

A TERROIR OF CONCRETE & STRIP MALLS?

By David Leftwich



Photo by Paul Hester.

Two hundred million years ago, France was underwater. A fact revealed in the beginning of “Bourgogne, The Birthplace of Terroir,” a short video produced by the Bourgogne Wine Board. The video goes on to outline the geological events that formed what became the Burgundy region of France and produced the soils and tastes that make the region’s wines unique.

This is the essence of “terroir.” The concept food-science writer Harold McGee describes as “the entire physical environment of the vineyard: soil, its structure and mineral content; the water held in the soil; the vineyard’s elevation, slope, and orientation; and the microclimate” affecting the taste of wine and food.

However, as cultural anthropologist, Amy Trubek, points out in *The Taste of Place*, the origins of terroir are as much cultural and economic as scientific. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, French winemakers, tastemakers, and farmers began developing the ideas of terroir and the more official appellation d’origine contrôlée (protected designation of origin) to protect both their culinary heritage and their economic investments. Today, these ideas both preserve traditional foodways and, at times, reinforce darker nationalistic tendencies.

Terroir, it turns out, is about how human culture as well as soil and weather shape the culinary tastes of a region.

Like France, Houston was once under an ancient sea. And, despite the miles of concrete, asphalt, and strip malls, you can find hints that this and other geological events can shape taste in Houston. I’ve bitten into collards and mustards grown in sandy soil between Houston and Port Lavaca that have a salty tang, making them some of the best greens I’ve ever eaten. I’ve noticed the subtle differences in salinity and taste of oysters harvested from different parts of Galveston Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. In 2011, during the height of the drought, the citrus grown in the area was some of the best I’ve had because the dry conditions concentrated the flavors, even as farmers struggled to save their crops.

But these tastes are fleeting. In Houston, we’ve developed over most of the agriculture we had and, as the area’s population continues to grow, Gulf fisheries have, unfortunately, become less influential in shaping how and what we eat. The Mexican Revolution and the Battle of Dien Bien Phu are now more important to what Houston eats than ancient seabeds and shifting tectonic plates. Though our geography—the bayous and bays and the proximity of the Gulf—helped make it possible for those events to influence what we eat.

So arguably, Houston may not have *gout du terroir* in the traditional sense of taste of the soil but we have it in the other sense of that French phrase, local taste—tastes that are being shaped by a history and culture of diversity.

In Harris County, where according to Rice’s Kinder Institute in 2014 the population was 41.8 percent Latino, 31.4 percent Anglo, 18.5 percent African American, and 6.8 percent Asian, that diversity has become key to understanding what we eat, but it also makes it impossible to define a single terroir or cuisine for the area. We are developing regional cuisines based not on what’s harvested here but who lives here.

The central tenants of those cuisines will vary depending on whether you are a second-generation Vietnamese, a seventh-generation Tejano, a fourth-generation Anglo, or a first-generation Honduran; whether your great-grandparents were African Americans from southwest Louisiana or immigrated from Lebanon; or whether you recently arrived from Nigeria, Syria, Mexico, or India.

As these tastes fight the culinary white noise of the corporate grocery store aisles, what is emerging are cuisines shaped by global events, the Gulf of Mexico, international trade (often through the Port of Houston), and, as is often the case in Houston, by immigration—cuisines that as the United States approaches Houston’s level of diversity may serve as a model for how the nation lives and eats. Though the best way for that to happen may be less attempting to define it and instead to listen, observe, and eat.