In the garden with Harold McGee

11 Sep 2006 by JR

Last week I had the great pleasure of an extended conversation in the garden with Harold McGee, the esteemed and thoughtful American food scientist and author of On Food and Cooking and The Curious Cook. He was over from Palo Alto to spend some time with Heston Blumenthal of the Fat Duck with whom he collaborates on a number of projects and wanted to discuss terroir in particular as he is becoming especially interested in how place can be tasted.

I gave him a choice of talking inside or out on this beautiful September day in London and it seemed entirely appropriate to be sitting in the autumn sunshine smelling the somewhat vinegary apples and plums that had dropped from our trees some time before.

He's a quiet man with a keen but lightly-worn intelligence and it was a great privilege to be discussing wine with someone who knows so much about a closely allied subject. He was mainly interested in exactly how and whether local effects, particularly different soil types, can be tasted in wine. We agreed that direct effects were few and far between but I suggested that two obvious examples in my experience are the Achleiten vineyard in the Wachau and superior examples of Priorat grown on its special licorella soil.

He had just been lunching with the Neal's Yard Dairy team (the son of Neal's Yard's Randolph Hodgson, by the way, has got the wine bug in a big way, which may eventually yield some interesting work on wine and cheese matching). Harold didn't know this but he did meet Bronwen Bromberger of Neal's Yard who reported that she had been disappointed with so many wines as matches for cheese that she started experimenting with sakes, on the basis that both cheese and sake are high in glutamates. Apparently this has been a great success and she has now developed quite a bank of apparently very successful matches – strange when you think how little cheese features in Japanese cuisine.

We started to talk about umami in wine, one of my hobby horses, and he gave me some background to the story I already published with Heston's experiences with wine and umami. Harold had been travelling around northern California with Heston, from restaurant to restaurant talking food in between. They also got to wondering what umami in wine would taste like so they stopped at a supermarket and picked up some red wine and some of that white steak salt that is chock full of monosodium glutamate, and therefore umami. They repaired to a secluded spot in the garden of the motel where they were staying and started to experiment. This involved opening the wine and Harold setting to to make up tiny doses of the salt. This he did by measuring out minuscule amounts on to slips of white paper. They were eventually disturbed and had some very nitty explaining to do.