

Wines that are organic and taste good

23 Nov 2004 by JR

See purple pages for detailed [tasting notes](#) and scores of the blind Riesling tasting referred to here and for notes on current Australian Rieslings.

It seemed eerily appropriate that this year's Great Riesling Tasting in London, held on the day that President Bush issued his ultimatum to Saddam Hussein, was held in the Royal United Services Institute in Whitehall.

In the library, lined with volumes on Churchill, Clive of India and Arafat, 15 of Germany's finest winemakers were abuzz with the hand that nature, if not man, has dealt them with the 2001 and 2002 vintages.

In another sun-filled chamber overlooking a couple of defiantly anachronistic horseguards, some of the best Rieslings of Austria, Alsace, Australia and the rest of the New World were on show. According to Brian Croser of Petaluma, 2001 and 2002 also provide lovers of Australian Riesling with the chance to compare the products of the hottest vintage ever recorded in South Australia, 2001, with the coolest ever, 2002.

His prediction is that it is the 2002 Rieslings which will eventually develop the particularly strange smell associated with mature Riesling, variously described as petrol or kerosene, which Riesling lovers savour but which must deter a few potential converts. Even Croser, one of Australian wine's most prominent technocrats whose first-ever wine produced was a Riesling which gave his future mother-in-law a migraine that lasted three days, admits that he does not know exactly what causes this curious aroma. He has observed that it is usually associated with cool weather, and oxidative handling (exposing the grapes to oxygen) in the winery but, like many a top German winemaker, is perplexed as to its exact origins.

Australia's hot-weather 2001 Rieslings, he predicts, will not develop what Hugh Johnson has described as 'the whiff of the forecourt', but will instead eventually show the honeyed, spicy side of Riesling. It is this wide range of flavours - including floral, citrus, mineral and toast - that make it so much more fascinating than most white wine grapes.

Riesling lovers will for the moment be concerned with the characteristics of young Rieslings, the wines they can get their hands on most easily. For the first time almost in living memory, German Riesling producers have experienced such international demand for their wines that many have virtually sold out of their 2001s, from a vintage that has set connoisseurs alight around the world.

Ernie Loosen of the Mosel (and now, via the J L Wolf estate, the Pfalz region much further south) sounded a note of caution about this much-lauded vintage - as in Australia the mirror image of its successor. In 2001 September was cool and everything looked potentially disastrous until a golden October finally boosted sugar levels and the best grapes for the wines were picked in November. Some of those picked in October, according to Loosen, 'had high sugar levels but not real ripeness of flavour' so suffer from a certain hole in the middle.

In 2002 in Germany everything looked absolutely perfect up to mid-October, with an excellent flowering and record warmth. But the rains arrived in the second half of October, just as harvest started, dashing hopes of the noble rot needed for Beerenauslesen or TBAs (though some good Eiswein was made at the end of the year).

But apart from being denied the possibility of making these very sweet (and very expensive) rarities, German growers are in general pleased to delighted with 2002. According to the innovative and thoughtful Rainer Lingfelder of Pfalz, 'it was the Mosels in 2001 that generated all the fuss and we just followed in the slipstream. In the Pfalz, 2002 is better than 2001, even if the picking involved a lot of work because of having to eliminate any rotten or damaged fruit - though the cool nights helped.'

In the Nahe too, a German wine region that is like Pfalz a hotbed of ambition, the hugely talented Werner Schönleber of Enrich-Schönleber maintains that 2002 is at least as good a vintage as 2001 for this estate - and his 2002s certainly look stunning.

Christian Ebert of Schloss Saarstein says flatly '2002 is the best vintage I ever made, from grapes with record ripeness

and healthiness which averaged 10 degrees Oechsle [the German measure of grape ripeness] more than in 2001'. Hans-Joachim Zilliken also confirms that 2002 was better than 2001 in the Saar whose damper soils meant that grapes were more damaged by 2001's wet summer than on the middle Mosel's better-drained slopes.

So, it would seem, there should be no shortage of offers on 2002 German wines to follow many merchants' unprecedentedly successful sales of 2001s.

But my preliminary tastings of 2002 German wines, many of them admittedly pre-bottling, suggest that this is an open, easy, friendly vintage - bursting with health so long as the vintner took the trouble to tend vines and grapes carefully. It may well provide some lovely drinking while we wait for the best 2001s to develop majestically in bottle. (A 1971 J J Prüm Wehlener Sonnenuhr Auslese Goldkap tasted recently reminded me of the thrilling combination of extract, ripeness and acidity to be found in the best 2001s but not in any 2002 I have tasted - yet.) Christoph Tyrell of Karthäuserhof in the Ruwer describes 2002 as a blend of 1999 and 2001 which seems about right.

A blind tasting of 36 top Rieslings from around the world at this same event was instructive. Although there were only 15 German wines in the line-up, five out of my six favourite wines were German (the other was Austrian F X Pichler's Steinertal Smaragd 2000 which is nearly £30 / \$45 a bottle).

Alsace too can boast of 2000 and 2001 as vintages that are truly exceptional in terms of their Rieslings - and Austrian Rieslings continue to reach new heights of purity and density with practically each new vintage. All in all, this is a good time to be a Riesling lover.

Some aristocratic Rieslings at commoner prices

Listed in ascending order of sweetness.

Eitelsbacher Karthäuserhofberg Spätlese trocken 2001 Ruwer, Mosel
£12.95 [Montrachet](#) of London SE1

Very light-bodied but no shortage of extract. Lively, dense, very elegant. Both dry and concentrated - a triumph.

Graacher Domprobst Spätlese halbtrocken 2001 Max Ferd Richter, middle Mosel
£10.95 Montrachet
£10.50 Stone, Vine & Sun (tel 0845 061 4604)

Clean, lively, good balance - fills all corners of the palate. Very 2001 - and all the better for it.

Wehlener Sonnenuhr Kabinett 2002 Dr Loosen, middle Mosel
£10-£11 Halifax Wine Co (tel 01422 256333)
Haslemere Cellar (tel 01428 645081)
[Philglas & Swiggot](#) of Battersea and Richmond
Wine of Interest in Ipswich (tel 01473 215752)

Cool, aristocratic and sleek.

Zeltinger Sonnenuhr Spätlese 2001 Selbach Oster, middle Mosel
£12 [Morris & Verdin](#) of London SE1 (see also the delicate dry version at the same price)
Inspired Wines of Cleobury (tel 01299 270064)
Dunells in Jersey (tel 01534 736 418)

Still very youthful but round, rich and easy. Extremely fruity but lifted by great vivacity.

Riesling for Chardonnay drinkers

These wines are designed to be a sort of introductory half-way house between full-bodied, dryish New World wines and the sleeker delights of Riesling. Listed in ascending price order, at about \$10-15.

Bird Label 2001 Lingenfelder, Pfalz
£5.99 [Oddbins](#)

A great hit already this wine but the 2001 vintage is a star and the 2002 likely to be a very worthy follow-on. (The range, export only like the Blue Nun Liebfraumilch on which Rainer Lingenfelder cut his talented winemaking teeth) is being expanded to include a Gewurz.) Full bodied, deep flavoured, dry - a blend of Kabinett and Spätlese made up mainly of bought-in fruit from Grosskarlbach and Bad Durkheim.

Dr L Riesling 2001/2 Dr Loosen, middle Mosel

£5.99 [Booths](#)

[D Byrne](#) of Clitheroe

S H Jones of Banbury (tel 01295 251177)

Great Western Wines of Bath (tel 01225 322800)

T Peatling of Suffolk (tel 01284 755948)

Cool, fresh, clean, off dry. Super-clean; super-delicate.

Riverside Riesling 2001 Balbach, Rheinhessen

£5.99 T Peatling of Suffolk (tel 01284 755948)

Bottletops of Putney (tel 0208 788 4752)

[Raeburn Fine Wine](#) of Edinburgh

Very clean, crisp, open, just off-dry - perfect for an outdoor lunch - from Niersteiner Pettenthal vineyard.

Riesling QbA 2001 Josef Leitz, Rheingau

£6.49 [Booths](#)

Hicks & Don (tel 01380 831234)

[Averys of Bristol](#)

Christopher Piper (tel 01404 814139)

[Noel Young](#)

Oxford Wine Co (tel 01865 301144)

Smooth and true off-dry, lively lemony expression of Riesling with impressive length.

Crest Label Riesling 2001 Schloss Vollrads, Rheingau

£7.85 Ribblesdale Wine Co of Clitheroe (tel 01200 441241)

Evingtons of Leicester (tel 0116 254 2702) - soon

One third malolactic gives a fresh, clean, convincing halfway house between true Riesling flavours and New World Chardonnays, with good minerality.

Graziosa 2001 Peter Jakob Kühn, Rheingau

£10.50 Haslemere Cellar

Montrachet

The idea here is that, if the vintage demands it, sugar levels can be slightly higher than the 18g/l required for Halbtrocken.

Clean, pure expression of Riesling, Concentrated, firm, true, dense and very good for food, if very slightly short.

The two most active US importers of fine German wines are Terry Thiese Estate Selections of Michael Skurnik Wines Inc of Syosset, NY (tel 516 677 9300, www.skurnikwines.com) and Rudi Wiest Selections of Cellars International Inc (tel 760 753 4244, www.germanwine.net). It will be some time before the 2002s cross the Atlantic but this is the time to stock up on as many 2001s as you can afford.

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