

Why no one in wine can agree on the meaning of this word

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Can you taste the rocks? Terroir specialist Pedro Parra samples a glass of just-fermented Cabernet Sauvignon at the Nuns Canyon Vineyard in Glen Ellen.

Few statements in the world of wine are as contentious as “I can taste the minerality.”

The controversy begins with the fact that no one can really agree, at least in any succinct way, on what “minerality” is. Most of the time, when people say it, they’re referring to one of three things.

Sometimes people use the word to refer to the taste or smell of stones, rocks or minerals — things that most of us haven't put in our mouths since we were wayward toddlers at the playground. Others use it as a stand-in for “terroir,” the also-nebulous concept that a wine tastes like the place where it was grown. And lately, the term “mineral white” has become shorthand for a crisp, acid-driven, more-earth-than-fruit sort of wine. (For the record, I employ the phrase liberally when ordering at wine bars or restaurants.)

Even if we could agree on the flavors, textures or aromas that “minerality” captures — and I doubt we will in my lifetime — there's the additional problem that the connection between geology and wine flavors isn't exactly straightforward. The wine world's conventional wisdom, for instance, holds that there isn't a single tasteable signature from soil types. So when the uninitiated say things like “mmm, I love the taste of limestone,” as if they're nibbling on the calcium-rich rock that undergirds the most prized vineyards of Burgundy, wine geeks groan.

I have a new perspective on these issues after spending a day with Pedro Parra, a “terroir consultant” who has become the global wine industry's most famous voice on the effects that geology, and terroir more broadly, can have on wine. His work with Hamel Family Wines in Sonoma is the subject of [a story I wrote this week](#). Unlike most of the wine people I know, Parra believes that you can distinctly taste specific soil types.

After spending the morning in the depths of soil pits at Hamel's Nuns Canyon Vineyard, marveling at the jagged basalt that buttresses much of the site, we sat at the Hamel winery tasting some of their wines: flinty Sauvignon Blanc (the approach for which was, “how do we kill the fruit on this wine?” said winemaker John Hamel); delicate, translucent Grenache; and fresh, energetic Cabernets.

As we discussed the nuances of each wine — some of which were obviously due to their soil and geology — I asked Parra how he thought about the wine industry's widely accepted tenet that you can't literally taste the vineyard's stones in the finished wine.

“I never understood when people were saying that,” Parra said. “The taste is very evident.” No, you can't taste lime or chalk in a limestone-grown Burgundy. But if you're paying close attention, Parra believes you can sense subtle and important hallmarks.



“It’s not aroma,” he continued. “It’s a sensation, an energy, a movement on your palate. If you train your palate, you can taste it” — by which he means identify a wine’s soil type based solely on its taste — “nine times out of 10.”

Granted, most people will never train their palates in the way that Parra has. Limestone “has a fine grain,” he said, “a fast and fine vibrato.” (If “minerality” is a largely unintelligible term, good luck to “vibrato.”) “Powdery rock gives the sensation of shock in your mouth.” (Limestone’s high pH tends to result in wines with lower pH, which translates to higher acidity.) Schist, in Parra’s view, produces wines that are “bigger, brutal and lateral.” Granite produces wines that enter the mouth “like Mike Tyson,” brash and bold. Basalt can create a “high-volume” wine, especially when it’s rich in iron.

This is opaque language — the kinds of complex metaphors that can make wine jargon feel out of reach for so many people. But I also find it evocative. In the case of the Cabernets from Hamel’s Nuns Canyon Vineyard, with its iron-heavy basalt, I absolutely could taste the metallic zing of blood — a flavor often captured by the term “ferric,” or literal iron. Were we tasting the rocks? It was hard to conjure any other explanation.

To be clear, a deep understanding of underground rocks is not a requirement for enjoying a wine. When I ask for a minerally white in a restaurant, I often spot a flash of recognition in the eye of the server or somm, as if they know just the sort of wine I’m looking for. They almost always do: The request has resulted in a glass of Chablis grown in soil packed with fossilized oyster shells, salty Assyrtiko from Greek islands flush with volcanic ash and Muscadet grown in magnesium-rich, granite-studded ground.

Did the servers assume I was asking for a wine that smells like wet stones? Or simply asking for a terroir-driven wine? Whatever definition we each hold in our heads, we all seem to know minerality when we see it.