

Book Review

Wine, Terroir and Utopia: Making New Worlds

Braden Neihart ^{1*}

¹ *Independent Scholar*, UNITED STATES

*Corresponding Author: bradenhist@gmail.com

Citation: Neihart, B. (2021). Wine, Terroir and Utopia: Making New Worlds, *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 6(2), 15. <https://doi.org/10.20897/jcasc/11453>

Published: December 28, 2021

Keywords: wine, terroir, geography, history

Dutton, J. and Howland, P. J. (eds.) (2020). *Wine, Terroir and Utopia: Making New Worlds*. London: Routledge Press.

Studies of food and alcohol examine culturally-preferred ways of making and consuming. One particularly difficult aspect of this process is taste: what flavors are desired, and how do producers ensure their consumers detect and appreciate the correct flavors? What we taste is heavily influenced by what we are expecting or told to taste. Conceptualizing these perception-influences on taste is a difficult task. Terroir is one such word that scholars and laypeople use to describe a great range of influences on food products, particularly wine. In *Wine, Terroir and Utopia: Making New Worlds* edited by Jacqueline Dutton and Peter Howland, a series of scholars seek to overlay ideas of utopia over wine and terroir in an effort to illuminate some of the boundaries of this term. This work excels in highlighting the multiple, multi-faceted, and endless definitions of terroir and applying them in a series of case studies. Foreground in a great theoretical introduction, the following chapters ask questions to clarify, expand, and challenge terroir.

Though not formally divided in this way, the chapters roughly address three major wine regions: Europe (particularly France), South Africa, and Australia. Each chapter addresses how we can use utopia--itself a flexible and intangible term--to better understand wine and winemaking in various parts of the world. Fundamentally, they posit that utopia is a sort of constant hope. In wine, it manifests as a sense of anticipation that the grapes will ripen well, the desire for a good harvest, that the multitude of factors that come together to ferment great wine will all occur, and that no matter how good the current year's yield hope that the following one will surpass it. Utopian hope also manifests in the desired benefits of wine over other alcohols to better society, and in the hope that gruesome working conditions can improve. The applications are varied, and each chapter presents a new way to use hope to understand the wine world.

In applying utopia to terroir, it opens up a dialogue of perceptions, hopes, and idealized landscapes. This work does a fantastic job of showing the endless components of terroir, and how each is shaped by utopian visions of wine, landscapes, and people. Briefly, terroir is the people, land, and climate that contribute to a finished bottle of wine. Within each of these categories lie bottomless factors of history, the environment, capitalism, race, class, gender, among other variations that can be tapped into to make one plot of land somehow different from another. Some of these are real, scientific differences that do indeed impact the product--France's soil and climate is highly variable, and different again from other wine regions. Despite this, one crucial element of terroir and utopia is their malleability. The way marketers, oenologists, and others involved in the production and promotion of wines sell their landscapes and histories does tremendous work in cultivating desired tastes and perceptions in consumers.

Yet, the work does not dismiss concerns of dystopia and what the pursuit of the perfect wine costs in human and environmental capital. Pointedly, McIntyre, Pierre, and Germov's chapter on Australia highlights how the desire to develop vineyards as an effort to curb the uncouth drinking habits of early colonists meant an extension of dystopian experiences for Aboriginal Peoples. Further, Howson, Murray, and Overton's chapter on South Africa engages in the ethical considerations of terroir. They discuss the awful working and living conditions of many Black vineyard laborers, and how ethical production has become another aspect of the wine landscape that can be manipulated and sold.

This is a useful collection to evaluate the ways humans view landscapes with expectations. What hopes, dreams, realities, perceptions do we apply to agricultural spaces, workers, and products? In applying utopia, the contributors ask us to expand how terroir can include a new set of attributes. In many ways, this work re-opens questions about what we should include in descriptions of terroir.

This collection might be best suited for people wanting to learn more about wine and terroir theory. The case studies draw upon a variety of time periods and regions. A working knowledge of these histories is not required, but some familiarity would certainly help frame several chapters' arguments. Certainly, this is a theoretical work with case studies to support assertions and frameworks more than it is a historical work of wine growing regions.