attributes. "Joseph Krug said that healthy grapes, good barrels, a good cellar and a good cellar guy are what make a great Champagne", he quipped, adding that "for a long time, Petrus was unknown, only Madame Loubat discovered how to make it". As knowledge and techniques have evolved down the centuries, the ability to make good wine is now within the grasp of many regions around the world, and allows producers to tap into 97% of the market. The capacity to access the realms of the great wines, however, involves adapting the vine to the soil; use of massal selection and native yeast but not irrigation or wine correction methods; a curb on yields, and biodynamic farming. "Yeast is the translation of terroir, so it needs to be native", he claimed, adding how biodynamics have a proven ability to enhance sense of place, as witnessed at such iconic estates as Burgundy's Domaine de la Romanée Conti. The choice of varietals, too, plays a pivotal role, as some cultivars such as Riesling, Pinot noir and Syrah, are strong terroir translators, whilst others are not.

A mystery to be solved

These assertions have been ascertained over time – "as Baron de Rothschild once said, making a great wine is not a problem, only the first 300 years are difficult!" But terroir expression remains shrouded in mystery. "Saint-Emilion with its limestone is a terroir for white grapes, so why does it produce elegant reds?" questioned the celebrated French wine critic. Part of the answer is to be found in the actual make-up of the soils. "PH or soil acidity is essential, it changes the flavour profile of the wines and is the first thing that needs to be understood about the soils in China". Soils produce a reverse reaction in the wines: acid soils make wines that are less acidic – hence the need to acidify wines in Ningxia – whilst neutral or alkaline soils yield wines that are intensely acidic. And soil acidity also modifies the way nutrients are assimilated, which is of paramount importance in the case of poor soils. Over time, regions have learnt to overcome certain stumbling blocks through choice of varietals and winemaking techniques: "Bordeaux has very homogenous soils, so it achieves differentiation through its varietal combinations and blending, whereas Burgundy has very different soils, and can achieve differentiation with the same grapes". Climate change – both past and present – can alter parameters and human trial and error can produce unexpected results. "If you listened to the recommendations of Davis University in California, Burgundy wouldn't exist!" These encouraging words will certainly not have fallen on deaf ears amongst Ningxia's wine industry representatives...