

# **Translating Terroir Beyond Burgundy: Authenticity and Exclusivity in Wine Language**

**Weinakademiker Thesis (D7)**  
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## **Motivation**

As a professional translator with a background in literary and legal translation, I am interested in examining the implications of language for communication with wine consumers. Because I am fluent in German, French and Spanish as well as English, I am able to observe directly how terroir is represented in many winemaking regions. During my WSET Diploma studies and visits to wineries, as well as when reading wine journals and professional texts, I noticed that terroir as a concept is utilized frequently yet without real precision. On the one hand, terroir discourse often implies that wine reflects essential qualities of the vineyard. On the other hand, terroir is invoked to praise the methods of skilled winemakers and defend the value of small-scale artisan production. I have observed that Burgundy serves as a model for entire legal systems as well as for individual winemaker ideologies worldwide. But to what extent are these models corroborated by scientific research and verifiable evidence? How can cultural traditions be reconciled with advances in technology and viticulture? With these questions in mind, I set out to investigate the origins and extent of Burgundy's influence on terroir, and to evaluate modern terroir discourse from a legal, scientific and cultural perspective.

## **Objective**

The goal of this project is to demonstrate how terroir is utilized as a political and ideological tool to enhance the value of wine through authenticity and exclusivity. By examining the evolution of the Burgundian hierarchy and its international imitations, greater clarity can be achieved regarding the nature of terroir and how sense of place can be communicated effectively to wine consumers. One particular aim is to examine how intangible notions of cultural appreciation can be balanced with objective scientific observations about the influence of specific sites on wine taste and quality. By treating terroir as a communication strategy, different approaches can be examined to determine how regions can optimally communicate what makes them distinctive, while offering real value for consumers.

## **Methodology**

To gain a better picture of the history of terroir in Burgundy, I consulted French-language historical accounts such as Jean-François Bazin's *Histoire du vin de Bourgogne* as well as

primary source material from 19<sup>th</sup> century vineyard surveys such as Jean Lavalle's *Histoire et statistique de la vigne et des grands vins de la Côte d'Or* and historical maps from the Beaune Agricultural Committee. I then examined modern narratives concerning Burgundy's terroir, including educational and promotional materials published by the Bourgogne Wine Board (BIVB), along with articles in professional wine journals and textbooks. To understand the implications of terroir globally, I drew on sociological essays regarding the role of geographical indications as intellectual property and the development of terroir as a protectionist response against globalization. Regarding modern imitations of Burgundy, I directly consulted the legal texts of new wine laws from countries such as Germany, Spain, Austria, Hungary and the United States. Modern scientific studies provided objective evidence regarding popular terroir claims, and consumer studies offered indications about the relative success of terroir marketing. Finally, the ideology of terroir-driven wines was examined by comparing websites, tasting notes, wine journalism, academic essays and conversations with winemakers.

## **Content**

The introduction to this project engages with the various definitions of terroir utilized by different segments of the wine industry, demonstrating their common objectives of authenticity and exclusivity. The second section critically analyzes the development of terroir as a marketing concept in Burgundy, contrasting historical evidence of the political and commercial factors that shaped the region with modern narratives that evoke a sense of timelessness and permanence. The third section presents an overview of recent imitations of Burgundy through legal frameworks protecting quality wine production. The pyramid hierarchies of Germany, Austria, Priorat and Bierzo are contrasted with the geographically focused American Viticultural Areas of the United States to show that despite superficial differences, the underlying logic depends on environmental determinism. This is followed in the fourth section by a discussion of terroir-driven wine as a countermovement of local, small-scale production against globalization and industrial wines. The fifth section continues this argument by analyzing the role of soil in terroir and tasting notes. The conclusion provides an overview of consumer studies and scientific research on terroir as potential alternatives to the Burgundian model.

## **Conclusion**

While modern promoters of terroir wines insist that the concept is ageless and inherently connected with geography, terroir-based marketing in Burgundy actually arose out of political and cultural crises in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The advent of globalization in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century provided another major impulse for the terroir movement, this time in the form of an ideological trend towards environmentally conscious terroir-driven wines. Burgundy's astronomical success in recent decades has made it an appealing inspiration for imitations, but these models lack Burgundy's cultural context and brand recognition. In some cases, the trend toward single-vineyard wines threatens to homogenize regions and obscure the qualities that make them unique. On the other hand, terroir often serves as a political stance for small winegrowers and wine enthusiasts who argue that science—and by extension, large-scale winemaking that relies on modern technological advances—cannot adequately explain what confers a sense of place to wine.