

## Finding my *Terroir* – Jim Law, Linden Vineyards <http://www.lindenvineyards.com/>

*Terroir* is a French term that is not accurately translatable. I define *terroir* as wine's expression of the influences of climate, soil and winegrower choices. All sites have *terroir*, but it may not be of high quality, or its full potential may not have yet been realized. My own land is 76 acres. Some of this land I have deemed unacceptable for grapes (lousy *terroir*). Some of my land has good *terroir*, but was not initially understood and planted with the wrong variety. What follows is a practical biography of my quest to define, understand, and ultimately express *terroir* in the bottle.

Over the last thirty years my personal relationship of the concept of *terroir* has evolved from nebulous theory to a more defined set of parameters. There are three factors involved: climate, soil and me. I cannot change my site's climate or soil, but I can make informed planting and management decisions that have the best chance of resulting in a wine that expresses my *terroir*. Taking a cue from the Old World, I consider a wine of *terroir* to be superior to a wine of *cépage* (varietal wine). A *terroir* wine is singular and cannot be reproduced. A varietal wine is easily reproduced (the goal is to be "varietally correct") and therefore ordinary.

I purchased this worn out, abandoned hardscrabble farm in 1983. I had been doggedly searching for just the right site since arriving in Virginia three years prior. Like so many other New World winemakers of a generation ago, my quest for the ideal site was centered around microclimate with only a casual nod to soil.

In those pioneer days success was measured by consistent yields and unflawed wines. Slowly we matured, as did our customers. We became less afraid of our weather, more confident in the potential of our site. Encouraged by customer loyalty and America's newfound romance with wine, the obstacles to producing great wines began to diminish.

About 10 years ago I had a paradigm shift. The way I looked at my vineyard and my wines changed. My approach became more organized and influenced by a more European approach to vineyards and wines. It revolved around defining rather than simply conceptualizing *terroir*. Climate, soil and me were still the three players, but with greater focus and definition.

Climate. I learned that hot and dry might be ideal for production viticulture, but undesirable for *terroir* driven wines. High quality grapes need to ripen under cool conditions. "Ripe, but barely ripe" grapes produce the most complex and long-lived wines. . With the combination of climate change and improved viticulture, we as an industry have seen our grapes ripen earlier and earlier. The sweet spot for harvest in this region is September 15 through October 15. This is when the nights are cool and ripening is slow. Under these conditions white wines are more aromatic and have fresh, mineral acidity. Reds have better color, more elegant structure and more complexity.

Over the past decade I have been re-organizing my vineyard so that the majority of harvest will happen from mid-September to mid-October. Early ripening varieties are being removed entirely or re-

planted on cooler slopes. Late ripening Cabernet, originally planted on cool clay has been re-planted on rocky, thin warm soils in order to accelerate ripening.

Soils. In the Eastern United States, soils are much more significant in their contribution to producing high quality wines than on the West Coast. This is because of rain. We have lots of rain during the growing season. How soils hold or evacuate water after a rain is the most important aspect of understanding a great *terroir*. In fact, some industry leaders challenge the notion that *terroir* can even exist in dry climates. I have learned to read my soils and match variety with soil characteristics. Good drainage is critical in all winegrape soils. Too much available water not only results in poor wine quality, but also will often kill a vine due to complications from excessive growth.

White wine grape varieties are happiest in a relatively vigorous, cooler soil. A bit more growth in the canopy can delay harvest and give the wines more aromatics. Red wine grapes produce the best wines under more stressful conditions. It is critical for these vines to stop green growth by late July. This is best achieved by lack of water, which is most likely to happen in well-drained, thin soils. I save the rockiest steepest sites for Cabernet. Cabernet needs to be water stressed to produce great wines. Merlot however likes more clay as it is delicate and can easily become too water stressed in the late summer. This results in a fruity, high alcohol, flabby wine. These are relationships that I wish I had understood decades ago when I first planted.

Me. The third leg of the *terroir* stool is the decision maker. 30 years ago I didn't have the information necessary to get the best potential out of my *terroir*. It was there, but greatly underutilized. Unlike the Old World, I couldn't build on the foundation of my ancestors. I'm desperately trying to cram many generations of experience into one lifetime.

Through travel, reading and tasting, my goals and intentions change, perhaps too frequently. Steep slopes, high-density plantings, revised trellising and pruning are all practical reflections of philosophical evolution. More vines are being removed to make room for improvement as I try to get it right before I die. But deep down, I know that I will never be content.

In my opinion, the world's best wines are "*vins de terroir*". They are expressive of a place and a time rather than a grape and a process. If the *terroir* is not good, or poorly exploited, the winemaker is relegated to make a "*vin d'effort*" (a wine of effort). This involves varying degrees of manipulation in the cellar, which can make a correct, serviceable wine, but a wine without soul or a story to tell.

The following Linden wines were presented at the Chone-Law *terroir* workshop. These are notes that can be found in the wine archives on the Linden Vineyards website:

## 2009 Hardscrabble \$50.00

**Aromas:** Blueberry jam, pâtisserie, vanilla lift and smoky underbrush.

**Palate:** Dried cherries, savory, very linear, energetic, and fresh with assertive, long tannins.

**Food Pairings:** Lamb and other red meat, preferably served rare.

**Vineyard:** Hardscrabble Vineyard (100%), Fauquier Co. on top of the Blue Ridge at 1,200 to 1,400 feet with an eastern to southern slope. moderately shallow, well drained rocky, mineral soils give depth, structure and length. Vines planted from 1985 to 2006. Older vines planted at a density of 600 to 800 vines per acre. Younger vineyards at 1,500 to 2,500 vines per acre.

**Vintage:** 2009 started with a very cool, wet spring. As the season progressed, weather conditions improved. June was manageable, July was typical with only the occasional thunderstorm and August was dry, but cooler than normal. It was obvious at *véraison* that it would be a late season and that red clusters, especially Cabernet Franc and Merlot, were uneven in their ripening. As a result, green harvest at 80% *véraison* was ruthless.

“Uncommonly lucky” refers to an amazingly dry stretch during harvest. Northern Virginia was spared from the significant rains that soaked areas to the north, east, south and west. Red winegrapes required judicious work in the vineyard, meticulous sorting at the crush pad, bleeding, and draconian declassification. Harvest was from October 5 to October 29, 2009.

**Winemaking:** This is a selection of the best vineyard blocks of Hardscrabble. The 2009 vintage included for the first time our new steep slope plantings. We hand sort before destemming and then again afterwards to remove pink berries and stem pieces. 15% bleed. An average of 5 days cold soak. Fermentation begins naturally (no added yeast) in small one-ton fermenters. Punched down and pumped over averaging two times per day. Extensive post fermentation macerations make for a total *cuvaison* of 28 to 30 days. Malo in barrels. The wine was aged in new (50%) and slightly used French oak barrels for 21 months. Bottled July of 2011. 64% Cabernet Sauvignon, 19% Merlot, 10% Petit Verdot and 7% Cabernet Franc. Drink now through 2022. 467 cases produced.

## 2006 Hardscrabble Red

**Aromas:** Red currant and rose petals. Pine resin and toasted oak.

**Palate:** Cherries, dried herbs and Indian spices. medium body with mineral and savory flavors in the mid-palate. Finishes with a bright acidity and dusty baker's chocolate tannin grip.

**Food Pairings:** Simply prepared, mild red meats.

**Vineyard:** Hardscrabble Vineyard (100%), Fauquier Co. on top of the Blue Ridge at 1,300 to 1,400 feet with an eastern to southern slope. Deep, well drained rocky, mineral soils give depth, structure and length. Vine ages from 3 to 21 years.

**Vintage:** 2006 was a good year. I would have to characterize the vintage as "classic" in that the growing season was about as close to typical as is possible. There were substantial swings in temperature and rainfall during the summer, but in fact, this is normal for Virginia. The red grapes ripened fully with good balance. They were by no means overripe. They were "crunchy", red fruit, ripe. There was some dilution with late rains, which resulted in significant bleeding of the juice at crush. Dry, low vigor spring conditions led to a very large fruit set and a potentially enormous crop. Late June gave us a deluge of rain, rejuvenating vine growth and worrying growers about disease. July and August went back to being dry and hot. As a result, vines stopped their growth earlier than normal, which is what probably made the vintage for us. It confirmed to me the importance of vine balance and

having the shoot tips cease growth at veraison. Green harvest took place for the reds in early to mid-August. By late August we were in the unusual position of hoping for rain just before harvest, as young and shallow rooted vines were showing water stress. We got more than we had hoped for in the form of Ernesto and 4.5" of rainfall. Very fortunately, there was no berry splitting or rot, but there was some dilution. I refer to September and October 2006 as the great obstacle course, with alternating sun and rain. This pushed back ripening of the reds, but because of more rigorous crop thinning, our harvest dates were normal. Crop levels seemed to have had a large impact on red wine quality in 2006. Harvest was 9/28/06 through 10/25/06.

### **Winemaking:**

This is a selection of the best vineyard blocks of Hardscrabble. We hand sort before destemming and then again afterwards to remove pink berries and stem pieces. Fermentation begins naturally (no added yeast) in small one-ton fermenters. We punch down by hand once or twice per day. Pressing takes place after about 7 to 10 days, usually before or just after fermentations are complete. The wine was aged in new and slightly used oak barrels and puncheons (French and Hungarian) for 18 months. Unfined and unfiltered. 61% Cabernet Sauvignon, 17% Merlot, 11% Petit Verdot, 11% Cabernet Franc. 454 cases produced. Drink now through 2018.

### **2009 Hardscrabble Chardonnay \$33.00**

**Aromas:** Crystallized ginger, kiwi, stone dust, lime zest and honeysuckle.

**Palate:** Focused and persistent with an apricot richness and a sappy green apple finish.

**Food Pairings:** Roasted chicken or cornish hens. Sauteed mushrooms. Poached salmon.

**Vineyard:** Hardscrabble Vineyard (100%), Fauquier Co. on top of the Blue Ridge at 1,300 to 1,400 feet with an eastern to southern slope. Deep, well drained rocky, mineral soils give depth, structure and length. Chardonnay vines age from 15 to 25 years. Yields average 3 tons per acre (45 hl/H).

**Vintage:** I can best categorize the 2009 growing season at Linden as "uncommonly lucky." It was a vintage that started as alarmingly awful and ended spectacularly sweet. May and early June were dreary, cool and damp. As the summer progressed, weather conditions improved. The remainder of June was manageable, July was typical with only the occasional thunderstorm and August was dry, but cooler than normal.

"Uncommonly lucky" refers to an amazingly dry stretch during harvest. Northern Virginia was spared from the significant rains that soaked areas to the north, east, south and west. It was a great vintage for Chardonnay with bracing mineral acidity, good textural weight and ripe flavor profiles. Harvest was September 21 and 22, and October 5, 2009

**Winemaking:** Grapes were sorted and lightly crushed into the press. Only free run juice from two distinct vineyard blocks were used. Both cultured and native yeast. Some barrels were allowed to go through spontaneous malolactic fermentation. Barrel fermented in new to four year old French oak barrels. Aged on lees for 10 months with stirring. Bottled in August 2010. 332 cases produced. This vintage will improve over several years and plateau around 2014 to 2017.