

THE MYTH OF THE ESTATE?—ANDY PEAY



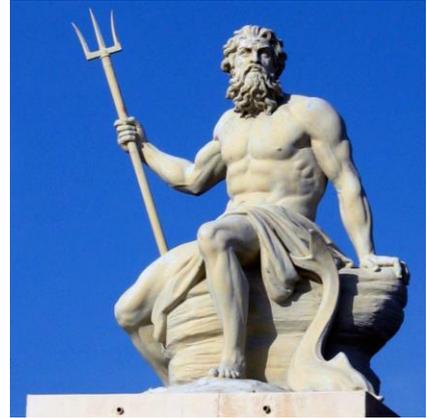
Giacomo Conterno. Domaine de la Romanée-Conti. Domaine Jean-Louis Chave. Other than high price tags, Old World roots, and legions of fans, what do these wineries have in common? All three are estate wineries. Recently a wine writer wrote a book on California Wine with a chapter provocatively titled, “The Myth of the Estate”. The chapter made, and still makes, me bristle. In it, the author suggests that in California it is not necessary for a winery to own the vineyard (i.e. to be an estate bottling) or to have even farmed the vineyard in order to make California’s greatest wines. He proffered,

you can buy fruit, perhaps farm your section of the vineyard to some degree for even a short period of time, and, voilà, you have captured the essence of the vineyard and are making the best examples of those varieties in California. While I agree it is possible to make a delicious wine this way (ahem, we make a superb *Savoy* Pinot noir, btw), the negociant model often provides wines that are a fair representation of a wine from that region, or a specific vineyard, but rarely captures the essence of the vineyard like a wine made by the people who planted and farm it. For some reason negociant wines seldom make the heart soar. Why is that? The grapes frequently come from a heralded vineyard and the winemakers have all the technical ability of their estate counterparts? There must be something about living on the vineyard throughout the year, daily walking the vineyard at all stages of growth, and making wine from the same vineyard across many varying vintages, that enables the estate winemaker to best capture the ineffable, yet distinct, voice of the vineyard. I think it has something to do with the estate winemaker’s slow accretion of knowledge about the unique quality of grapes grown at their site. Without this intimate knowledge the winemaker may unwittingly obliterate the identity of the vineyard by employing winemaking techniques or otherwise make decisions to add qualities to the wine that are not unique to their site: excessive oak use, excessive ripeness or unripeness, excessive stem use, etc. It is easy to layer in flavors that consumers recognize and like but those flavors are available to any winemaker making wine from any region. It takes restraint to hold off on the heavy make-up and only highlight features so the inner beauty of the site shines. Now, not every consumer may like the face the winemaker brings forth, but the subset of people who do have a much deeper relationship with the wine as there is something exceptional that they appreciate and connect with. That connection can start a long conversation that may last a lifetime between the drinker and the wine. That is the myth of the estate I believe in and the one that informs my wine buying and making.

At the base of this argument lies the granddaddy of wine mythology, the concept of terroir. The modern, western mindset oftentimes balks at the idea of terroir since the link between the wine and place is not measurable and scientifically verifiable. The idea (see not even a thing but an idea!) is complex, comprising physical attributes that can be measured (temperature, precipitation, aspect, geology, etc.) and those that cannot (the human who made the decision on how to farm and all of the subtle influences on her sensibilities when making decisions). Despite an inability to scientifically explain why a wine tastes the way it does based on its terroir, however, we all know terroir exists from our empirical experience. From drinking. But, like this “Estate business,” terroir is relegated to the class of Mythology wine marketers obviously trot out to justify their pricing, right?

Even if you persist in calling “Estate quality” and “terroir” myths, are myths inherently untrue? Myths exist and are vital because they often explain cultural phenomenon and “truths” that are otherwise beyond description. A list of characteristics about what it means to live a good life is not as powerful as a

mythical tale that shows you the value of living a good life. Despite my attempt above, I cannot tell you concretely why estate wines are better. But in the myth I am writing, I think it is because the land, the wine, and the people are one. Can you taste Aubert de Villaine in La Tâche? Literally, thankfully, not. But you can somehow taste his steady hand on the rudder, year in, year out. There is a clear vision that can persist through conflicts of interest, tides of fashion, or restless egos. The commitment to expressing the estate's terroir trumps all other considerations and, in doing so, ensures no one else can make a wine that tastes like DRC's La Tâche. Coaxing out the estate profile in the wine was considered long before that spring's bud break or even the previous ten budbreaks. Theoretically, someone can purchase the same grapes from the vineyard (it is a Monopole, I know) and make a vineyard designate wine but when making the wine they will not know what the person who planted the vines was thinking when he planted. He does not know what the farmer was thinking when he made each decision throughout the year or throughout the past twenty years. He simply does not possess the same aesthetics, sensibility, and experience as the estate vigneron.



We have beaten the drum of estate winemaking since we started in 1996. It was the first commandment Nick laid down when he proposed we make wine together. It was a monumental decision as it forced us to become farmers first—yes, boys from the suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio, decidedly not farm country. It meant we had to plant a raw piece of land and farm it for 4 years before harvesting our first fruit and then to wait another two years until we had wine to sell. To cap it off, we had to sell most of our fruit the first 4 years since we did not feel we could reveal the voice of our site and make world-class level wines from young fruit. As the newly minted MBA, it did not take me long to calculate the financial impact of this decision. But, unless you are one of the few people who inherit a vineyard, this is what you must do if you wish to be an estate vineyard. Hopefully, the piece of land you planted has something interesting to say.

But you don't really need me to tell you the author got it wrong when he called the importance of an Estate a mythology in California. Almost every winemaker/owner who finds financial success making wines with purchased fruit eventually ends up buying land to plant her own vineyard. And that is a fact, not a myth.