Despatch from Rieslingburg

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Things were tough for those trying to sell Riesling to Americans in the early 1990s. The most literate and passionate US importer of German wine Terry Theise, now with Michael Skurnik Wines, had to devise cunning stratagems to persuade wine drinkers to even try them.

At a public tasting in New York, on being asked by a woman for his "best Chardonnay", he famously poured her a fine, off-dry Riesling from the Pfalz region in southern Germany.

"Oh my," she said, "I do believe this is the best Chardonnay I've ever had!"

"That's because it comes from the town of Riesling", he said conspiratorially, pointing to the word Riesling on the label. "All the best Chardonnays come from the village of Riesling. If you just look for that word on the label, you're guaranteed to get an outstanding Chardonnay."

"Why thank you so much, you've really taught me something," she gushed.

Of course I would prefer it if the butt of this story were a male wine drinker who thought he knew it all rather than a female one who clearly did not, but I take my hat off to Mr Theise for demonstrating so vividly that the typical American Chardonnay can be just as sweet as many a Riesling, a varietal scorned by Americans a decade ago for its supposed sickliness.

Things have changed quite dramatically recently however. Mr Theise and others importing German wines across the Atlantic are thriving, thanks particularly to American enthusiasm for Germany's 2001 and 2002 vintages. Nor is Germany's super-ripe, record-breaking 2003 vintage likely to be spurned by US wine buyers. There is barely a self-respecting restaurant on either coast of the United States without some fine Riesling, now recognised as friendlier to food than many Chardonnays, on its wine list.

America's second most important wine-producing state, Washington in the far Pacific Northwest, is even suffering a serious shortage of Riesling and the dominant company Chateau Ste Michelle is having to import wine from Germany to make up the shortfall.

Over the last few harvests grape prices for Chardonnay in Washington have been steadily falling while those for the increasingly popular Riesling have been rising to almost the same levels, about $700 a ton. Just five years ago the standard price for Riesling grapes was less than $400 a ton.

The main reason for this dramatic upturn in Riesling's fortunes in Washington state is human, in the bespectacled form of Ernst Loosen, wine producer of Bernkastel in the Mosel valley and arguably Germany's best-known figure on the international wine stage. With his deep love of red burgundy and Pinot Noir in general, he had been visiting America's Pinot state Oregon to the immediate south of Washington for some time when he heard that Chateau Ste Michelle was busy signing up Europeans in joint winemaking ventures. He had tasted the odd Washington Riesling which he thought had potential and suggested to the company, based in a sylvan suburb of Seattle, that together they might be able to make an even better wine.

Over recent years he has identified the three or four vineyards in the semi-desert of eastern Washington that seem cool enough to yield sufficiently fine Riesling grapes, and has encouraged growers there to increase crop levels slightly so as to delay ripening and allow interesting flavours to develop.

Thus was born Eroica Riesling which, since its debut vintage in 1999, has become one of America's most admired white wines Â– and certainly its most celebrated Riesling by far. The leading wine magazine *Wine Spectator* has included every vintage in its top 100 wines of the year (although personally I feel there may be more than a hint of fashionable patriotism at work here Â– it is not difficult to find German Rieslings finer than Eroica, however well made the domestic product).

Thanks to all this publicity, Eroica is extremely popular and sells out before the next vintage is available. Thus is it that Chateau Ste Michelle has decided to import a 2003 German Riesling made in the Pfalz by Loosen, to satisfy demand.

Under pressure from Loosen, who has become tired of cork taint, it is stoppered by a screwcap, still a novelty in the US wine market, but is otherwise packaged very much as a Chateau Ste Michelle product. Saint M will retail at around $12 - Eroica sells at closer to $20 - and is made in a very similar off-dry style with lots of fresh peachiness and immediate appeal.

Thus has Chateau Ste Michelle become a serious Riesling producer Â– indeed the company, whose efforts until recently were focused on Merlot, Cabernet and Chardonnay, claims to be the largest single producer of Riesling in the world, already selling a total about five million bottles a year of this under-estimated varietal, including their other Riesling bottlings and tiny amounts of an excellent, super-sweet, botrytised Riesling coaxed by Ernie from the 1999, 2000 and 2001 vintages.

To the south, Oregon producers are also witnessing their own small Riesling boom (everything in Oregon is small Â– except for the beards of the winemakers). There is now an official shortage of Riesling grapes in Oregon where prices per ton can be even higher than in Washington. Chehalem's $19 Dry Riesling runs out after four or five months and some growers are planting the great German grape variety once again.

This, it should be pointed out, is not exactly new in the Pacific Northwest. Riesling was the principal light-skinned grape variety in both Oregon and, especially, Washington in the early 1980s but then, as Myron Redford of Amity Vineyards puts it, Â“we realised we were gauche drinking Riesling and not ChardonnayÂ” so everything changed Â– despite the fact that the clone of Chardonnay planted in Oregon until recently was hopelessly ill-suited to its damp autumns.

Between these two Riesling peaks, growers tended to pull out their Riesling vines, or graft them over to a more fashionable variety Â– and quite substantial quantities of Washington's Riesling wine was sold in bulk to the likes of Gallo in California.

The trailblazing Randall Grahm of Bonny Doon in California has been producing a Pacific Rim Riesling from Washington fruit, topped up with the maximum permissible proportion of Riesling imported from Johannes Selbach in the Mosel, for years now.

California grows a fraction of the Riesling it once did, for much of the state's wine country is too hot for this cool climate grape variety. There are however a few producers who faithfully persist with it in foggy corners such as the Anderson Valley. Navarro in particular has steadfastly made fine Rieslings for decades.

The American region with arguably the most noble history of Riesling production however is the Finger Lakes region in upstate New York where long-lived dry Rieslings have long been made. They too deserve to benefit from the delights of the village of Riesling.

Some favourite American Rieslings

Chehalem Dry Riesling 2002 Oregon
Cold Creek Riesling 2003 Washington
Eroica Riesling 2003 Washington
Hogue Cellars Late Harvest White Riesling 2003 Washington
Navarro White Riesling 2001 Cluster Select Late Harvest California
Hermann J Wiemer Dry Riesling 2002 New York
Woodward Canyon Dry Riesling 2002 Washington