

# The Terroir of Chinatown

by Nicole Wong

The streets of Chinatown are wet with rain, dark with dusk, and empty. Surprisingly quiet at eight at night for a corner of a city that never sleeps, surprisingly gloomy for a landmark in the city of dreams. The restaurants are closed, the shuttered storefronts create a maze of metallic blinds—all locked away from the outside world.

But of course, this is not what I think about on a January night, warm in my dormitory room on a liberal arts college campus in upstate New York. No, this is not what I think about as I argue with my roommate who also happens to be my sister.

“What do you mean you ‘quite frankly don’t care about where your food comes from?’”

My sister glowers at me before snapping back.

“I care about animal cruelty and sustainability if that’s what you mean, but if you’re talking about that elitist, pretentious French tradition of buying so-called ‘local’ then you’re right, I honestly don’t care.”

That “elitist, pretentious French tradition of buying local,” is the more common understanding of *terroir* in the United States. However, the more common understanding of any complex concept is often biased or over-simplified, and the common American understanding of *terroir* is no exception.

*Terroir*, a word with no exact translation from French to English, captures in its first four letters the origins of its meaning. *Terr*—part of *terre*—refers to the earth, the soil beneath our feet, the fertility of the land from which all our sustenance grows. Specifically, *terroir* is a concept that originated from wine production—the notion that a wine embodies the essence of the plot of earth from which it came, due to the climate of the area, the soil composition, as well as the traditional methods of grape cultivation and wine production specific to that vineyard or region. This view on wine evolved to encompass other food products such as cheese, meat, salt, and dairy, but also fostered a social and political facet to the notion of *terroir*. After all, if even a wine embodies the essence of its region, what

does this notion say about the people of a region? What does it say about foreigners? *Terroir* is thus a multifaceted concept that suggests not only pride in tradition and in one’s sense of place, but also hints at xenophobia, racism, and prejudice. Economic factors further complicate the matter, as products of a specific *terroir* may indeed be expensive. Though products of a particular *terroir* may be inexpensive in rural areas of France, some of these products in urban French cities may be less affordable. Much like the beautifully-packaged handmade soaps or the locally-sourced mineral waters often displayed in well-to-do grocery shops in the cleaner parts of New York City, products of specific *terroirs* are affordable for some, but may be only swaths of pretty parchment in passing windows for others. Worse yet, for an average person—though the definition of “average” is up to question—of modest means living in the United States, their only exposure to such items may be from a tedious middle school reunion at a certain classmate’s penthouse—note, the *only* classmate with a penthouse—with a host who only cares to share expensive, gastronomic goods for the sake of brandishing wealth. The pretentiousness of others is never easy to swallow. It is understandable, then, why my sister—for she and I come from a middle-class, immigrant family—is so indifferent to the idea of *terroir*.

Yet, the concept of *terroir* is *not* synonymous with the often-unaffordable goods in high-end grocery stores. The fact that a product is made with pride in a tradition stretching back generations and with a sense of rootedness in one’s home soil is not directly correlated with whether certain individuals buy the products to show off their wealth at dinner parties.

Even so, my sister’s question remains, “Why should I care?”

Indeed, why should she care? “Rootedness,” “home soil,” and “a sense of place” are unfamiliar notions to her and to me, floating as we are: displaced,

rootless individuals with parents who left Hong Kong almost thirty years ago. How can any immigrant, any individual so *déterré*—literally, “de-earthed,” torn from one’s soil and homeland—understand and care about *terroir*?

With these questions in mind, let us return to Chinatown.

My father spends his days walking the streets of Chinatown, running up flights of old buildings to see his patients, chatting with the owners of small Chinese bakeries during his brief lunch breaks, spending extra half hours with lonely, elderly patients. In return for his company, his patients recount to him their memories of a long-lost Chinatown. When several years ago I remarked the increasingly-early hour at which restaurants and bakeries in Chinatown closed, my father replied with a faraway gaze, that the elderly owners of those eateries perhaps could not keep their storefronts open late into the night, especially with the knowledge that no one would come. Restaurants were closing one by one, sometimes because their owners could no longer afford rent, but often because the owners’ children refused to continue the business. Refused, or were never offered by their parents, for many owners of restaurants and bakeries in Chinatown wish for their children a “better life,” though exactly what a better life consists of is difficult to determine. With an increasing number of storefronts for rent, tourism gradually decreased. Now whenever I return to the city during school holidays, I notice tourists only cluster on a single street in Chinatown, or in a few newly-opened bars with flickering candles, chalkboard menus, and rustic window frames. The glow of candlelight and soft clinking of cocktails mock the storefront sign of one of the bars. With Chinese calligraphy written in dark red paint, the sign denotes the name of a Cantonese family restaurant, a name now stolen by a population who cannot read the characters on that stolen sign and does not care to learn. I watch in silence as these strangers exploit nostalgia, as they bask in the “exotic” allure of those decades-old brushstrokes.

When the topic of parents’ occupations surfaced in high school, many of my classmates whose parents owned bakeries or restaurants in Chinatown only vaguely alluded to their parents’ line of work. Even when I expressed my awe for their parents—

as the role of passing on and sharing one’s culture through cuisine seemed so admirable to me—my classmates only stared at me skeptically. Some said they wished their parents were educated. Some said they wished their parents knew English. But almost none mentioned how much their parents had accomplished, how their parents were able to hold close to their roots and sow the seeds of their traditions in a new “home” soil, half a world away from their original homes. They had successfully transformed part of a foreign city into a landmark named after their native land. Yet, my classmates looked on with an unchanging gaze of shame in their eyes.

The sense of hushed embarrassment that I noticed in so many of my high school peers, does not seem to be so prevalent in France between children and their parents who contribute to the food culture of their country. Farmers, restaurant owners, wine producers—they *and their families* seem to share a sense of pride in their work, because they are upholding traditions perfected over centuries, safeguarding treasured recipes and methods of production, and carrying the metaphorical torch passed down from their ancestors. But most of all, they are proud of their work because their work grounds them to their native soil, to their *home*, and acts as an extension of their ancestral roots. *Terroir* underlies this sense of pride and place.

When I stroll down the streets of Chinatown, I sometimes wonder what would happen if my community shared the same sense of pride, identity, and place the French seem to have, this notion of *terroir*. Would the restaurants serving regional Chinese specialties lift their metal gates again and flourish? Would they take down their “For Rent” signs and start anew? Would these signs advertising vacant restaurant spaces diminish in number as tourists replenish to taste, touch, and see the beauty of my culture? Would my old classmates invite me to dine in their parents’ restaurants and share with me the specialties of their native regions? I do not know, but I can hope.

Yet how can I hope when a paradox presents itself to me incessantly? This paradox whispers, “How can you have a sense of place when this land is not your home? How can you understand *terroir* if you and your community of immigrants have been

uprooted again and again? Does a *terroir* even exist for diasporic peoples?” I watch the way fruit vendors and bakery owners hurry quickly past those newly-opened bars, brushing past drink menus they can never read. I listen to the stories my father tells of patients who have never left Chinatown for fifty years, never seen the neon skyscrapers of Times Square, never heard of the Christmas tree at Rockefeller. The paradox echoes again, “Your people’s home soil is half a world away. How can you even hope for a sense of rootedness?”

But I can.

I can hope because—to return to the origins of *terroir*—some plants, like wine grapes, can be replanted and regrown. Severed from its roots, a grape vine can be grafted onto the roots of another grape vine in another land yet bloom and produce fruit all the same. People are not so different. Perhaps for an immigrant community, we should focus less on “rootedness” and more on the fruits that we cultivate—fruits of culture, tradition, and identity. Indeed, my roots are not the same as those of individuals living in China, who can trace their ancestral lines in the same province through centuries. The roots of Chinatown too are embedded in American soil and are not the same as those in Chinese soil, but the community of Chinatown has grafted its identities, values, and traditions to these American roots, so its members might adapt to a foreign land without losing the essence of their homeland. The people of Chinatown were once uprooted, but they are not rootless. Their roots are American, but they are also Chinese.

Within the corner of New York City called Chinatown, restaurant owners and fruit vendors laugh as they call out to each other across the street. Elderly couples sit contently on benches watching people come and go. Various Chinese dialects echo through windows and walls carried by voices in late night conversations, tearful confessions, and heartfelt laughter. At certain hours of dusk or early morning, I realize there is happiness here, there is a sense of home here. Indeed, many of the inhabitants of Chinatown may never step beyond the fringes of their corner of the city into SoHo or Tribeca, but they do not seem to mind.

The paradox thus quiets itself. Indeed, Chinatown is in the United States rather than in China, but the Chinese people who live in Chinatown have tilled

their new soil, cultivated their new land into a place they might finally call home. For a “rootless” person like me, *terroir* is about creating a new sense of place, derived from one’s original home soil yet adapted to a new one. If the members of the Chinese community in Chinatown could only see how much they have accomplished, how strong their grafted vines are, perhaps they would not be so ashamed, and perhaps they would encourage their children to continue cultivating the fruits of their labours.

Though my sister has fallen silent in misty-eyed contemplation after our discussion, *you* might still ask, “Why should *I* care?” If you are neither Chinese nor French, why should *terroir* matter to you?

I do not know whether *terroir* will matter to you, but I hope it will because *terroir* is not solely about France, or Chinatown.

Indeed, Chinatown may not be the centre of your people, the heart of your diaspora. Indeed, you may not care about French wine, French food, or any cultural cuisine or product besides your own. But *terroir* is your own right to claim this land as your home. *Terroir* is the way your family cooks turkey every Thanksgiving next to a maple tree you’ve come to love and recognize, having visited the same campsite every year you can remember. *Terroir* is the soil in your grandmother’s backyard from which you picked the sweetest strawberries in the world. *Terroir* encompasses the stories your parents told you and the stories you will one day tell your own children. It encompasses the way your parents grew up, the way you grew up, and the way you loved the treehouse you used to play in, the swings on which your mother used to sit as a child, and the secret garden where your grandparents used to hide as teenagers in love. Even as a country of immigrants, each of us has a right to a sense of place—not only of the place of our ancestral homes but also of the place that we now call home, the soil on which we have created meaning and memory. For those who are not immigrants, who have been displaced brutally and expressly from their ancestral lands in this country, they especially have a right to determine their own sense of place. This sense might capture not only a history of injustice but also a present effort in reviving and preserving cultural traditions inseparable from the soil of this nation. Everyone then, has a right to determine and define their own *terroir*.

Yet, if everyone has a right to a sense of place, when does one's right encroach upon another's? When does pride in one's soil become guarded, defensive, xenophobic? To claim a place as one's own is to deprive the land from someone else. To attach one's identity in the soil beneath one's feet is to say to a stranger, "You do not belong here." But must it be this way? I do not know, and I cannot say, for the line between the beauty and the danger of *terroir* is a fine one. I only know that to not believe in *terroir* is to forget how forgettable humans are, and risk erasing the memory of careful cultivation that our parents or grandparents have devoted to making this soil our home.

My sister suggested that I write this because she did not understand why *terroir* should mean so much to anyone, until I explained that *terroir* is who we are and who we have been. The way we approach the notion of *terroir* guides us to who we will be. The way we consider our relationship to the soil beneath our feet, and the way we define "home" will shape the ways we think about the land on which we live and the roles we play on it. Your role may be as simple as returning to the restaurant your parents own in Chinatown to smile at your parents with newfound pride. Your role may be as complex as finding ways to revive a dying language spoken by your people before they were forced to live on reservations and leave their ancestral lands. Whatever your role may be, it will be inextricably connected to the land—*your* land. As for myself, my role remains to insist upon the importance of *terroir*, not only for myself, not only for Chinatown, but for anyone who must confront the paradox of rootlessness and rootedness and who must define for themselves what *terroir* means to them.