

Review of:

The Taste of Place: A Cultural Journey into Terroir.

By: Amy B. Trubek.

Review By: Nicholas Hartmann
Memorial University of Newfoundland

According to author Amy Trubek, the French term *terroir* is a word that is incredibly difficult to define outside of a French context; whether looked at in relation to geography, soil or locality, *terroir* is a vital keyword in the study of food, especially in France, where much of the nation's ideology is firmly rooted in the image of a farmer. A professor in food sciences and formerly an instructor at a major culinary institute, Trubek strives to better understand the term *terroir* and its meaning to food both inside and outside of France; her book *The Taste of Place: A Cultural Journey into Terroir* does that while also giving us a better idea of the importance of taste, and the ways it is determined, within specific cultures.

In order to provide some historical and cultural context, Trubek uses the first chapter, "Place Matters," to demonstrate how *terroir* reflects reality. Stressing that physical traits of a place, as opposed to those who cultivate the place, are the major factor in defining *terroir*, Trubek argues that French cuisine is a major definer of global notions of taste, and those who create it were among the first to regulate how food of a specific region must be defined. Trubek goes on to describe the role of the rural Frenchman as a major factor in the regulation of such cuisine, as well as how such notions of taste are not only ingrained at an early age, but also serve as a way for people to determine their roots and their identity. For those interested in notions of nostalgia and self-identification, this chapter is well-connected to such ideas as they are discussed within folklore.

Discussions regarding the local and the global, as well as the understanding (and, quite often, misinterpretation) of *terroir* are part of the second chapter "Wine is Dead! Long Live Wine!", which discusses the above in relation to the controversial attempt by Robert Mondavi to develop a winery in the Languedoc. This chapter succeeds in demonstrating that scientific aspects of *terroir* are far from encompassing while emphasizing that local knowledge and understanding of a region and its people are also important to the notion of *terroir*. The same notions apply in the third chapter, "California Dreaming," which looks comparatively at the role of *terroir*, as well as wine, within the state of California in order to demonstrate that such developments are affected by American ideas surrounding quality, taste, and experience. Trubek's discussion of California wine, and the obsession with its more *quantitative* attributes, are related to issues of sustainability, class, and cultural myths surrounding a movement fixed on creating a better food world for Americans.

An example of a chef's role in the latter- this time within the state of Wisconsin- is the core focus of the fourth chapter, "Tasting Wisconsin: A Chef's Story." Looking at Madison-based chef Odessa Piper's role in the development of a regional cuisine, Trubek brings up the duality of the desire for agrarian utopia and the demand of a consumer market that, quite often, only has large supermarkets from

which to acquire their food. Through collaboration with farmers and a slow (yet steady and year-round) process of introducing people to the foods of their region, Piper's inspiration is a solid example of how neither chefs nor growers are exclusively responsible for the creation of *terroir*.

This connection carries on seamlessly in Trubek's fifth chapter, "Connecting Farmers and Chefs in Vermont," which examines the role of the Vermont Fresh Network in developing farmer-chef dialogue while encouraging the consumption of local products. This chapter is heavily based on examples, focusing on the Fresh Network's holistic approach to promoting Vermont food and emphasizing the importance of understanding the contexts of both farming and cooking. The chapter succeeds at displaying the importance of adopting ideas from larger food worlds into smaller-scale, more sustainable efforts, but it does seem to be somewhat of a repeat of the past chapter in terms of its points.

The final chapter, "The Next Phase: Taste of Place or Brand?," discusses issues of commodification and market economics in relation to food, pointing out the concerns of lack of knowledge surrounding the food we eat while emphasizing the reality that pointing out *terroir*-rich food creates a brand image. Trubek emphasizes that such images create other images and often perpetuate utopian notions surrounding agriculture. This chapter is quite frank about the importance of commerce in the shaping of both food practice and *terroir*, and its basis in market realities makes the book seem a bit less utopian than other major food literature. Trubek discusses movements such as slow food in a fair and holistic manner. This results in a better understanding of the politics of *terroir* for the reader.

Such politics are important for this book's intended audience. *The Taste of Place* will find a good audience with food scholars, chefs and anyone interested in the issues surrounding foodways. Regarding an everyday audience, however, the frequent use of untranslated French terminology and the advanced tone of some of the book's writing might not appeal to everyone. If anything, this is a book for those already involved in the study and/or production of food, yet it has the potential to make a huge impact that, eventually, can be spread to other audiences through other means.