

Food-friendly Australian Riesling

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San Francisco is a restaurant town, and The Slanted Door is one of that greedy city's most respected Asian restaurants, serving sort-of Vietnamese food with a sort-of California twist. It is famous not just for its green papaya salad with rau ram and roasted peanuts and its long queues but also for its wine list.

Of the 52 bottlings on the current list, exactly two are made from Chardonnay, the grape that is by far the most planted in San Francisco's hinterland. And they appear under this heading 'Warning: not with spicy dishes'. Twelve of the wines on offer, on the other hand, are Rieslings.

Ah, Riesling! Great grape of the past and even greater one of the future. Admittedly, the majority of The Slanted Door's Rieslings recommended as ideal for drinking with the spicy food we are eating so much more of nowadays are fragrant, fruity Germans. But this sort of Riesling is probably a step too far for palates weaned on Australian Chardonnay.

I suspect that Riesling will worm its way into the affections of a new generation of wine drinkers not in German but in Australian form: dry and powerful rather than featherlight and fruity. Nowadays scores of truly fine examples of this noble wine type are available around the world. They can be drunk without food and are also much more delicious with many dishes than the ubiquitous Chardonnay, thanks to their racy acidity and lack of heavy oak character.

The fact that Riesling is one of the most obvious wine styles made without oak or deliberate exposure to oxygen has made it a prime candidate for bottling under screwcaps rather than corks. Wine producers the world over are increasingly frustrated by seeing their wines tainted by faulty corks and are actively seeking alternative stoppers.

The humble screwcap has been shown scientifically to be probably the best there is. But it takes a leap of faith to seal wines that are made using oak and a little gentle exposure to oxygen (such as many Chardonnays and most fine red wines) under screwcaps. So Riesling has been something of a guinea pig in this respect. Do not despise Rieslings stoppered with screwcaps; their makers are hyper quality-conscious.

Britain's biggest supermarket chain Tesco, incidentally, is so convinced of the virtues of screwcaps that it has just launched a whole range of inexpensive screwcapped wines, called Unwind, including a red or two.

Here are some of my current favourite Australian Rieslings, listed in approximate increasing order of price (together with UK stockists and prices) - but New Zealand is beginning to export some fine examples too. There is no hurry to drink these wines; Rieslings can be aged for many years in bottle, gathering nuances of flavour and becoming drier and drier.

Yalumba Y Riesling 2001 South Australia

Attractively packaged wine from Australia's largest family-owned wine company which, like many a commercial Chardonnay, is very slightly sweet (I mean off-dry really), excellent value, and made mainly from Barossa and Eden Valley vines, some of them 50 years old.

£5.99 Safeway from June

Leasingham Bin 7 Riesling 2001 Clare Valley

This offering from BRL Hardy is a little more expensive but is even better value for it is bone dry and obviously made from absolutely top-quality fruit. It should go well now with all sorts of fish and chicken dishes but I suspect it will continue to deepen in flavour over the next 10 years.

£6.99 Waitrose and, soon, Oddbins

Tim Adams Riesling 2001 Clare Valley

Quite austere and Grosset-like (see below) with massive extract. Cellar this one for at least three years. Very minerally.

Takes no prisoners.

£7.49 Tesco

Bests Great Western Riesling 2000 Great Western

The estate bottling is much better than the regular one here: limey and concentrated.

£7.75 Peake Wines/The Wine Cellar of Fareham (tel 01329 822733)

Elsewhere Riesling 2001 Tasmania

Good acid, light and racy in Mosel style with some floral notes. Very flirtatious. So far exported only to Watson's Winecellars in Hong Kong and the Outstanding Wine Club in Japan

Petaluma Riesling 2001 Clare Valley

Petaluma has been faithful to great dry Clare Riesling for decades. This vintage is lean and lime-flavoured with enormous extract. Strictly speaking, it should not be drunk for many a year though it is already very long and tantalising. Good price.

£9.49 Oddbins Fine Wine

Wineglass Bay Riesling 2000 Tasmania

The export label of the first-class producer Freycinet whose Pinot and Riesling show enormous promise.

£9.99 Reid Wines of Hallatrow (tel 01761 452 645)

Skillogalee Riesling 2001 Clare Valley

Emphasise the last syllable of this name. There's a fine perfume here and some very smooth fruit. Easy to drink already.

About £10.50 from The Great Northern Wine Co of Ripon (tel 01765 606767) and Wimbledon Winecellars in London SW19 and W4 (tel 0208 540 9979)

Crawford River Riesling 2000 Victoria

Full, pungent nose. Bone dry. Very steely and good with food. From Condah on the Victorian coast west of Scotchman's Hill. Much more alcoholic than most Rieslings though. Australian wine guru James Halliday raves even more over the Reserve bottling.

£10.90 [Justerini & Brooks](#) of London SW1 and Edinburgh (tel 020 7484 6400) which has just abandoned its retail operations in favour of mail order only.

Henschke Julius Riesling 2001 Eden Valley

Extremely lively wine that is only just off-dry with masses of exuberant fruit and an admirably creamy texture.

£12.95 [Lay & Wheeler of Colchester](#) (tel 01206 764446, web www.laywheeler.com)

Stefano Lubiana Riesling 2001 Tasmania

Much more powerful (13.5 per cent alcohol) than the Elsewhere Tasmanian. Bone dry, steely, almost herbal.

£10.99 Noel Young of Trumpington

Mount Horrocks Riesling 2001 Watervale

Smoky nose. Very dry, citrus palate which is still tightly furled.

About £12.50 from [Philglas & Swiggott](#) of London SW11, [Bennetts](#) of Chipping Campden, Compendium of Belfast, Inspired Wines of Cleobury Mortimer and Staintons of Kendal.

Grosset Rieslings 2001 Clare Valley

Jeffrey Grosset is another who has set a gold standard for Australian Riesling with dry wines of enormous extract and ageing potential. Cellar the austere, long-lived Polish Hill bottling and drink the fruitier Watervale one.

£16 and £14 respectively from Milton Sandford Wines of Knowl Hill (tel 01628 829449) plus Reid Wines of Hallatrow, Bennetts of Chipping Campden, Grogblossom of London and [Ballantynes](#) of Cowbridge.