

## FOREWORD

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This book begins, like so many do, with an epiphany, of the sort that thousands of wine lovers experience to one degree or another. You are *moved* by a wine, in precisely the same way that you are *moved* by a painting, a poem, a passage in a novel, a sunset, a mountain vista. Just taking a sip of this wine is transporting, humbling, it fills you with wonder. Like a great meal, great sex, a great musical performance, the feeling will be powerful but fleeting, rousing but ephemeral, grounded in the senses and yet cosmic all the same.

Inevitably, you start to wonder why. What makes this wine much more graceful, powerful, unique? What about this wine takes it out of the combinatory matrix of fruit, tannin, acid, and alcohol and into another, more interpretive realm? You wonder about that subtle spice, that consistently warm core of fruit, the grace and balance found here and here alone, distinct from vineyards just a few meters away. You marvel at the consistencies of texture, the tension, the power, the finesse, that seem to inhabit this wine no matter when you taste it and where—its constancy is uncanny, confounding, thrilling. Suddenly the experience of tasting this wine is (if I may coin a word) extra-vitreous: it takes you out of the glass, and into a speculative place.

For wine lovers, the discovery of *terroir* is a breakthrough that cannot be unbroken. Whether it's the somewhere-ness of a region like Chablis or the particulars of its prized Grand Cru vineyards, it is an irrevocable event in your wine consciousness: once you've found it you'll seek it in all wines for the rest of your life. *Terroir* will take over your

understanding of wine, it will leave you gobsmacked by discoveries, and straining to grasp at things that aren't there.

Tim Patterson sought a practical explanation for that incredulity. As a wine writer he came up against the concept of *terroir* all the time, he became its student whenever he tasted and evaluated wines, when he walked vineyards with grapegrowers and winemakers, when he sniffed at the dirt and pocketed rocks from between vine rows, mementoes from hallowed ground.

But in addition to being a writer, Patterson was a home winemaker, using purchased fruit to make his own wine. This fact is critical: since he didn't grow the grapes, didn't live on the land, that sense of place wasn't something inherent in his interpretation of that fruit; its signature was something he had to discover, to isolate and express. He wondered constantly, as he sniffed his vats of bubbling grapes, just what did he have to do, or not do, to tease out a site's uniqueness—was there a skeleton key, a secret procedure, that would bring out the wine's *terroir*? Or conversely was there something that would inadvertently mask that character, and what could he do to avoid that fate? When did he need to step in, and when did he need to get out of the way?

John Buechsenstein had similar concerns over the course of his long career as a winemaker and wine educator in California and elsewhere, whether in the old vine fruit in the MacDowell Valley in Mendocino County, or the estate plantings at Fife, Phelps, and other places, and not least in his last ambitious winemaking venture, the Sauvignon Republic Wine Company, where with Paul Dolan and John Ash he parsed out the nuances of Sauvignon Blanc from three wildly differing regions, New Zealand, South Africa, and California. Had the project gone forward, they would have made Sauvignon Blanc from seven different global locales—*terroir* exploration on an unprecedented scale.

These ruminations, in many articles, over many vintages and many wines, grown, made, and drunk, are the germ of this book.

In 2008, at a wine conference in Portland, Patterson ran into Buechsenstein, and they got onto the topic of *terroir*. A few glasses of wine later they'd hatched the idea of a *Terroir* Reader, a compendium of texts that would get at these questions, allowing the two authors the chance to think about them deeply, systematically, and skeptically, and address the mysteries, strip the concept of its fairy dust, the cosmic claims, the dubious assertions, the siren song of marketing, the whiff of bullshit. The book was meant to be inclusive, to compile in a single volume the many contradictions inherent in the topic, encompassing both passionate belief and healthy skepticism.

Why skepticism? Because *terroir* as a concept is inevitably subjective and interpretive; its beholder is vulnerable to suggestion. As a wine writer Patterson was frequently exposed to marketing that exploited the subject, to suggestive interpretations of *terroir* by winemakers or spin agents eager to point out the uniqueness of the wine in front of him. As a globetrotting winemaker, Buechsenstein was subject to similar interpretive

dances, literally on a global scale. His task was to decipher local *terroir* and minimize winemaking manipulation, so that his wines expressed their local flavors.

Not every wine, after all, expresses *terroir*. Some, like Yellow Tail or Two Buck Chuck, don't seek to make the distinction. But many more wines in the market that come from somewhere express little or nothing of the place they're grown; any vestige is obliterated by overripeness, indifferent winemaking, or adulteration—often all three. But that doesn't keep marketers from making claims of typicity. Skepticism is required in the *terroir* game, even if it's rarely employed. Patterson and Buechsenstein sought to avoid being seduced by their subject matter. They wanted to strip the concept of hype, to bring a sober eye to its examination.

John brought a familiarity with the scientific and technical literature. He foraged for relevant research material, scientific studies, conference papers, books, and articles. He knew where to find such pieces in the vast array of global sources. He brought, too, a familiarity with the technical and at times abstruse nature of these research efforts, and was a worthy translator and distiller of their research and ideas.

He and Tim spent long hours organizing and codifying the topical material in each chapter, but Tim brought the authorial and editorial thrust. It is his voice and his narrative skills that link the pieces of this compendium together, that allow them to flow and brush up against and inform one another, guided by his inquisitiveness and his abilities as a reporter and storyteller.

Tim Patterson lived much of his life in failing health. Born with extremely poor vision, he endured two autoimmune disorders, a non-functioning kidney, and a tubercular condition of the lymph nodes, for which he had his first surgery at age four. None of this stopped him, not from making wine, not from writing about it, not from tasting and enjoying it, and certainly not from having it consume him in the course of this project.

But in late March 2014, his health took a turn. He sent a worried email to Blake Edgar, then acquisitions editor at UC Press with some concern. "My vision," he wrote, "never much good, went into a tailspin—swarms of floaters, color vision way off, depth perception shot. So far, no diagnosis or explanation. Worst part is that I can't read anything, or type anything. I will keep you posted." By the time Edgar responded, Patterson was in the hospital; shortly after he was diagnosed with a glioblastoma—a cancerous growth in the connective tissue of his brain. It was untreatable, and less than two months later he passed away.

In his last days of consciousness, Tim lamented with Aaron Belkin, the cousin of his wife Nancy and a professor of political science at San Francisco State University, the fact that he would not live to finish the book. Belkin, who had spent many years helping authors with their manuscripts, promised Tim that he would shepherd the project to its conclusion. He has done a heroic job marshalling editorial forces (I became the developmental editor for the project), wading through a thicket of reprint and copyright permissions, pushing the project to its completion in keeping with Tim's final wish. With the

guidance of Aaron and John, and as its final editor, I completed drafts, finished stalled chapters, brought some editorial polish to passages and chapters that Tim was too ill to address himself.

I've worked hard to preserve Tim Patterson's voice in these passages. Tim had a nimble and restless mind, a probing intellect, and a unique ability to inject a kind of dialectic tension into his prose as he grappled with an idea, an effect that was enhanced by the joy he had with language and in particular with wordplay: in these passages and commentary, he was often able to bring a touch of levity to a very demanding topic. Wherever possible I tried to preserve that feel to the prose here, even as he and John led me down pathways of inquiry I wouldn't have thought to explore.

As I said at the outset, *terroir* is a topic that few who love wine can escape, but what the authors have done here is a more complete and more exhaustive exploration than has ever been attempted before. They have made it all the more inescapable. For that, and for many other reasons, I'm grateful for having had the opportunity to work on this book. I hope you'll agree that this was a worthy project to bring to completion.

*Patrick Comiskey*  
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