

Let them eat dirt

Artist Laura Parker serves up a taste of place.

Around here, where locavores seek *terroir* in every mouthful and where chefs serve “dirt” made from roasted chicory root, it was only a matter of time before someone started serving actual dirt.

“If you want a taste of a place, go straight to the source!” says Laura Parker. She’s a San Francisco artist, and in her installation called “Taste of Place” she serves up dirt—in wine glasses—to demonstrate the influence of particular soils on the crops grown in them.

At a recent tasting in her studio on Bryant Street, Parker served Visalia sandy loam from T&D Willey Farm in Madera and Suther loam from Pug’s Leap Farm in Healdsburg. To me, the former smelled like rocks and salt, and the latter like a muddy football field. But then, I’m a novice. Another taster sniffed her Pug’s Leap loam and said, “Yum! I’d rather eat organic dirt than eat conventionally grown fruits and vegetables.”

Along with the organically cultivated soil, which she collected herself, Parker served radishes, collard greens, chervil, and cheese. By smelling a given soil and then tasting foods grown in it, Parker says, you can see how the soil “speaks” through the plants, and even through the cheese made from the milk from the goats that ate the plants.

Parker started her soil tastings three years ago because she thought farmers deserved more notice. “For many years, I’d draw a pear and someone would say, ‘What a beautiful pear!’ But they were talking about my drawing. I wanted them to appreciate the pear itself—and the farmer who grew it.”

In fact, Parker thinks of farmers as artists. “Of course geology and topography influence soil. But farmers influence soil, too, with the way they treat it,” she says. Soil, then, is the farmers’ medium. Parker makes it their message. ■ **EVAN ELLIOT**

