

## Riesling

I think that Riesling is indisputably the greatest white wine grape in the world but many people think I am mad.

The problem I think, is that Riesling has so much character compared to Chardonnay, the other most obvious candidate for greatest white wine grape. Whereas Chardonnay in most cases presents the winemaker with an almost blank canvas on which to paint the traces of his techniques and processes, Riesling has its own very distinctive character which varies immensely and excitingly according to exactly where it is grown. Riesling responds rather badly to winemaking tricks. It is happiest when it is just fermented as simply as possible and the pure fermented juice bottled with minimal resort to oak, malolactic fermentation, less stirring and so on.

To me Riesling is great not just because it, like Pinot Noir for example, is so exceptionally good at expressing *terroir*, but also because it makes white wines that are so good at ageing. A fine Riesling almost demands time in bottle. They can be quite austere in youth (which may be why so many wine drinkers are wary of them). Many 1990 Mosel Rieslings, for example, are just starting to approach maturity whereas most 1990 white burgundies (Chardonnay's most noble expression) are way over the top. The prospect of a 50-year-old Riesling can be an appetising one while the number of white burgundies worth ageing past their 15th birthday is extremely small. I once presented a tasting in Frankfurt where we compared fine Rieslings with classed-growth red bordeaux of the same vintage and each pair of wines was maturing at almost exactly the same rate.

So just what is this precious distinctive character of the Riesling grape? Firstly, the grape does not naturally reach particularly high sugar levels. In global terms it is a relatively early ripening grape, even if compared to most of the grapes planted in Germany's coolish vineyards it is one of the last to ripen. In fact there is only any point in planting it on one of Germany's more favoured sites where it is exposed to sufficient sunlight to ripen it fully (Müller Thurgau and other ultra-precocious ripeners will do for the rest). Wherever it is planted, it rarely produces wines with more than 11% alcohol and is often responsible for wines with just 8% - a blessed relief in this era of high alcohol wines. But it is never short of flavour.

Riesling is particularly aromatic. Its aroma is so sharp and piercing, combined with naturally high acidity, that it can resemble Sauvignon Blanc in this respect. Except that whereas Sauvignon's aromas are of vegetation and green fruits (gooseberries), Riesling's are more likely to be of flowers, honey, minerals, nuts and citrus fruits. The exact flavour depends exactly on where it is grown. Even within the Mosel, its natural home, it can give a featherlight impression of rainwashed stone in the Saar, richly heady spice in the Würzgarten vineyard of Urzig and creamy hazelnuts in great Mittelmosel sites such as Wehlener Sonnenuhr - and that's within only 50 km.

To me the apogee of Riesling is its range of wine styles on the steep, slaty sides of the Mosel valley. Here the light, refreshing character of Riesling is most emphasised, in off-dry Kabinett, medium dry Spätlese and Auslese and some quite stunning sweet but delicate nectars labelled Beerenauslese, Trockenbeerenauslese and, made from frozen grapes, Eiswein. Drier Mosel Riesling is the standard aperitif I serve at home, weaning my friends off champagne.

The Nahe and Rheingau can also present us with Riesling classics, however, with increasing body, if not always such ageing capacity. Germany has few more classical wines than Riesling from the historic great estates, however many ups and downs some of them have suffered in terms of quality. The closer to the equator Riesling is grown, the less likely it is to need some residual sugar to counterbalance its naturally high acidity. Dry Rieslings from the Rheingau, Pfalz, Baden and Franken can make great bottles for the dinner table.

But Germany no longer has a monopoly on Riesling (generally called Rheinriesling wherever in the world other grapes go under the name of Riesling such as the middle European Welschriesling or the *ersatz* local Cape Riesling of South Africa or Emerald Riesling of California).

Riesling is the one German grape grown in France, in Alsace, for steely, increasingly sweet, full-bodied wines (just as German wines are becoming drier!). For me the greatest dry Riesling in the world is Trimbach's Clos Ste Hune, with an unrivalled track record for stately maturation in bottle. Knowledgeable French vigneronns ache to try out Riesling in their own regions but it is officially permitted only in the border region of Alsace.

A little Riesling is grown in Switzerland but in Austria, the Wachau and neighbouring Kamptal and Kremstal are busy

building themselves a reputation for Rieslings of irreproachable quality with the body of an Alsace example but the racy aromatic purity of a fine German. Wachau Riesling is ripened on terraces hewn out of the slopes on the breathtakingly beautiful northern bank of the Danube due west of Vienna.

Most of southern Europe is too warm for Riesling; if it ripens too fast and early, it fails to build any flavour. This makes it all the more surprising to find an enclave of fine Riesling production in South Australia, not known for its low temperatures. Both the Clare Valley north of Adelaide and Eden Valley to the east have established reputations for great dry Riesling, the sort of punchy, confident wine that goes perfectly with the Pacific rim cuisine of which Australians are now so proud. This is Riesling at its most alcoholic, sometimes as much as 12% alcohol, but it has real nerve and, in the Eden Valley, a certain floral quality to it while Clare Valley Riesling is often more lime-scented. Both these Rieslings can develop for many a year in bottle (though faster than a German Riesling) and after time can acquire a certain toastiness. Lesser examples - and there are plenty of sweetened-up commercial blends - may take on a more obvious kerosene note, a hint of which can be found in many an aged Riesling wherever it was grown.

There are signs that Riesling could do well in all sorts of cooler wine regions such as New York's Finger Lakes, Constantia in South Africa, north-western Oregon, Washington State, Canada's winelands and New Zealand's South Island. Wine professionals everywhere are utterly fascinated by Riesling. Now all we need is for consumers to join us!

Suggested labels:

Egon Müller Scharzhofberger Auslese  
Heyman Lowenstein Terrassen  
Robert Weil Riesling Spatlese Trocken  
Close Ste Hune, Trimbach  
F X Pichler Wachau Riesling Smaragd  
Jeffrey Grosset Clare Valley Riesling