

When is Riesling not Riesling?

12 Aug 2008 by JR

After pressure from the country's more fastidious and better educated wine commentators, the South African authorities have finally moved to outlaw the one-word term 'Riesling' on wine labels for the distinctly uninspiring Crouchen grape variety. Absurdly, true Riesling has at the moment to be labelled 'Rhine Riesling' or 'Weisser Riesling' in South Africa while Crouchen may be labelled 'Riesling' unprefixd.

After years of prevarication, and presumably pressure from the big companies who have Crouchen-based brands labelled Riesling, the Wine and Spirit Board is recommending to the South African Minister of Agriculture that from 2010, it is real Riesling that should be labelled simply 'Riesling'. What a breakthrough.

Unfortunately, however, they have bowed to commercial pressures and still propose to allow Crouchen to be labelled Cape Riesling. Their argument is that the word Riesling is found all over the world on labels of wines made from grapes other than the great Riesling grape of Germany.

Discussion of this issue was had extensively in Europe 30 years ago when the Germans eventually managed to tidy up nomenclature so as to distinguish their Riesling from the perfectly respectable but very different grape variety we now know variously as Welschriesling, Laski Rizling, Olaszrizling etc. The Germans' aim was that the word Riesling *tout court*, not as a suffix or prefix, should be applied exclusively to their favourite variety.

So far as I know, American wine producers are the ones who have most obviously ignored this. I believe you can find all sorts of grape varieties labelled Something Riesling across America. And of course there is the very distinct crossing called Emerald Riesling that is still grown to a certain extent in California.

South African wine writer Michael Fridjhon is trying to establish the extent to which the term Riesling is still mis-used. Can you help? For example, I thought that the Australians had agreed to ban Clare Riesling as an accepted synonym for their Crouchen? Do you still see Clare Riesling on Crouchen labels in Australia?

Have you come across examples of wines made from grapes other than the great Riesling of Germany that either are still labelled simply 'Riesling', or were once labelled Riesling but are now labelled differently?

Your observations below would be most welcome. Please make clear to which country your comments refer.