

Border Wines: Terroir across Contested Territory in Central Europe and the Middle East

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Abstract – Etymologically related, the concepts of *terroir* and *territoriality* display divergent cultural histories. While one designates the palatable characteristics of place as a branded story of geographic distinction (*goût de terroir*), the other imbues the soil with political meaning, defensible boundaries, and collective entitlement. This presentation traces the production of GIs in contested spaces across political borders. Tracing the ascent of terroir as an organizing principle for the global wine culture and food industry, I examine the intersection of political geography, national identity, and cultural locality in the production of edible authenticity. Border wine regions such as Tokaj between Hungary and Slovakia, the Judean Hills and South Mount Hebron in Israel and Palestine, and the former Cold War buffer zone between Bulgaria and Greece illustrate the articulation of terroir as a story of border-crossing. Beyond the essentialization of terroir as “nature” and the contested politics of territory, I identify three formations of the terroir-territory connection: (a) *territorialization of terroir*, (b) *terroir-ization of territory*, and (c) *terroir expansion*. In the case of “border wines” strategies of boundary- and terroir-making highlight the creative agency of GI producers across political territories.

Keywords – wine ; terroir ; territory ; border wine ; Israel/Palestine ; Central Europe.

INTRODUCTION

Drawing on the growing critical studies of wine and terroir (Demossier 2011; Black and Ulin 2013; Trubek 2008) I bring into conversation two distinct conceptual fields: the cultural notion of “taste of place” (*goût de terroir*) predicated on the phenomenology of terroir as “somewhereness” (Kramer 2007; Grahm 2006), and the politics of territory as a strategy of bordering and ordering (Green 2012; Popescu 2011). This article responds to Black and Ulin’s (2013: 7) call to view wine as a point of departure to contested traditions “too often ignored or eclipsed by narratives devoted to the commodity itself.”

In border wine regions where terroir often traverses national territories, cultivating nature becomes a political statement. How is terroir defined and defended in politically contested wine regions where it literally deborders the state? The indexical power of border wines pits the “territory effect” (Painter 2010) against what I call the “terroir effect.” Reading the claims of terroir against the claims of territory sheds light on the political agency of wine.

Territorializing Terroir

In the wine world, no concept is more controversial than the key symbol of terroir, whose proponents arguably “take it to the level of Jihad” and are conversely accused of “viticulural racism.” Traced back to the thirteenth century, the French notion underpinned the continental patrimonialization of taste with the 1935 institutionalization of the *appellation contrôlée* system. Toward the end of the twentieth century, it became a buzzword glossing place-based product authenticity (Gade 2004: 866).

From the Balkans to China, wines are sold as terroir wines. Indeed, our time is marked by and marketed as “terroir fervor,” which embodies the paradox of globalization. “Local is in,” announces Master of Wine Debra Meiburg (2012), and explains *terroir fervor* as “New and Old World winemakers touting the specialness of their plot of land, be it a sprawling valley or a postage stamp. A winemaker’s passion, they insist, is so intimately related to the land that the winemaker is an integral part of terroir.”

The most poetic notion of terroir was made famous in the film *Mondovino* (2004) by the owner of the traditionalist Domaine de Montille in Burgundy. Distinguishing between “vins de terroir” and “vins de marque” (brand wines) he exclaimed: “The vine is here! It’s the terroir... Brands are a part of Anglo-Saxon culture ... Here we cultivate an appellation of origin. Brands get forgotten, like people.” In the French tradition, terroir cannot be reduced to the signature taste stemming from the soil. It is also the human know-how that preserves these material characteristics. In this sense, terroir is *embodied* and encompasses bodily dispositions. “Le vin a du corps”—it is made, preserved, and exalted by a winemaker who performs the magic of the terroir. In *Mondovino*, Hubert de Montille concludes that wine is “90% perspiration [sweat], 10% inspiration.”

The semiotic power of terroir lays in its untranslatable indexicality linking speaker to space. Terroir fervor is thus a way to touch posterity through nature. Despite its global currency, however, the notion of terroir as “mythical” (Poulain 1997; Matthews 2016), “polysemic” (Bérard and Marchenay 2007), or even as “useless nostalgia” (Latour 2016) and a “joke” (Ashenfelter et al. 2013; Gergaud and Ginsburgh 2010) is not uncommon among critical wine scholars. In a recent article for *GuildSomm*, Jane Lopes writes (2017), “*Terroir* is a word that’s gotten overblown and deflated, now an impotent, saggy balloon in the wine industry. It’s been so overused that it barely means anything anymore.”

Historically, the cultural concept of terroir is based on a “secular conviction of a tight objective relationship to the farmed environment” (Vaudour 2002: 119); however, in specific contexts it is often infused with religiosity and hallowed nationalism. In my paper I interpret it as a story of place and its defining boundaries and borders—a cultural narrative that positions a commodity in regional political economy.

While much has been written on the regional and global politics of wine (Colman 2010), terroir across political borders remains uncharted territory. To understand how terroir has become part of projects of territorialization, especially in places where border disputes are heightened, we need to reframe borders as relational rather than as “lines” and “edges” of sovereign spaces (Green 2010: 586). They create territory “not as an actual state space, but as the powerful, metaphysical effect of practices that make such spaces appear to exist” (Painter 2010: 1116). Controlling mobility, these spaces constitute, by extension, national entities and identities (Mitchell 1991: 94). A relational view of the territorial border as place (rather than a line) resonates strongly with Georg Simmel’s (1997: 142) memorable observation that “the boundary is not a spatial fact with sociological consequences, but a sociological fact that forms itself spatially.”

Anthropologists of borders have emphasized the

motility of people, signs, and commodities traveling within and across the “national order of things” (Malkki 1992). For Green (2010: 264), the historicity of the border “generates connections and relations as well as disconnections and separations, across space and time.” However, these connectivities are not unilateral but rather dialectical and performative: “If performing the border means classifying and defining people, things and places in a particular form, then that is done not only by the separation and disconnection that renders borders visible, but also by connection that can remake them differently and even erase them from view” (ibid.). As we shall see, this indexical, place-based notion of the border allows winemakers and analysts alike to challenge its fixity. Borrowing from Massey (2005: 12) Green (2012: 587) suggests that “borders mark the locations of stories so far.” One such story is the story of terroir. While performing the border produces the “territory effect,” thinking of terroir as performance allows us to speak of the “terroir effect” as a social process of production and signification of places and things vinous.

To explore the dangerous liaisons between terroir and territory, I examine the quality-space of terroir across three political borders: national borders, Cold War borders, and colonial borders. “Border wines” demonstrate how terroir can turn into territory and vice versa by highlighting processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Beyond the standard model of terroir developed in France I point to three strategies of *terroir-making* in less centralized wine cultural and legal systems. First is the case of Tokaj, which exemplifies a strategy of patrimonialization and nationalization of wine. Tokaj is an ethnic wine, where contested political territory inscribes terroir, or the *territorialization of terroir*. Second is the case of one of Bulgaria’s southeastern border wines, also known as “No Man’s Land.” It is a case of the commodification of the border zone, or the *terroir-ization of territory*. Third is the case of Israeli settlement wineries that employ wine to imagine a Mediterranean landscape within a colonial framework—a strategy I term *terroir expansion*.

This research project draws on participant observation, interviews, and media analysis in wineries across Palestine/Israel and Central Europe. Fieldwork was complemented by long-term professional training in Italy (Sommelier 3rd level, 2010) and in Austria (Wine & Spirit Education Trust, level 4, 2014–). The project proposes a historical anthropology of wine cultures by articulating the ethnography of wine production and consumption practices with the history of their expansion. Mapping the regional production of wine, knowledge, and power on both sides of the border, I explore the nexus of science (enology), culture (taste), market (branding), and politics (territoriality) by rescaling the macro-determinations of enolocality to the microregion. I conceptualize the terroir-territory configuration relationally as the interaction between individual cross-boundary practices and official region-making processes. The contested demarcations of wine regions and the agency of winemakers position wine as an ambivalent commoditized actor, which regulates social relations at the same time as it legitimizes symbolic claims over land and history.



Figure 2: Map of Tokaj across the border (Illustration by Igor Vizner, distributed under a CC-BY 2.0 license)

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