

## TERROIR

Terroir is a most important word, and refers to the qualities a soil can impart to what is grown in it. The most famous use of the word is in winemaking in France where the soil in which grapes are grown is absolutely crucial to the resulting taste of the wine. Even where there are two adjacent fields where the same grape variety is grown, the wine from one can be of much greater quality than from the other. This aspect has been studied down the centuries and the knowledge has given rise to the designation of often quite small areas having their own quality label, or *appellation d'origine contrôlée*. Other countries have followed the French lead in awarding their own quality labels. China awards its own quality labels to various teas, and other crops in several countries are having this link between soil and quality formally recognised. Even oysters, grown off coasts, in river estuaries and in inland seas, have their own quality labels. This is because, even though they are reared in sea water, the oysters thrive where there is a mixture of fresh water from rivers and sea water. And, of course, the fresh water contains nutrients from the fields drained by water courses – the nutrients being special to that terroir.

In the famous film “Jean de Florette”, after the book by Marcel Pagnol, Yves Montand takes a handful of soil, puts it in his mouth and chews on it to assess the terroir. He was advising his nephew on a prospective land purchase. Cinemagoers must have been amazed, but that is one way of assessing soil, and avoids expensive laboratory tests. Provided you know how good soil should taste!

So the taste of what we eat and drink depends upon the soil's characteristics. We need quantities of at least 19 trace elements every day for our health and it is likely that we have evolved such that **if fruit and vegetables taste good they probably are good for us**. It is likely that the process of Darwinian elimination, called evolution, led to those of our ancestors who could recognise good plants (using their taste buds) surviving, and those whose taste buds were not so refined being eliminated because they would have been more prone to disease since they were suffering from malnutrition.

If food and drink items are very low in the 19 trace elements they will usually taste very bland. But if they are rich in those elements they will taste absolutely marvellous. Which brings me round to the very tasty vegetables and fruit from my allotment (surprise, surprise!). I enriched my soil over many years by the application of copious quantities of farmyard manure and so increased the amounts of the 19 vital trace elements by an average of 157%. The difference in the taste of the crops compared with supermarket food was most marked. Supermarket food, whilst it looks good, usually has a bland taste (though there are exceptions). This is because the quantities of 16 of those 19 elements have been reduced by about half since 1940, as crops took away the 16 from the soil and farmers no longer replaced them (they simply applied the other 3, nitrogen, phosphorus and potash, since that was the way to improve crop yields massively). Quality of our food has been sacrificed to quantity. So the only practical way to obtain crops having adequate amounts of all 19 vital trace elements is to grow your own. And by so doing you will be able to eat really tasty fruit and vegetables as you take advantage of your own terroir. Regarding my allotment, perhaps I should apply for the quality designation “*appellation d'origine Walter's Ash contrôlée*”!

Good Gardening!

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