



### **“Terroir” or “Tastes Better” The combination of cultivation and culture**

Bob Weybright, Weybright & Associates, Inc. and  
Cheryl Leach, New York Food Venture Center; Cornell University, Geneva Experiment Station

For several years, there has been a lot of discussion in the US about the survival of local agricultural production. The suggested strategies all have merit and may be part of the many tools a modern agricultural business will need to be competitive. For the purposes of this article, I thought we would take a look one strategy that has received a fair amount of press in the past decade, “terroir”. The reason is, it is my good fortune to live in France – arguably the originator, or at least hot bed, of “terroir” – and I would like to shed some light on why the French are known for their passionate embrace of terroir, based on living as an American in the south of France.

First and foremost the concept of terroir ties into to the fact that the French really, really love good food. Food is an essential part of each day and is a key element to a quality of life that is not easily replaceable. For example, an hour-long lunch (time for a “proper hot meal” as we were told early in our tenure here) is quite normal. In fact it is not politically correct to eat at your desk (at work), and you can expect to be told so if you do. Because food is such an important part of the lifestyle here, there is a solid understanding of what foods are supposed to taste like. The French’s love of food means it is common knowledge when foods taste best and where it comes from (no mandatory COOL here!!!). Place of origin includes knowledge of the specific growing region, not just the country of origin. Produce, meats, cheese, and dairy products all have tags or labels that identify what country and region it is from. It is the passion for taste that drives purchase decisions. Indeed, the French hold no grudges when it comes to quality food. For example, as soon as Florida grapefruit come into their prime season they are brought in to replace the Spanish fruit, but this does not happen with the oranges. Taste trumps location!!

Selection of foods for intended use is paramount. At a typical market there are 6 varieties of tomatoes, 4 varieties of plums, 6 varieties of potatoes, 4 varieties of onions, 2 varieties of carrots, 3 varieties of strawberries (when they were in season). Each variety is used differently based on the recipe. A gratin dauphinois cannot use the same potato as a frite to be sure.

To make it worthwhile financially for the farmers, a quality and use-based pricing system is used. For example tomatoes have a range of prices based on ripeness, method of ripeness, and intended use. Regardless, they all get worked “down through the system” daily. For example (Euro’s converted at a rate of 1€ equal to \$1.42 US) fancy vine ripened cherry on stem, \$8.24; the ones that fell off the vine yesterday \$6.82; small vine ripened on stem, \$5.24; vine ripened that fell off the stem (left over from yesterday), \$3.69; hot house vine ripened, \$3.27; and Roma \$2.13. A similar pricing structure is used with cheeses as well. Comté prices vary as much as \$2 per pound depending on its age and reputation of the creamery. This is a perfectly acceptable range in prices, because consumers make their decision based on intended use. There is nothing worse than getting a young cheese when you need a nicely ripened cheese for your recipe, it just doesn’t cook up the way you want.

Pricing is clearly indicated according to each individual item and according to quality. Individual vendors will then further differentiate from each other by their produce knowledge and by their interaction with the consumer. At the local market where I shop there are at least 4 vegetable vendors selling right next to each other. It is not uncommon for all of them to have pretty much identical produce (much like a US farmers’ market) selling for as much as \$0.09 per pound different from each other. It is clear that pricing is not done based on vendor consensus but according to their financial needs. At the same time each vendor is working to establish a relationship with each of their customers (even an American with limited French). Each time I go to buy produce, I must first be greeted and asked how I am doing by the fruitier; it is then expected that I return the courtesy (if I want to be part of the “regular” crowd). We then ring up and pay for the produce; but that remains an incomplete transaction until...we then wish each other parting wishes (merci beaucoup, au revoir, est bon journey). All this does not take a lot of time, but it does make for a solid and human connection that is based on respect and appreciation of each other. Will this work in the US where seconds count in the day, I can’t say. But it is something to be aware of when training staff to interact with your customers.

Another noticeable element in the French markets is that there is always someone on staff to provide help with finding specific items or to answer questions about the food items. There is always a sample for people to taste (with fruits, vegetables, and wines) or to examine the interior. Customers need access to information about the varieties you are selling, and you need to be able to explain why you chose those varieties...hopefully it relates to taste and not just because you can grow a ton of it easily. Yes, growing to satisfy tastes takes more work than growing what the guy/gal/farm/business down the road grows, but the rewards and customer commitment to your business are worth it.

---

“**Smart Marketing**” is a marketing newsletter for extension publication in local newsletters and for placement in local media. It reviews elements critical to successful marketing in the food and agricultural industry.

*Please cite or acknowledge when using this material.*