

For Winery Owner Joel Gott The Best Terroir Is Not Always Under Foot

by John Mariani



Joel Gott, based in California's Napa Valley, buys grapes from all over the Pacific Northwest.

No one driving north on Napa Valley's Route 128 can miss the old sign that reads Taylor's Refresher, a roadside stop dating back to 1939. But the occupant of the land is Gott's Roadside, founded in 1999 by brothers Joel and Duncan Gott, who out of nostalgia kept the old sign everyone knew. The stand is always busy and people know they're getting an unusually high quality of hamburger, French fries, onion rings and milkshakes, sourced from the best beef, dairies and vegetable purveyors in the state. There are now seven Gott's Roadside stands (including one at San Francisco International Airport).



Gott's Roadhouse in St. Helena, CA, fits nicely with the winemaker's style.

Three years earlier, Joel Gott, who grew up in the wine industry, founded his own winery with his then-girlfriend, now wife, Sarah, buying fruit from the best growing regions in California, Oregon and Washington. That is not a unique concept in western winemaking, but it puts the now sacrosanct idea of terroir into question.

Twenty years you'd be hard put to find the word "terroir" in an English or American dictionary, though among wine aficionados it has been the go-to word to describe a very large or very small viticultural region with distinctive characteristics of soil and climate. Terroir is a passionate religion to the French, who have been carving up their parcels of land to identify the geological, sometimes mysterious composition of the soil that gives a particular vineyard's wines a particular taste.

When the California wine industry boomed in the 1970s, terroir still sounded like a foreign idea, not least because the vineyards of Napa and Sonoma threw into question how much micro-climates and levels of limestone and clay really mattered in a vast region where good wine seemed to just seep out of the ground. By the '80s, however, terroir was a buzzword for California wineries who gave them the more mundane term "blocks" plus numbers, and serious viticultural studies out of the U. of California at Davis showed that there were indeed plots more suitable to certain varieties than others.



Joel Gott often stores his barrels at others' wineries.

So, back to Joel Gott, with whom I had dinner at New York's new Four Seasons restaurant. Gott has that amiable California way of talking, using words like "neat stuff" and describing how he "feels like I'm six or seven years old again whenever I look at a yellow and green tractor."

His wife Sarah holds a degree in fermentation sciences from UC Davis, and experience as winemaker at Joseph Phelps and Quintessa Vineyards.



Despite its low price, Joel Gott Sauvignon Blanc has won several awards in blind tastings.

For Gott terroir is where you find it, leasing all his vineyards from nine in California and the Northwest, “always trying to stay ahead of the rolling ball.” He has other wineries ferment some of his bottlings

and stores his barrels at Ranch Winery in Napa. He partnered with Roger Scommegna and Charles Bieler on the Three Thieves brand and in 2005 with the Trincherro Family Estates to expand his market coverage.

“It’s all this crazy co-ordination that makes it fun,” he says, working with a small staff of eight. “To me it’s like a Rubik’s Cube: There are a million different options to making the best wine. Ten percent of the choices get screwed up in the winery, and we’ve made some losers. But we ask ourselves, do we want to take a risk in a vineyard we love? For instance, we only make 126 cases of Grüner-Veltliner because we wanted to see if we could make a good one.”



Joel Gott aims for wines with good acid to keep it refreshing with food.

As a result, Gott's range is very wide, from Rosé of Grenache (\$18) and Unoaked Chardonnay (\$15) to simply labeled Washington Red Wine (\$15) and a best-selling Sauvignon Blanc (\$12). Only a few, like his Oregon Pinot Noir (\$25) and 14 Cabernet Sauvignon (\$53) are higher.

Over the course of the dinner we tasted some of Gott's wines right next to some famous French bottlings, "for fun." Comparisons showed that while there were differences in flavor, there were far more marked differences in price.

"We want to make wines with acid that go well with food," he says, "and we want them to taste clean, vibrant. And we keep the price of our wines so that someone who buys a bottle feels he stole something because the wines taste far pricier than they are. We are unique in being up against big companies making brands, not wine."

Given his success by being unorthodox, I asked if companies and entrepreneurs seek to invest in his winery. "All the time," he says, "but we have some good bankers who loan us whatever we need. So, I'll meet a potential investor at Gott's Roadside and if he has nothing else to offer but money, I just say to them, "Thanks very much for coming over. Here's a milkshake?"