

The Geography of Flavor

Bringing a European Idea Down to Earth: Producers, Farmers Pin Hopes on the Appeal of 'Terroir'

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It was a risky move back in 2004 for Arlin Wasserman to launch his Minneapolis consultancy, Changing Tastes. His expertise: the esoteric concept of "terroir," a French term that literally translates as terrain but has come to mean the way foods and wine express the soil, climate, culture and tradition of a region. His proposition: show farmers and manufacturers how to sell food based not on price, but on where it comes from and how it is grown.

Americans are familiar with Vidalia onions, Idaho potatoes and Florida oranges. But even in gourmet circles, "people didn't know what 'terroir' meant," Wasserman recalled. "So we had to start to use words that made sense to businesses, like 'identity preservation' or 'geographic identity.' "

Google didn't seem to know what Wasserman was talking about, either. Back then, a search for the term "terroir" turned up almost no results, prompting the search engine to ask whether users had misspelled "terror."

Three years later, Wasserman has a growing roster of clients, from General Mills to a co-op of Amish goat and lamb farmers, as well as a group of Minnesota artisans with a line of charcuterie, preserves and wild rice dishes in the works. Similar projects are taking shape across the country. On Lummi Island, off the coast of Washington, salmon fishermen have formed a co-op to sell local sockeye salmon caught in reef nets, a traditional Native American method. Researchers in Iowa have done feasibility studies on bringing back the Muscatine melon (see "Certified Levels of Terroir," Page F6), a variety of cantaloupe that owes its juicy fragrance to the sandy soil on the banks of the Mississippi, and I-80 beef, ultra-marbled steaks from the northwest corner of the state.

Terroir may sound like just another opportunity for elite gourmets to one-up one another at dinner parties. But Wasserman is at the cutting edge of a new trend to bring the concept into everyday conversation and into the neighborhood grocery store.

Terroir has the potential to promote a variety of interests in ways that simple origin labeling, as with Vidalia onions, can't. Farmers believe that the focus on growing conditions and production methods will make their products stand out in a market where low prices reign supreme. Economists see terroir as a device to help restore and protect rural communities; if farmers can earn more money, they're more likely to stay on the land. Others believe that promoting terroir could help quell fears about food safety.

The one group that has yet to embrace the concept, however, is the American consumer. Just say terroir (pronounced tare-WAHR) and, even at Whole Foods Market, you're likely to get a blank stare. "Where it comes from doesn't fit into how we think about food," said Amy Trubek, a University of Vermont professor of anthropology and author of the upcoming book "The Taste of Place: Food, Culture and the Pleasures of Terroir."

That's not the case in Europe, where consumers understand that champagne owes its finesse to double fermentation of the wine and the cool climate of the Champagne region of France. Much of the credit goes to European governments, which have stepped up to define, and protect, unique growing areas.

The first protected region in Europe dates to 1855, when Napoleon III established the Grand Crus areas of Bordeaux. Later, other wine regions were recognized, as were areas of traditional food production, such as Parma, which produces prosciutto, and Modena, which is famed for its balsamic vinegar. In 1992, the European Union introduced regulations to protect these so-called designations of origin. Over the past 15 years, the E.U. has identified 746 place-based foods.

Such traditions, and the bureaucracies that protect them, were never established in America. Indeed, the U.S. government remains locked in a battle with the E.U. over its demand that American producers refrain from using product names such as "feta," which by E.U. law is made only in Greece, and "champagne."

"We went to the Industrialized Age almost immediately," Trubek said. "We never had cute little towns with wine-and-cheese traditions. The American experience is all about expansion, to make it bigger, to keep moving."

Two hundred years later, an unlikely coalition is joining forces to invent American tradition by linking foods to the places they come from and, like American winemakers before them, to romance. Their hope is to offer a counterbalance to the commodity mentality that a strawberry from California is interchangeable with one grown in Florida.

Studies show that the strategy can be profitable. According to a May 2004 survey conducted by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University, 56 percent of respondents were willing to pay at least 10 percent more for a place-based food, or "produit du terroir." The survey also revealed that 65 percent of respondents preferred products that would give farmers a higher percentage of profits than processors, distributors and retailers.

The theory has borne out for fishermen on Lummi Island. Five years ago, they formed a co-op and agreed to catch salmon with reef nets. The contraptions, a modernized version of a Native American invention, consist of an artificial underwater reef made of plastic ribbons. Fishermen stand on tall towers above the water and watch for salmon to swim into the reef, then pull up the nets, spilling the fish into an underwater pen in the boat's center. The fish are then moved into a separate tank, where their gills are cut and they swim slowly to their deaths.

It sounds cruel, but Lummi Island fishermen claim it's far less stressful than contemporary methods in which fish die full of adrenaline, struggling for breath on the deck of a commercial fishing vessel. "Reef-net fish have this amazing flavor," co-op member Ian Kirouac said. "We wanted to identify ourselves with a strong sense of place. There's a big difference between what we do and what other people do. "

By advertising their technique and the place of origin, this Lummi Island co-op has been able to command a premium for its fish, both from retailers and restaurant clients. Commodity sockeye salmon sell for about \$3.25 a pound wholesale, while Lummi Island's fetch as much as \$5.25 per pound.

Across the country, Vermont maple syrup producers are exploring how terroir can make their product stand out in a crowded marketplace. Led by Trubek, a team of researchers initiated a program in 2006 to test whether a syrup made from trees sitting on limestone bedrock has a flavor distinctly different from syrup made from trees growing on shale or schist. The researchers have yet to report on their findings, but the Vermont Department of Agriculture is paying close attention.

Cheaper Canadian syrups are now widely available. Many are made using reverse-osmosis technology that drastically reduces the amount of time the syrup needs to be boiled. The result, said Henry Markres, the agency's chief of consumer protection and official maple specialist, is that they taste simply sweet rather than maple-y. "People used to just accept that Vermont maple syrup was the best in the world," Markres said. "Anything we can do to quantify the uniqueness of Vermont will help."

Rural economists looking for alternatives to commodity crops for Midwestern farmers have watched such projects with interest and have conducted research to determine which heartland foods might have broad appeal. For example, researchers at Iowa State University assessed the potential for I-80 beef, terroir-based corn-fed beef from the ranches along Interstate 80, in answer to Japanese customers' clamoring for juicier, more marbled steaks. The project established such feeding standards

as a minimum of 180 days on a diet of corn and documented how ranchers could distribute the product and protect the brand.

The project hasn't taken off -- yet. Spurred by fears of mad cow disease, Japan banned imports of American beef a second time in January. "The ideas of what could be profitable shifted," said Rich Pirog, associate director of Iowa State's Leopold Center. "Terroir is a harder sell here than it was a few years ago."

Still, Pirog thinks the concept will slowly become a part of the Midwest's agricultural landscape. Agritourism gives the concept a boost; if you taste a great farmstead cheese in Wisconsin, you're likely to seek it out back at home.

Concerns about food safety will be a motivating factor, too. "There is a demand from consumers who want to know where their food comes from. Place-based foods offer that kind of transparency," Pirog said.

The final driver, ironically, is globalization. "Our farmers are competing in a global market, and everyone else is using the concept to their advantage," said Gary Nabhan, co-founder of Slow Food's Renewing America's Food Tradition program. He cited the success of French cheesemakers, Mexican tequila distillers and Egyptian date and olive growers.

Even here at home: In May, Napa and the Napa Valley became the first American wine regions to be recognized by the E.U.

Certified Levels of Terroir

The original French term "gout du terroir" translates as the "taste of place." That idea, shortened to just "terroir," includes a complex set of variables: the climate, the soil, the way the product is grown or made, culture and tradition. As a result, the term means different things to different people. To some, it's as simple as a food or wine that hails from a specific region. To others, it requires that the products be made using high standards or traditional methods.

The European Union identifies three kinds of terroir for wines, olive oils, butters, cheeses, meats, honeys and breads:

- Protected Designation of Origin products, or PDOs, such as pecorino Romano cheese and kalamata olives, are associated with a specific location and made in a traditional way.
- Protected Geographic Indication products, or PGIs, such as Alsatian honey and bresaola (air-dried beef), have a geographic connection for at least one stage of production but not all.
- Traditional Specialty Guaranteed products, or TSGs, such as mozzarella cheese and lambic beers, have traditional ingredients or production methods but are not linked to a specific region.

The closest the United States has come to sanctioning the concept is what's known as a certification mark, a sort of Department of Agriculture trademark that identifies the product's origin but makes no mention of tradition or standards. Vidalia onions have a certification mark that ensures that no one outside 20 counties in Georgia is permitted to sell onions as Vidalias.

In the future, U.S. advocates of terroir hope to use certification marks to help define regional foods. Researchers at Iowa State University have examined the potential of the Muscatine melon, which has been grown on the sandy banks of the Mississippi River for 150 years. Researchers believe the region's coarse, glacial soil and extended warm growing season produce a juicy, intensely flavored cantaloupe. They are also examining traditional products including sorghum syrup, rhubarb wine and black walnuts.