

Incorporating *Terroir*

L’Affaire Mondavi Reconsidered

CHOOSING A BOTTLE OF FRENCH WINE means deciding about dirt. No, this is not the latest version of a Zen koan. Americans tend to pick wines according to the type of grape. Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot? Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc? But in France people consider location first. The terms can be broad—say, Bordeaux or Burgundy—or narrow, for instance rocky or rich soil. As a wine neophyte I have been trying to figure out why dirt or, more elegantly, soil is so important to wine in France. The French word linking soil to wine is *terroir*, and even after years of exploration, I see no end in sight.

Terroir recently created a transatlantic battle of epic proportions. The forces? On one side, the United States, whose chief emissary was the Mondavi Family Winery. On the other, France, represented by a coalition including vintners, politicians, citizens, and even a famous actor. Emmanuelle Vaudour, a French wine researcher, has pointed out that “*terroir* is often mis-translated, giving rise to a great deal of further misunderstanding.”¹ No recent story reveals the problems in translating the French understanding of *terroir* and the possibility that it can be misunderstood by outsiders (even wine experts) as aptly as the tale of the Mondavi family’s journey to southwest France.

The Mondavis went to Languedoc-Roussillon in the late 1990s to make a premium, or *grand cru*, wine on French soil. They appointed a general manager to develop a vineyard and winery. Three years later they left the region without success. Their decision to withdraw from France and abandon plans to make a premium wine was the direct result of fierce local resistance. Initially, the main antagonists were individuals involved in making wine in Aniane, the village where the Mondavi family intended to create their vineyard and winery. Later, many other residents of Aniane joined the fray.

Terroir, for the French, possesses a constellation of possible referents; meaning shifts from place to place, person to person, situation to situation. The fluid and multiple meanings, as well as usages, of the term *terroir* in France have frequently led to cross-cultural confusion. Across the Atlantic,

Americans have tended to interpret *terroir* quite narrowly, adopting dictionary definitions that translate *terroir* as a single word, “soil.”² Less attention has been given to other translations, which define *terroir* as a *place* with specific cultural and historical genealogies. Neglecting to connect *terroir* to a territory’s heritage got the Mondavi Family Winery into trouble.

Terroir has multiple meanings, but they all refer back to a system of ordering and classifying a particular place. Anthropologist Mary Douglas, famous for her analysis of religious purity and pollution rules, said in that context, “dirt is matter out of place.” *Terroir*, however, is dirt *in* a certain place. And as Douglas points out, “Dirt, then, is never an isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, insofar as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.”³ The cultural significance of a particular location motivates all interpretations of *terroir*.

Americans focus on *terroir* as a material phenomenon because the people transporting the term to these shores were involved in making wine. Thus, over the past century, here *terroir* has evolved to represent a particular philosophy of winemaking, one that argues that the natural environment is what makes wines distinctive in flavor. The esteemed *Oxford Companion to Wine* defines *terroir* as the “much discussed term for the total natural environment for any viticultural site,” where the primary components are “soil, topography, and climate.”⁴ Winemakers who espouse allegiance to expressing the flavor of the natural environment are called “French-style winemakers.” And, indeed, the French, especially the producers, critics, scientists, or regulators involved with wine, understand *terroir* as such. But there are other ways to think about it.⁵

The Mondavi family wanted to create a *domaine*, a specific location where grapes were grown, harvested, pressed, fermented, aged, and bottled. Such a *domaine* would contain vineyards possessing all the conditions—the viticultural *terroir*—for creating a high-quality wine. The Mondavi family chose Aniane; as Tim Mondavi says,



“The site was fabulous [and] I love the wines from the area.” He also wanted to make a wine primarily from Syrah grapes, the traditional variety grown in that locale.

Those leading the resistance movement were angry about the place the Mondavis chose to build a vineyard and winery: lands owned by the village of Aniane, in an undeveloped area called the Massif de l’Arboussas. Aimé Guibert, proprietor of the most well-known *domaine* in Aniane, was instrumental in organizing L’Association du Defense de Massif de l’Arboussas. Using all the strategies of a contemporary citizen-advocacy campaign, the combatants marshaled their resources. Founded on May 3, 2000, the association promptly set up a Web site, contacted the press, and started a local initiative to depose the mayor and the city council members involved in the negotiations with Mondavi. Their sole aim was to “fight against the clearing of 108 hectares of woods and *garrigue* owned by the commune of Aniane.”⁶ The Association resisted the Mondavi proposal because it was not sensitive to their understanding of the *terroir* of l’Arboussas.

The group was extremely effective in its organizational efforts. In the subsequent municipal election 84 percent of the citizens of Aniane voted, and the mayor and city council

Aimé Guibert consulting with a vine expert in the new plot.

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members involved in the negotiations with Mondavi to develop l’Arboussas were deposed. The new mayor was against any development of l’Arboussas. Rather than fight the citizens of Aniane, the Mondavi family decided to withdraw their proposal. After their defeat they abandoned their efforts to create a *domaine* in France.

“L’Affaire Mondavi,” as the story was often headlined in numerous press reports, was frequently interpreted as an example of French anti-Americanism writ large. And many people did use the rhetoric of “the big bad corporate American machine” to articulate their resistance or their support of the resisters. Even Gerard Dépardieu, an actor now also involved in winemaking, “compared the villagers’ fight with the Gauls’ struggles against the Romans, saying it was ‘an amazing story of this little village which resisted the invader.’”⁷ However, in examining the chain of events, the motivations of the key players, and the voices of the villagers more closely, we find that this reading is too narrow: *terroir* itself is a player in this story of resistance. Recognizing the role that *terroir* played in this dramatic conflict offers new

insight into L’Affaire Mondavi and broadens our understanding of a powerful cultural category.

The response of the townspeople to the news of the deal between the mayor and Mondavi was motivated by concern for the soil, but people were mobilized by an understanding of *terroir* as “the cultural meanings of a geographical place or origin.”⁸ *Terroir* is to the French as “freedom of speech” is to Americans; meanings are multiple, interpretations vary, and consequences shift accordingly.

Ultimately, this battle over a plot of dirt reveals the profound transformation of food and wine production practices over the past seventy years. The nineteenth-century version of Larousse’s *Grand Dictionnaire Universel* defines *terroir* as “the earth considered from the point of view of agriculture.” The importance of local practices of farming, hunting, and foraging in a particular place helps to explain the negative reaction of the people of Aniane to the Mondavi proposal to develop l’Arboussas. The Mondavi winery, an American company, wanted to use *terroir* to make a great wine, saying they would respect French traditions of winemaking. But the people of Aniane wanted to protect a *terroir* instrumental in defining who they are and preserving a certain way of life. To understand how the story developed, we must look at the various players.

The American Wine Company

For the past twenty years the Mondavi Family Winery has shown both a commitment to the prevalent philosophy of *terroir* in the wine world and a penchant for roaming the globe to start new wine ventures. The company attempts to balance an artisanal approach to winemaking with ambitions of becoming a major world player in the wine business. The Robert Mondavi Winery began in 1966 when Robert Mondavi started his own small winery in Oakville, California. From those beginnings Mondavi has gone on to become a publicly traded corporation that sold over seven million cases of wine in 2000 and registered 506 million dollars in sales. It is the fifth-largest California winery. Robert Mondavi has always run the company; he is now founder and chairman emeritus. His two sons, Tim and Michael, have long worked for the company and, in recent years, have taken on more responsibility. Michael is now chairman and Tim is chief winegrower. Their corporate mission is to “become the pre-eminent fine wine producer in the world.”⁹

To fulfill this mission Mondavi’s operations have extended from that first small winery in Napa Valley. In 1979 the company bought Woodbridge Winery in order to produce lower-end California varietal wines. In the

same year they launched a joint venture with Baron Philippe Rothschild, proprietor of Château Mouton-Rothschild in Bordeaux, France. The intent of the venture was to create a signature ultrapremium French-style wine in Napa Valley. French and American winemakers were charged with creating the wine, named Opus One. With the 1985 vintage they successfully exported California ultrapremium wine to Europe.

The Mondavi Family Winery went public in 1993, with the family retaining the majority of voting rights. To satisfy their stockholders (as well as their family’s mission to make fine wines) their strategy was to expand their winemaking worldwide in a series of joint ventures. The joint venture with the Rothschilds to make Opus One had shown the Mondavi family the benefits of collaboration.¹⁰ In 1993 they started a joint venture with the Frescobaldi family in Italy and in 1997 released the partnership’s first wines. In that same year they entered into a joint venture with the Chadwick family of Chile’s Vina Errazuriz, introducing the Sena and Caliterra labels. That year they also went to France and began producing the Vichon Mediterranean label from grapes grown in the Languedoc region. (Vichon was a California winery they had bought in 1985; in 1997 they moved the entire operation to Languedoc.) In 2000 they announced their intention to purchase land in the Languedoc region to develop an ultrapremium wine on French soil; they also released news of a joint venture with Southcorp, the major wine producer in Australia.

The story so far sounds like the classic tale of the ever-expanding holdings of large corporations. But in France the story took a decidedly different turn, highlighting the far greater complexity of producing a commodity with an identity based on place. Who has rights to the site that produced a wheel of cheese or a bottle of wine?

David Pearson was appointed vice president and general manager of Vichon operations. Since the Mondavis did not yet own any vineyards in France, he initially worked with local wine cooperatives, purchasing their grapes and then producing the wine in nearby aging and bottling facilities. Many thought that the Mondavis would immediately purchase a *domaine*, but instead they took over two years to study the region closely. They needed to find the very best site, since not all parcels of soil will produce great wine. Pearson spent two and a half years exploring the region: “We looked at the possibility of buying [an already existing] *domaine* but none of them had the right qualities [of] total natural environment of soil, topography, and climate. Our project was as French and *terroir*-driven as any other. [I see] *terroir* as a unique site, it provides products of originality.

The object was to determine the site.”¹¹ Thus, from the first, *terroir* was part of the Mondavis’ French strategy.

They settled on the village of Aniane in the Languedoc. The idea was to produce a Syrah-based wine in the style of the Rhône, a wine region bordering Languedoc-Roussillon to the north and east. However, the Mondavis were unable to find a preexisting *domaine* or even vineyards available for sale that had the necessary attributes for making a premium *terroir*-based wine.

Tim Mondavi and David Pearson felt that the village of Aniane, particularly the area north of the village in the hills, had the potential to create marvelous wines. At the same time Mondavi felt that the cooperative system of making blended wines from many small growers, long the tradition in southwest France, had “prevented the stars from shining. We thought we could use techniques and investments and break an economic [barrier] that people had not been able to cross.”¹²

Pearson began to work closely with the mayor of Aniane to see if Mondavi could purchase communally owned lands located near the domaine La Granges des Pères, identified as possessing the ideal *terroir* to create “products of originality.” Initially told they could purchase the lands, they were instead offered a one-hundred-year lease. Despite misgivings, they decided to proceed, proposing to invest at least eight million dollars to develop the vineyards, the aging cellars, and the bottling facilities.

So what went wrong? For one thing there was no consensus among local citizens, wine growers, and politicians about whether this venture was good for the community. Pearson had worked carefully and closely with all parties involved to get initial approval, as is clearly indicated in the official Robert Mondavi press release from July 26, 2000: “Earlier this month, the local winemaking collective, representing 80% of all growers, voted favorably on working in partnership with Robert Mondavi to produce a separate, premium wine. This vote, and the recent positive vote by the Cave Coopérative of Aniane, sends a clear signal that the community of Aniane supports our plan to create a domaine wine that honors the tradition and *terroir* of the region.”

The initial approval did not last. The Socialist mayor of Aniane, André Ruiz, a key figure in getting support for the project, argued that the Mondavi winery would bring much-needed economic development. The region was struggling with an oversupply of grapes, as well as changes in farming practices and price supports resulting from the increasing importance of the European Union in determining agricultural policy in France. Ruiz successfully negotiated the long-term lease allowing Mondavi to develop a 108-hectare vineyard on communal lands. But by the following spring

Ruiz had been voted out of office, as had town officials who supported the project. The new mayor, Communist Manuel Diaz, was against the project.

By May 2001 the Robert Mondavi Winery had pulled out of Aniane and abandoned any attempts to create an ultrapremium wine on French soil. The company’s press release said, “While we continue to believe in the value and integrity of our proposal, it is our deeply-held conviction that we can only be successful in cross-cultural business endeavors when we work in complete partnership with members of the local community. The lack of support from the newly-elected Municipal Council of Aniane as well as the administrative, legal, and political obstacles that have resulted from this change in local government, reflect the difficulty of forming a partnership and raise such uncertainty about the future of the project that it is no longer feasible to continue.” In the summer of 2001, Mondavi sold at a loss all their holdings in France for eighteen million francs to Sieur d’Arques, a major wine cooperative in the region. (In fact, this cooperative of grape growers was one of the major providers of grapes to Mondavi’s Vichon Mediterranean label.)

André Ruiz, the former mayor of Aniane, says that “this project is the major reason I was defeated. The new city council is against globalization and the arrival of Americans. They feel we are okay with things as they are.” But do anti-Americanism and antiglobalization really explain what happened? Is there not another way to tell the story of L’Affaire Mondavi? I believe that this story is more about the power of *terroir* than about political vendettas.

The Place

Aniane is located forty-five minutes west and slightly north of Montpellier, a lovely university town near the Mediterranean. A village with a population of 2,125, Aniane lies in a valley, bordered on one side by rolling hills overgrown with pine and oak forests, wild lavender and rosemary, and lots of rocks. This wild area in this part of France is called *les garrigues*. Surrounding Aniane on all other sides, especially to the west, is flatter agricultural land, primarily planted in vineyards.

The landscape around Aniane is vital to an understanding of L’Affaire Mondavi. Nestled between flat plains and rolling hills, the town straddles diverse topography with historically divergent functions. The hills above the town, called the Massif de l’Arboussas, have been used primarily for hunting and foraging, while the flat plains have been used almost exclusively for agricultural production.



The majority of vineyards in the Aniane region are located in the flatter region; however, vineyards are found throughout the region, even up in the hills close to l'Arboussas. Many people farm small, narrow plots that fan out from the center of town, which they harvest and sell to the local *cave* cooperative, and the majority of wine grapes are grown in these small plots. Only a few large *domaines* produce their own wine. Unlike in Bordeaux, famous for its many privately owned châteaux with large vineyards, the bulk of the wine in Languedoc-Roussillon is produced by small growers.

From the center of town, the road to l'Arboussas winds through a landscape that is partly wild, partly cultivated in vineyards. To the left stand the scrubby but magnificent shrubs and trees of the region—pines and oak, wild olive and rosemary. To the right the hills descend into the valley where Aniane, Gignac, and other wine-growing towns lie. The terrain becomes ever steeper and more remote. After winding through several small, narrow valleys the road enters into the heart of l'Arboussas, with its ochre-colored and rocky soil.

Much of l'Arboussas is owned by the town of Aniane. People come from the town, the region, and even from Montpellier to hike, take a Sunday promenade, and picnic. A welcoming sign proclaims, “The commune of Aniane wishes you ‘Bon appétit,’” and, below, “The commune entrusts you with this site—protect it!”

This soil has a place in the memories and traditions of people from the region. As they make sense of all the assaults on their rural and agrarian way of life, they don't want any disruption to the l'Arboussas. The sign in the picnic area, simultaneously welcoming and warning the visitor, hints at the deep and, perhaps, deeply conflicted feelings of the people of Aniane toward l'Arboussas.

The French Winemaker

A central character in the Aniane drama is Aimé Guibert, proprietor of Mas de Daumas Gassac. Many who have commented on Mondavi's initial decision to focus on this section of the Languedoc-Roussillon point to the presence of this esteemed vineyard. The entire *département* of Languedoc-Roussillon, bordering the Mediterranean west of Avignon, has become the new frontier for winemaking in France. Up until recently the region was considered the source of much

of Europe's “plonk” (cheap) wines. Now, new companies are setting up shop and attempting to shed the plonk image with decidedly more up-scale and expensive wines.

Guibert's Mas de Daumas Gassac is a pioneer in the movement to make high-end wines in the southwest of France. *The Little Red Wine Guide*, published in 2000, argues that the wines of the region merit consideration similar to that given in the groundbreaking 1855 classifications of the Bordeaux region;¹³ it endeavors to create classifications for Languedoc-Roussillon. The *Guide* uses “Catégorie” instead of “Cru,” stating that Catégorie A parallels Bordeaux's Premier Cru down to Catégorie E, understood to be the 5eme cru.¹⁴ Mas de Daumas Gassac is the only *domaine* awarded a Catégorie A or Premier Cru. This vineyard has a reputation for producing exceptional wines; Hugh Johnson declared that Mas de Daumas Gassac is “the only grand cru of the Midi.”¹⁵

Mas de Daumas Gassac is a relatively young vineyard, with vines planted since only the 1970s. Guibert entered the region as an outsider from Aveyron and did not follow many of the traditional practices of *vignerons* in the area as he developed a plan for planting and cultivating vines. The *vignerons* of the Aniane region had long planted primarily Syrah, Mourvedre, and Carignan grapes in the flatter plains south of Aniane, although some were grown in the hills leading to l'Arboussas. By contrast, Guibert's first plantings were almost exclusively Cabernet Sauvignon grapes, historically used in Bordeaux. Furthermore, Guibert planted only forty hectares at Mas de Daumas Gassac in vines, leaving the remaining forty in *garrigue*, which is purported to impart flavors of thyme, rosemary, and lavender to the wine. Most of the *domaine*'s plots are nestled near the *garrigue* in a series of small hills leading up to l'Arboussas.

Guibert made these radical choices because of his sense of “plant growing or nutriment *terroir*”—the natural environment and the influence on the grape vines and fruit of the vine.¹⁶ He consulted with two renowned experts from Bordeaux University, Henri Enjalbert, a professor of geography, and Emile Peynaud, a professor of oenology, both of whom visited the site. Enjalbert thought the *domaine* had tremendous potential, with the right characteristics for making exceptional wines: “This *terroir* of glacial deposit formed by the Riss, Mindel and Guntz glaciation periods provide the essential elements necessary for a grand cru: deep soil for the roots of the vines to see nourishment deep down; perfectly drained soil so that the roots of the vines are not permanently moist; soil so poor that the vine suffers, thus creating unique aromas of exceptional quality.”¹⁷ Once this unique *terroir* was identified, Guibert set out to use grape

Left: A street in Aniane.

PHOTOGRAPH BY AMY B. TRUBEK © 2004

varietals and adopt vinification practices that would take full advantage of it, ignoring traditional local practices, especially in his choice of grapes and his decision to intersperse vineyard with *garrigues*.

The winery's brochure states that "If the discovery of the *terroir* owes everything to Henri Enjalbert, the codification of vinification and maturing owes everything to Emile Peynaud." Scientific analysis trumped local knowledge. For many years the *vignerons* of Aniane called Guibert *fada*, or crazy, for following the advice of Enjalbert and Peynaud.¹⁸ Furthermore, since Guibert did not plant the grape varietals required to obtain AOC status for his wines, he had to label it as a *vin du pays*, even though he intended to sell it at *grand cru* prices.

In many ways Guibert and Mondavi have much in common: outsiders committed to using scientific definitions of *terroir* to create unusual *grand cru* wines. At first Aimé Guibert, David Pearson, and Tim Mondavi had cordial conversations. "Mondavi came to visit me several times...I encouraged him to establish here," says Guibert.¹⁹ In fact, Mondavi was initially interested in developing a joint venture or possibly purchasing Guibert's vineyard, though the negotiations never came to anything.²⁰ As Guibert points out, Mondavi would have had to sing the praises of Mas de Daumas Gassac to strengthen the case for his own wines, since he intended to follow Guibert's practices of interspersing vineyard plots and forest. However, he continues, "the day I learned that the politicians of Lanquedoc promised him part of a 2000 acre protected forest to plant [grape vines] on the hillsides I was ready to fight."²¹

Interpretive Battles

Guibert's vociferous response to Mondavi's choice of this particular *terroir* reveals the complexities and contradictions in the meaning of *terroir* for the citizens of Aniane, as well as for the French overall. The wine world's scientific definition based on "agronomic properties" is generally accepted as a type of "best practice" for anyone involved in the wine business in France. But as soon as this definition of *terroir* becomes the rationale for practices that trespass on understandings linked to a community's sense of tradition and identity, collective goodwill disappears. Thus Mondavi turned from friend into foe. Over and over, people in Aniane emphasized that the problem was not that Mondavi, an American wine corporation, wanted a vineyard in the Aniane region; at issue was the particular piece of *terroir* chosen and the methods they used to obtain it. For instance, Chantal Borrida welcomed Mondavi's presence until she heard the

news of the deal to lease portions of l'Arboussas. She referred to the "rootlessness" of Americans, noting that she herself is a tenth-generation citizen of Aniane, and said that in the town "nous avons vraiment des racines" (we really have roots).²² L'Arboussas are part of Aniane's heritage, vital to its identity: "If it had been a private matter [between a landholder and Mondavi], there would not have been such an uproar," Borrida explained.²³

Alain Carbonneau, a professor of viticulture at Ecole Nationale Supérieure Agronomique in Montpellier, believes that the meaning and uses of *terroir* exist on four levels: cultural, scientific, viticultural, and *paysages*, best translated as "landscape." He argues that the interpretations of *terroir* from the perspective of culture and landscape arise from indigenous beliefs and practices that are historically important to the French, which revolve around their relationship to rural agrarian life. The scientific and viticultural levels are more recent additions to the understanding of *terroir*, analytic endeavors that emerged in the early twentieth century to help explain and promote the qualities found in French wines, cheeses, and eventually other products.²⁴

The much-vaunted (and often criticized) Appellations d'Origine Contrôlées system, which designates certain places where wine, cheese, or other products have distinct characteristics and thus higher quality, uses a hybrid definition of *terroir*. Geography and traditional practices are used as initial gatekeepers for attaining AOC status, but the regulatory agency, the Institut National des Appellations d'Origine, also insists on scientific justifications to bolster and objectify these claims, which must create a link to the environmental conditions that create a unique *terroir*. Petitioners are asked to demonstrate soil structure, microclimate, and so on in the dossiers they submit to obtain AOC status.

Aimé Guibert relies on scientific and viticultural expressions of *terroir* every day; they are part of his best practices as a businessman who makes wine for a living. But as a citizen of Aniane and France, he also has recourse to the other levels of *terroir* to preserve the integrity of the landscape, heritage, and identity of l'Arboussas. As Carbonneau explained, even in France *terroir* is most often understood as culture and landscape. These broader understandings mobilized the Association de Défense de Massif d'Arboussas in its battle against Mayor Ruiz and *le groupe Mondavi*. In interviews and discussions citizens of Aniane repeatedly pointed to the potential destruction of the landscape and the loss of traditional practices—hunting, foraging, hiking—as the source of their discontent.²⁵

However, politics and politicians also played a role. For Aniane residents Mondavi's arrival offered a taste of the exotic,



but it also brought a genuine fear of the unknown. Much of the displeasure focused on the methods used by Mayor Ruiz and other local politicians in their negotiations with Mondavi; the locals felt they had been left out of the process. For example, the Association posted an open letter to Andre Vezinhet, the Président du Conseil Général de l'Hérault, on their Web site: "We do not understand why elected officials could conduct transactions with the Mondavi group using such secrecy so that the population of Aniane found itself presented with a *fait accompli*, without any power to express their agreement or disagreement."²⁶ The negotiations were not publicized; neither were public forums held. According to David Pearson, Ruiz had a secretive management style and counseled him to keep quiet about the proposal until after the upcoming municipal elections. This secretive approach created an environment ripe for rumors, many of which tapped into fears of American imperialism. Local growers stopped Pearson on the street once day and said, "We hear you are going to build a Disney World up there."²⁷ The political and economic implications of what were perceived to be backroom deals add another important dimension to the story, often overlooked by the press.

Cultural Patrimony and Globalization

Many journalists interpreted the citizens' response as another example of French resistance to globalization;

Vineyards in Aniane.

PHOTOGRAPH BY AMY B. TRUBEK © 2004

whether this signified courage or stupidity depended on the author's leanings. Businessmen and politicians implicated by the Association de Défense d'Arboussas regarded the Association's actions as bad business practice. The events at Aniane transpired soon after the attack on a McDonald's in nearby Millau, led by Jose Bové and members of the Confédération Paysanne, a farmers' advocacy group opposed to globalization. The newly opened restaurant was pummeled with rotten tomatoes. Following this attack a tremendous outpouring of support for Bové ensued, both in France and around the globe, and Bové's trial became a *cause célèbre* of the antiglobalization movement. Critics alleged that the Association de Défense d'Arboussas was antiglobalization, ignoring new economic realities and sabotaging real opportunities for economic development. In response the Association claimed that "we are not opposed to globalization when situations are characterized by fairness and open discussion."²⁸

In *The French Challenge: Adapting to Globalization* Sophie Meunier and Philip H. Gordon discuss what they see as France's paradoxical relationship to globalization: simultaneous resistance and adaptation. They argue that, in the end, for most French citizens the primary threat of globalization is cultural, not economic: the possible loss

of the nation's dearly and long-held sense of *l'exception culturelle*.²⁹ Certainly, food and wine have historically been identified as valuable elements in France's cultural uniqueness. In the case of food and wine, the loss of control accelerated by the push toward open trade, not just within the European Union but globally as well, is a major concern. The increased industrialization of agriculture is also an issue.³⁰ Furthermore, the wine business has seen a tremendous rise in foreign-owned companies (both individuals and corporations) buying French vineyards and setting up shop. The cultural ramifications are many.

No one disputes the fact that Mondavi's proposal would have destroyed communally owned forested and wild lands to create new vineyards. What people argue about are the consequences of such a proposal. In his support of the project, Mayor Ruiz underlined the proposal to intersperse five hectares of vineyard with five hectares of forest and wild lands as an environmentally sound approach to the creation of new vineyards. Local environmental groups had, in fact, vetted the proposal, which could possibly have brought tremendous economic benefits, especially since the region has recently seen a drop in the price of grapes and wine due to overproduction. Many believed that the presence of a major transnational winery like Mondavi in the southwest of France would have heightened the reputations of all wines from the area.

However, the new mayor, Manuel Diaz, pointed out that there were no guarantees in the proposal that the vineyard would not eventually be expanded to cover the entire 108 hectares Mondavi intended to lease from Aniane. He believed that such expansion would create an "environmental catastrophe" and compromise people's quality of life.³¹

Such popular protests are often simply explained as anti-Americanism and antiglobalization, and in general these and similar protests concern threats to culturally unique handiwork—not just food and wine, but film and literature as well. Some analysts consider these demonstrations an example of French intransigence, an unwillingness to accept the changes necessary to compete successfully in a global economy. But a closer look at events in Aniane reveals that the Mondavi affair involved more than naïve, knee-jerk anti-Americanism and antiglobalization. Rather, the citizens were staking claim to the process of economic transformation. Globalization does not have to be a timeless, placeless juggernaut, erasing all differences in values and practices along the way. Part of having control over the process lies in being able to retain locally important traditions and practices. In the case of Aniane, l'Arboussas represents this local knowledge, the *terroir* of a people, their traditions and

identity. Mondavi represented an approach to winemaking and *terroir* that concerned the soil but—crucially, as it turned out—ignored the place.

When it comes to food and wine in France, many people are involved in a fight to both preserve and promote a certain style of rural agrarian life. Aimé Guibert sees a direct connection between the declining appreciation for the cultural and *paysage* levels of *terroir* and the increasing economic incentives for adopting industrial-style agricultural practices. Guibert's concerns do not stop with his backyard—he feels that the opportunities for small farmers everywhere are dwindling. For Guibert good winemaking and all good farming come from proper stewardship of the land. You can find absolutely perfect viticultural *terroir*—the most amazing microclimate and soil structure—but if you do not adopt the right practices, the land and the wine will suffer. He spoke of a nearby vineyard, located in the same microclimate and possessing similar soil structure as Mas de Daumas Gassac, whose wine has a lesser reputation because the proprietor does not care about the vineyard's *terroir*. Thus, in Guibert's eyes, "la terre est morte."³²

Mondavi argues that the plans developed for the Aniane vineyard were "anything but McDonald's."³³ He says the intent was to adopt very traditional vinification practices—oak fermenters and wild yeasts—and use the customary grape varietal, Syrah. The only radical decision involved the vineyard site.

Conclusion

Even for those with the greatest investment in the instrumental elements of *terroir*—a certain soil structure, a specific geologic history—the need to incorporate *terroir*'s broader attributes is imperative. Culture, in the form of a group's identity, tradition, and heritage in relation to a place, must also be part of the equation. A French bottle of wine, though ultimately a commodity that is bought and sold in the global marketplace, is never far removed from home. The Mondavi group's focus on the more narrow definition of viticultural *terroir* may have unwittingly led to the demise of their project.

Soon after the Mondavi Family Winery decided to leave Aniane, the famous French actor Gérard Dépardieu decided to come. Dépardieu had already invested in wineries in Bordeaux and Burgundy. He was lured to Aniane partly by stories in the press of the town's resistance to the Mondavi proposal. Six months later, as he closed a deal on an already existing seven-hectare vineyard, growers and winemakers in Aniane were disgruntled because of the high price he paid

for the land. Philippe Coston, a local winemaker, said: “It’s a kick in the teeth for local growers—it’s impossible to buy anything around here that will allow you to make good wine.”³⁴ When livelihoods and traditions are at stake, even an idolized French actor is not spared criticism.

When we began our conversation, David Pearson disagreed with my analysis of L’Affaire Mondavi. He did not feel that the story was about *terroir*, but had rather to do with personal vendettas and political machinations. However, as we talked he concurred that cross-cultural misinterpretations did play a part: “We did not have a cultural broker. That had to do with the Languedoc. We felt that the two partners had to be equal, [but we] had no real partners with such stature. We thought we could do it ourselves. Perhaps it was hubris.”³⁵

L’Affaire Mondavi was a classic clash of cultures. The battle lines were drawn using disparate interpretations of *terroir*. Ultimately, the Americans lost out because they arrived with an incomplete map of the territory. Globalization may be radically transforming our food system, but many similar small skirmishes reveal that all local knowledge has not been lost. We have a lot to learn from the French about our attitudes toward the soil, respecting the landscape, the best ways to farm, and, especially, the many meanings of *terroir*. ❊

NOTES

1. Emmanuelle Vaudour, “The Quality of Grapes and Wine in Relation to Geography: Notions of *Terroir* at Various Scales,” *Journal of Wine Research* 13: no. 2 (2002), 119. In his article Vaudour includes a venn diagram that visually presents the ordering system, creating a typology of *terroir* that elegantly clarifies the term’s various meanings. This venn diagram delineates the separate but overlapping sensibilities toward *terroir*, which Vaudour labels plant growing, territory, advertising, and identity *terroir*. From the point of view of growing grapes and making wine, all these approaches overlap in a commitment to origin, persistence, specificity, and personality, all characteristics given to explain and describe wine (Vaudour later adds uniqueness to the list). Thanks to Carl Hanson for directing me to this article.

2. Translators find *terroir* frustrating: “English offers no satisfactory equivalent for *terroir*, and so must fall back on more general terms such as ‘soil’ or ‘land.’” See Timothy J. Tomasik, “Certeau a la Carte: Translating Discursive *Terroir* in *The Practice of Everyday Life: Living and Cooking*,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 100: no. 2 (Spring 2001), 523, note.

3. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Boston: Ark Paperbacks, 1985), 35.

4. Jancis Robinson, ed. *Oxford Companion to Wine*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 700.

5. Explanations of *terroir* in France are often extended to incorporate the idea of *goût du terroir*, the flavor or odor of certain locales that are given to its products, particularly with wine. For example, “Ce vin a un goût du terroir; je n’y trouve pas le parfum de terroir” (This wine has a local [or site-specific] taste; I don’t smell place). During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, saying a wine had the *goût du terroir* was not considered a compliment. But over time France has come to celebrate and promote the *goût du terroir* of wine and food. Following this tradition the Mondavi family hoped to make a premium wine with a distinctive *goût du terroir*.

6. <https://perso.club-internet.fr/verab/fr/projet.htm>.

7. Jon Henley, “Villagers Rebel against Sale of Vineyard to Depardieu,” *The Guardian*, 8 February 2003.

8. Vaudour, “The Quality of Grapes,” 120.

9. www.mondavi.com.

10. Interview with Tim Mondavi, 3 August 2003.

11. Interview with David Pearson, 13 August 2003.

12. Interview with Tim Mondavi, 3 August 2003.

13. Interview with David Pearson, 13 August, 2003.

14. *The Little Red Wine Book* (Paris: Les Arenes, 2000). The book presents the information in French, English, German, and Japanese.

15. Mas de Daumas Cassac promotional brochure.

16. Vaudour, “The Quality of Grapes,” 119.

17. Mas de Daumas Cassac promotional brochure.

18. www.aveyron.com/accueil/daumas.html.

19. Ibid.

20. Interviews with Gilles de Chambure, director of wine education at Mondavi Family Vineyard, 1 August 2003, and David Pearson, 13 August 2003.

21. www.aveyron.com/accueil/daumas.html.

22. Interview with Chantal Borrada, 15 March 2003, Aniane, France.

23. Ibid.

24. Interview with Alain Carbonneau, 5 March 2003, Montpellier, France. See also “La notion complexe de terroir,” *Progres agricole et viticole* (1995): no. 2, 122. This analysis is also supported by Kolleen Guy’s historical research in *When Champagne Became French*. She demonstrates that perceived threats to the livelihoods of small *vignerons* in Champagne during the late nineteenth century helped propel the development of the first controlled appellations. The use of science to explain *terroir* came later. See Kolleen Guy, *When Champagne Became French* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

25. A May 2001 article in the local newspaper, *La Gazette*, “Why They Kicked the Americans out of Aniane,” confirms this view in interviews with Aniane residents. Christophe, a thirty-five-year-old born and bred in Aniane, says, “Once they destroyed the woods in this fashion, they would not have stopped for anything. Nature is important.” “We used to live in Montpellier. When we made the decision to live in the country, it was not to see it vanish...” states Ursula. See Helene Tauzin, “Pourquoi ils ont boute l’americains hors d’Aniane,” *La Gazette*: no. 680 (18–24 May 2001), 9.

26. <https://perso.club-internet.fr/verab/fr/projet.htm>.

27. Interview with David Pearson, 13 August 2003.

28. <https://perso.club-internet.fr/verab/fr/projet.htm>.

29. Sophie Meunier and Philip H. Gordon, *The French Paradox* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute Press, 2001), 41–43.

30. Ibid., 55–60.

31. Interview with Manuel Diaz, 15 March 2003.

32. Interview with Aimé Guibert, 15 March 2003.

33. Interview with Tim Mondavi, 13 August 2003.

34. Josie Butchart, “Depardieu Resisted in the Languedoc,” *Decanter.com*, 5 February 2002.

35. Interview with David Pearson, 13 August 2003.

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