

## Book Reviews

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**Amy Trubek.** *The Taste of Place: A Cultural Journey Into Terroir.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008. 250 Pages.

Amy Trubek's latest book is an engaging and thorough introduction to the notion of terroir, or the "taste of place," in the United States. Not only does Trubek study terroir as a concept in wine—the term's usual context—but she looks at the effects of place on our perception and understanding of food as well. Trubek's comparison of the French and American interpretations of terroir calls attention to the ways in which these two cultures try to give value to unique foods when so many products are being mass-produced around the globe. In addition to addressing the cultural history of the term terroir, she also raises an ethical discussion of its marketability, arguing that both countries seem to be walking a fine line between using terroir as a socially-engaged concept and as a profitable way of adding value to a product.

Trubek starts with a thorough history of the term terroir and how it developed in France, then continues with a discussion of its application in the United States. Although terroir is a descriptive word most commonly used in wine tastings, here Trubek uses the term to refer to foods and the sensory evidence of the plants, animals, and region from which they are produced. Since such traces transcend our most obvious means of perceiving food (through taste), in France, terroir encompasses a cultural knowledge that is passed down through generations (18). By contrast, the United States, which has only recently adopted the term, lacks this rich heritage. The result is a product of modern times: as French winemaker Daniel Ravier suggests, Americans have achieved *scientific* terroir, but not a cultural knowledge of it (105).

Trubek begins her section on French terroir by giving engaging descriptions of the potentially dry legal jargon surrounding the

creation of the Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) and the Institut National des Appellations d'Origine (INAO), which were turning points in French history that sought to recognize and protect regional differences in food. She also does an admirable job of introducing the heavyweights of French gastronomy, from Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin to Maurice Edmond Sailland, better known as Curnonsky. She spends a significant portion of her discussion on Curnonsky's anthology of French culinary regions, *Le trésor gastronomique de France*, and its influence in shaping the popular consciousness regarding food. Throughout the chapter, Trubek poses questions of the validity of terroir, asking if it may just be a recently developed nostalgia: a desire to return to cultural roots in order to preserve memory and identity during a time of modern, fast-paced livelihoods (51-53).

Trubek's chapter on wine acts as a bridge between the French conception of terroir and the American approach to marketing place. While she takes great pains to explain viticulture and viniculture and their effects on the taste of wine,<sup>1</sup> the level of detail in her description of the Mondavi Affair deserves a book contract of its own.<sup>2</sup> This chapter could be improved by retaining only the aspects necessary to convey the Mondavi story without detracting from her introduction of American terroir.

Despite this drawback, Trubek's analysis in the following chapters of the American interpretations and applications of terroir make it obvious that she has not only researched her topic in depth but is able to apply gracefully these abstract French theories to the American food industry. Her focus on Californian wine growers and the San Francisco Ferry Building Farmer's Market, L'Etoile restaurant in Wisconsin, the Vermont Fresh Network, and Vermont maple syrup producers provides case studies through which readers can better understand the philosophical questions she poses.

In her analysis of L'Etoile, for example, Trubek points out the duplicity of American eating habits: our celebration of "local" and "seasonal" ingredients even though many of us still shop at large, overstocked supermarkets (151). Two dominant worldviews, she argues, help to explain why we are still largely uneducated in terms of our foods' origins: 1. modernity by necessity creates an industrialized and global food supply system, and 2. in the past, the

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<sup>1</sup> The cultivation of the vine and grape, respectively, for wine production.

<sup>2</sup> The Mondavi Affair refers to a conflict during which French villagers fought to shut down the California-based winemaker, which tried to enter the wine-growing community in the south of France.

food supply system was transparent, community-oriented, and “purer” (141). Trubek argues that L’Etoile occupies a middle ground between these two perspectives: Odessa Piper, the owner, is running a modern food business while promoting a sustainable, local food system and cooking with local ingredients such as the Wisconsin hickory nut and other seasonal farmer’s market produce. However, such an effort (and its popularity) could also potentially be viewed as a form of “nostalgic” terroir. Many Americans reflect this notion, longing for a “return” to local, sustainable farming—the idea of a utopian agriculture that offers a safe, transparent food system in the face of the modern food industry. Even the French are not immune to nostalgic terroir, for in the region of the Dordogne, Trubek encountered residents who resented the tourist industry for catering to people who they claim “are searching for their *racines*, or roots, as an antidote to their increasingly fast lives” (236).

Although Trubek eloquently describes the role L’Etoile and other restaurants around the nation are playing in providing a platform to discuss these issues, she doesn’t address the possibility that her proposed set of worldviews may not be true to begin with. Does our globalized and industrialized food system really make it impossible for us to trace our food sources fully, or do we as a society simply choose not to? And when was our society ever “pure”?

After this discussion of the recent local food movement in Wisconsin, the reader is primed in Trubek’s concluding chapter for an easy triumph of terroir over marketing as the best means of furthering global industry. Yet instead she paints a picture of how the two today, in the United States as well as France, go hand in hand. In this chapter, Trubek describes her research (with colleagues John Elder and Jeff Munroe) in determining whether or not one could taste the origins of the tapped trees in Vermont maple syrup. Although Trubek, Elder, and Munroe eventually prove that syrups produced from different maple groves taste different, the fact that they had to use complex scientific technology to arrive at this conclusion makes the reader realize that terroir is constituted by more than cultural knowledge (228). Trubek’s study therefore supports Ravier’s point that the U.S. still depends on science to promote terroir in a market economy. Trubek, describing the complexity of this issue with regard to consumers, discusses the 2005 law that bans farmers from using “Vermont” on a syrup’s label if it is blended with contents from other regions. Steve Jones of Maple Grove Farms (a company that purchases its syrup from all over New England and Canada), remarks: “Most people, as long as it has sufficient contact with

Vermont, they consider it Vermont syrup. They do not care where the tree is" (221). With this quote, Jones reveals that placing a location associated with quality and tradition on a label is often enough to convince consumers to buy a product, and that marketers are not afraid to exploit this phenomenon. As Trubek points out, although terroir is even marketed to add value to products in addition to protecting a unique flavor, culture, and method of production in France, her interview with Jones speaks powerfully about where the US is in terms of terroir and its marketability.

By the end of the book, the question remains in my mind, and in Trubek's as well: do we really want to emulate the value the French place on the cultural aspect of the definition of terroir, or can science and marketing be acceptable facets to adopt in American society? She argues yes and no, and therefore seems to pose more questions than she answers in her epilogue. Perhaps this is indicative of the relatively new area of gastronomic research in the United States, and should be taken as a call for further study of the topic. *The Taste of Place* leaves the reader believing that Trubek and the rest of America are in the process of discovering something new and exciting, and it is up to all of us to determine how we will come to define terroir as a culture.

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**Kenneth Hayes.** *Milk and Melancholy*. Toronto and Cambridge, MA: Prefix Press/MIT Press, 2008. 156 Pages.

Reading *Milk and Melancholy*, one imagines that architectural historian, critic, and curator Kenneth Hayes must have spent a great deal of time answering the question: "Why milk?" The result of more than a decade of research, Hayes's survey of the appearance and use of milk in contemporary, photo-based art from the 1960s through the 1980s might at first appear to be aimed at a niche market of food-obsessed art historians. As Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art Director Scott McLeod notes in his foreword to the volume, "[m]ilk is an unusual topic" to take up in a full-length publication (20). But to say that *Milk and Melancholy* is "about milk" is a bit misleading; Hayes's actual object of study is what he terms the "milk-splash