In the aisle of your favorite wine shop, you are confronted with a plethora of options displayed on the shelves. You've decided on a Pinot noir, but that doesn't make your selection much easier. You find numerous shelves of the same varietal and wonder, “Aren’t they all the same?” But it’s so much more than red versus white or Cabernet Sauvignon versus Pinot noir, and Etude Wines can help explain why.

“Etude was founded on the philosophy that winemaking begins in the vineyard long before the harvest and that superior grape growing diminishes the need for intervention by the winemaker, resulting in authentic varietal expression,” explains Etude’s winemaker Jon Priest.

What is it about the vineyard that creates such distinction in the wines? Various clones and rootstocks are used, but even those decisions are based on something even more elemental: vineyard soils.

With this in mind, Etude carried out a complete remodeling of its tasting room in 2009. The goal was not only to expose guests to its wines, but also to introduce them to the source on which the grapes are grown, leaving each guest with a better idea of the soils that support the vines, the differences between various soils, and the correlations between the vineyard and the finished wine.

While tasters sip happily, they can look at displays of eight different soil profiles that were recreated from the vineyards where Etude’s wine grapes are sourced. Three profiles are from grower vineyards in St. Helena, Oakville, and Rutherford American Viticultural Areas (AVAs), and the other five are from Etude’s Estate Vineyard at Grace Benoist Ranch in the Carneros AVA.

When the vineyard was planted, there was much to be considered: the slope and aspect, the microclimates, and the soils. Soil pits were dug and examined by a soil scientist and a geologist to determine the soil series and parent material found throughout. Each soil offers different water-holding capacity, chemistry, and inherent vigor capacity. The nine soil series identified were Kidd, Los Robles, Haire, Goulding, Laniger, Clear Lake, Tuscan, Zamora, and Toomes.

These classifications were a jumping-off point for the block design, which included vine training, trellis design, vine and row spacing, and the clone and rootstock selection. Most of the vineyard blocks are eight acres or less in size, which aids in capturing the changing soils throughout the vineyard.

Once the rootstocks were chosen, it was time to determine the appropriate varieties and clones to plant throughout the vineyard. The vineyard team set out to plant a little over 520 acres, of which about half is planted to Pinot noir with approximately 17 different clones, creating a wealth of diversity (Fig. 1). Etude currently produces a Chardonnay, a Pinot gris, a Pinot blanc, a Pinot noir rosé, and four different Pinot noirs from its Estate Vineyard.

Fruits for the Temblor Pinot noir, Deer Camp Pinot noir, and Heirloom Pinot noir are grown in Tuscan Cobbly Clay, Kidd Stoney Loam, and Goulding Toomes Complex, respectively. Grapes are grown in all of the soil types and combined to make the Carneros Pinot noir. What catches most people’s eyes when looking at the soil profiles in which Pinot noir grapes are grown is the distinct variation in the soils, despite the fact that they are all used to grow vines of the same variety (Fig. 2). In some instances, the blocks are less than 100 feet away from each other but look and act completely different.
The soil displays were recreated from photos of the original soil pits and the soil scientists’ pit descriptions. The profiles are not to scale due to design purposes and, in some instances, because rocks had to be broken to fit into the containers; however, the designers maintained the ratios and constituents of each horizon. For each profile, the horizons were dug by hand from the selected blocks. The soil was placed into picking bins, labeled, and transferred to Etude for construction (Fig. 3). Soils were dried before each horizon was painstakingly layered into Plexiglas containers that were created exclusively for Etude’s tasting room.

The entire process took nearly a month to complete. Once the vessels were filled, they were transferred to the tasting room and placed into displays that run along one of the tasting room walls (Fig. 4). The final result was not only educational, but a work of art.

The soil profiles were so successful in the tasting room that the Etude team created similar portable versions focusing on the soil profiles for its Pinot noir programs (Fig. 5). This design includes the four Pinot noir soil profiles, which are presented in conjunction with the four Pinot noirs made from the fruit grown in each respective soil. As part of the display, an iPad application provides a deeper dive into each soil profile, a comprehensive presentation of Etude’s Estate Vineyard at Grace Benoist Ranch, and information on all of Etude’s wines.

For more information, please visit Etude’s website at: www.etudewines.com.