

# THE Terroirist's DEBATE

DIGGING IN: UNIQUE  
TERROIR & ITS EFFECT  
ON WINE STYLES

by Jonathan Cristaldi and Diane Denham  
photos by Alexander Rubin

The hottest day on record fell on the summer solstice—June 20—as a packed room of buyers from the San Francisco Bay Area converged on The Napa Valley Wine Academy in downtown Napa. Though the energy was electric, the room was cool, but as *The Somm Journal's* second “Digging In: Unique Terroir & Its Effect on Wine Styles” seminar got underway, things began to heat up.

“Is the concept of terroir really just a myth? Are differences in wine styles only the results of bacteria and flavors imparted by different yeasts?” These are just a few of the questions raised by Peter Marks, Master of Wine, who moderated the event in a casual, confident manner, over four hours of discussion with nine panelists, representing wines from around the globe.

*Peter Marks, MW, moderated the event, shown here with Lisa Brown of Boisset Collection.*





Vittorio Marzotto, family member of importer Santa Margherita USA.

## ITALY: Alto Adige and Chianti Classico

The first of two wines, presented by Vittorio Marzotto, representing his family's Santa Margherita USA division, was the **Kettmeir 2014 Müller Thurgau, Alto Adige, Italy** (\$20). Marzotto wanted to showcase a variety specifically developed to compensate for the shorter growing season in high-altitude and -latitude regions like Alto Adige. Müller Thurgau marries the aromatics and acidity of Riesling with the earlier ripening characteristic of Silvaner; but, he explained, earlier ripening can result in underdeveloped aromatics. So, unlike normal white wine fermentation, which immediately separates juice from skins, Alto Adige grapes often undergo nitrogen submersion for a couple of hours to tease out the aromatics.

Still, "it's always about the land," said Marzotto, responding to Marks' question about human intervention with respect to terroir: "The winemaker's job," he said, "is to preserve what's in the vineyards."

As an example, he described the "deferred fermentation" employed at his family's Lamole estate in Chianti Classico to tame Sangiovese's tannins. "First, it's important that we identified two Sangiovese clones well-suited to the soils and altitude of Lamole's vineyards. In the winery, deferred fermentation requires separating the juice from the skins, then allowing it to ferment separately to six percent alcohol. Afterward, the partially fermented juice is reunited with the skins." Such vineyard and winemaking care showed undeniably in the smooth richness of **Lamole di Lamole 2011 Chianti Classico Gran Selezione "Vigneto Campolungo"** (\$35), which also shows impeccable spiciness with sweet tobacco notes.



## FRANCE: Alsace

The Hugel family, vigneron in Alsace since 1639, would agree that terroir has everything to do with the land. "Grand Cru vineyard expansions haven't set well with traditionalists like the Hugels," said Web Bond of Frederick Wildman and Sons, the U.S. importer for Famille Hugel. "If it wasn't land worthy of a Grand Cru before, they believe it's not worthy now."

Tasting the **Famille Hugel 2009 Riesling Jubilee, Alsace** (\$60), from various family-owned Grand Cru vineyards, Marks noted its complexity and youthfulness. "It's hard to believe this is a 2009," he said, which is the current release as of this printing. "The huge diurnal shifts in temperature give the acidity needed for aging," explained Web. "As for the complexity, chalk that up to Alsace's incredible soil diversity and requisite dry farming, which equates to smaller berries and more intense flavors." Further complexity is derived from natural yeast fermentation, Web noted.

Natural yeast's role in the terroir debate—the "yays" vs. the "nays"—elicited opposing views from some of the panelists. On one side, the Boisset family, whose Burgundy vineyards are farmed biodynamically, encourages yeasts in the winery. Nicole Hitchcock, Winemaker, J Vineyards & Winery, also said she tries to use indigenous yeasts as much as possible, but Stephen Reustle, owner of Reustle Prayer Rock Vineyards in Umpqua Valley, Oregon, sided definitively with the nays.



Web Bond of Frederick Wildman and Sons

Stephen Reustle of  
Umpqua Valley's  
Reustle Winery.



## USA: Umpqua Valley, Oregon

"I'm a scaredy cat," Reustle admitted. "No native yeasts for me, because I want control." However, to add complexity, he used three different yeast strains—fermented separately, then blended—in the sensuous and elegant **Reustle Prayer Rock Vineyards 2013 Winemakers Reserve Syrah** (\$39). Reustle added, "It takes a long time but you can actually determine which clones go best with what yeasts by fermenting separately."

For Reustle, terroir is about soil and climate. While conducting his search for his own potential vineyard sites, he reasoned that different soil types can yield good wines, but well-drained soils became his primary criteria. Armed with three decades of data to determine which varieties to plant—all the while keeping in mind the numerous microclimates of the Umpqua Valley—Reustle began to plant his vineyards.

And though most of Umpqua falls into the Winkler Scale Region IV (i.e. suitable for both Riesling and Merlot), noting Pacific Ocean breezes, and 35 to 45 degree diurnal temperature swings, he planted varieties suitable for ranges III through V, "because there's no such thing as an average year," he said.

## FRANCE: Bourgogne



Three wines presented provided excellent examples of how winemakers often blend different terroirs to achieve a winemaker's vision or a consistent house style. Although the **Domaine de la Vougeraie 2013 Terres de Famille Pinot Noir, Bourgogne** (\$50) from the Boisset Collection's portfolio is from Burgundy—a region that has parsed site-specific terroir like no other—Domaine de la Vougeraie is a blend from several vineyards. "The separate lots are Village level wines, but once blended, the Village appellation can no longer be used," explained Lisa Brown, Boisset

Collections Brand Manager; but noted that Boisset regional wines are treated like Grand Crus. "Regional wines give the first impression of Burgundy, so it's important to make it a good one," Marks agreed. The Pinot Noir did show impressive delicacy and uncommon finesse, "especially since 2013 was a difficult vintage, but this is one of the best Bourgognes Rouges I've ever tasted," he said.

## NEW ZEALAND: Marlborough vs. USA: Napa Valley

On the same topic of vintages, speaking about the **Kim Crawford 2015 Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough** (\$18), imported by Constellation Brands, Marks explained that, "It isn't a mix of vintages, but the winemaker has consistency in mind when making a mélange from seven different Marlborough sub-regions. And you're never far from the ocean anywhere in New Zealand, but the more northern vineyards give you the stone fruit characteristics, while further south you get more of the grapefruit elements and higher acids."

Marks returned the seminar discussion to specificity of site in a comparison between the same variety in the **Kim Crawford 2015 Spitfire Sauvignon Blanc** (\$30) from Marlborough and **Robert Mondavi Winery 2013 Fumé Blanc Reserve, To-Kalon Vineyard** (\$50) from Napa

Valley. "The Spitfire gives you the cool-climate acidity, typical gooseberry aromas and passion fruit and melon on the palate, he said. What you get with the Fumé Blanc is the concentration that comes from vines planted in the 1960s and 1990s. The warmer climate gives creamier sensations than the intense acidity of Marlborough and there's more peach and cantaloupe in the flavors."



## USA: Russian River Valley



Harkening back to the conversation about different yeasts, Nicole Hitchcock of J Vineyards & Winery, which in early 2015 was acquired by E&J Gallo, presented a snapshot of the winemaker as a kind of *terroirista*, tasked with blending together the various ingredients from different appellations, to create a wine that speaks to multiple terroirs.

Hitchcock sees a profound difference in Pinot Noir from the same site, depending upon the yeasts used. The **J Vineyards 2014 Pinot Noir, Russian River Valley, Sonoma (\$40)**—a voluptuous wine bursting with red cherry, strawberry and licorice spice with a round, plush mouthfeel, a burnt-orange-peel finish and zippy acidity to boot—is a complete package, blended together with fruit sourced from four different vineyards in the Russian River Valley AVA.

Hitchcock said that Pinot Noir from their Robert Thomas Vineyard off Westside Road, where it's a bit cooler, with alluvial gravel, clay and loam soils, tends to "impart nice bright acidity."

Further south, Pinot is sourced from Canfield Vineyard is "borderline Sonoma Coast, and an even cooler climate," she explained. "Pinot clones 943, 777 and Pommard are planted on Goldridge soils, and I get leather, cigar box and savory character, with bright acid—profoundly different from the northern parts of the appellation."

Nicole Hitchcock of J Vineyards & Winery.



## PORTUGAL: Douro Valley

Jumping the pond from New World to Old World, Rita Marques, the owner and winemaker of Conceito Vinhos, which is located in Portugal's Douro Valley and is imported by M Imports, LLC, also preached on the importance of distinction within vineyards. Her **Conceito 2012 Red Wine, Douro, Portugal (\$60)** is a field blend of 20 different varieties from vines that are 90 years old, planted in schist soils over 1,300 feet in elevation. It's a complex wine, fruit-driven, with savory spice character, hints of toffee and caramel, chalky and woody tannins and refreshing acidity. "We pick them altogether," said Marques, adding that she prefers not to inoculate but chooses to "ferment with wild yeasts because we believe that if you take care of soils, that's the best way to show your terroir." Marks was enamored by the wine's acidity, and Marques explained that making a wine with great acidity is all about finding the best microclimate, given the size of the Douro.



Rita Marques from Conceito Vinhos.

## PORTUGAL: Southwestern Coast

Choosing to highlight varieties specific to a place, Master Sommelier Brian Cronin, from Palm Bay International, presented the **Jose Maria da Fonseca 2013 Perequita Reserva** (\$15). “Perequita” is a synonym for Castelão, one of Portugal’s many indigenous varieties, and widely planted in the hot, dry, sandy vineyards in the south of the country.

“Because it’s hot as hell there, Portugal only recently started making drinkable dry wines,” Cronin said half-jokingly. “Cooling technology made it possible,” he added. Marks noted that the wine is particularly smooth for such a high-tannin variety. Cronin conceded that apart from terroir, that smoothness is a result of winemaking. “Cold-soaking retains freshness and brings out the fragrance of dried flowers,” so that smooth quality comes from “part new French oak and part the blend of Castelão, Touriga Franca and Touriga Nacional,” said Cronin.

Cronin further added that the soils have a big impact on texture. “Sandy soils give it the mid-palate texture,” he said, “so management of those sandy vineyards is where human intervention on terroir becomes crucial in southern Portugal. “You don’t need to graft because sand obviates the need for grafting, but you do need to manage the stewy characteristics from excessive heat with rootstocks and clones.”



Master Sommelier Brian Cronin from Palm Bay International.



Joseph Herzog of Herzog Wine Cellars/  
Royal Wine Company.

## ISRAEL: Judean Hills

Finally, Joseph Herzog, eight-generation family member from Herzog Wine Cellars and importer Royal Wine Company, presented their estate bottled **Domaine du Castel 2013 Grand Vin, Judean Hills, Jérusalem** (\$65). This blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Petit Verdot, planted in clay soils as high as 2,600 feet, offered mixed red berry notes, rose petals and earth, wild herbs and cedar smoke; it was juicy and plush with powerful tannins, nice acidity.

Herzog noted that Merlot planted in the Judean Hills “will be bigger and more acidic,” than even Cabernet Sauvignon grown in Napa Valley. Discussion then turned to questions about kosher vs. non-kosher wines. Marks asked whether the process to make wines kosher changes the sense of place or terroir? “No,” Herzog said confidently. “A wine that is kosher is handled by someone who observes the Sabbath” and must be made from kosher ingredients—it’s not a factor that impacts terroir. S

## Dig This

*With that, Marks expressed thanks to all participants and offered up the idea that perhaps terroir is a combination of “geography, soil, climate and”—adding, after a pregnant pause, “what you do to the wine.” Coming from a Master, that was the last word.*