

THE MINERALITY FACTOR – by Claudia Chamberlain

Minerality is the compilation of different elements in the growing environment that transcend to the nose and palate. It is thought to be a natural expression of terroir and give the impression of coming from a certain place. Minerality is a topic in blind tasting that there are themes to- salinity, river rocks, wet stones, slate, etc. It can look and feel similar across wine regions that really have nothing in common but carry their own unique similarities and differences. Minerality is an effusive topic and the center of a lot of debate. With reference to terroir, it is typically interpreted as a direct reflection of the soils and rocks found in the particular growing environment.

Gillian Ballance's discussion of Etude emphasized the importance of the fogs from the San Pablo Bay on driving the harvest temperatures in the Grace Benoist Ranch vineyard 20 degrees lower than the nearby winery in Carneros. She also noted that a lot of the surrounding land isn't actually for viticulture but rather for crops, supporting a healthy and thriving ecosystem that is believed to impart into the volcanic soils and translate to the Pinot Noir grown here. This changes the definition of minerality to a concept that actually reflects the entire greater growing environment- natural factors such as lower temperatures and human factors such as the use of cover crops, natural fertilizers, and composting- rather than just the soils. A thriving ecosystem combined with a sustainable approach impact the soils and alter the minerality and expression of the wine.

As emphasized by Bill Wente in relation to the Murrieta's Well vineyard, grape growing is a careful balance of taking care of soils and vines (in his case, the Sauvignon Blanc has been growing there for well over a hundred years) and allowing them to struggle in a cultivated way. This struggle can then be highlighted upon during fermentation and translate to a taster being able to pick up on that lack of nutrients in the glass. It leaves the taster with a wine that is equal parts fruit, salinity, and a unique savory bite in the texture that can only be interpreted as that wine's expression of minerality.

Steve Peck at J Lohr relayed that the wind in Monterey can be so strong that it will cause photosynthesis to cease during sunny parts of the day, closing the stomata and inhibiting ripening. This leads to Monterey beginning their harvest as Russian River is ending theirs, even though they're thought to be more similar in climate. Furthermore, the more the vine is stressed for water during this slower ripening, it increases the activation of mineral uptake by the root hairs.

The above examples demonstrate that the soil and the rocks are a product of the land and each unique approach growers have taken to cultivating it. Thus, minerality is not just the natural expression of rocks and soils. It is really the compilation of the growing environment and its unique cultivation coming across in the glass.