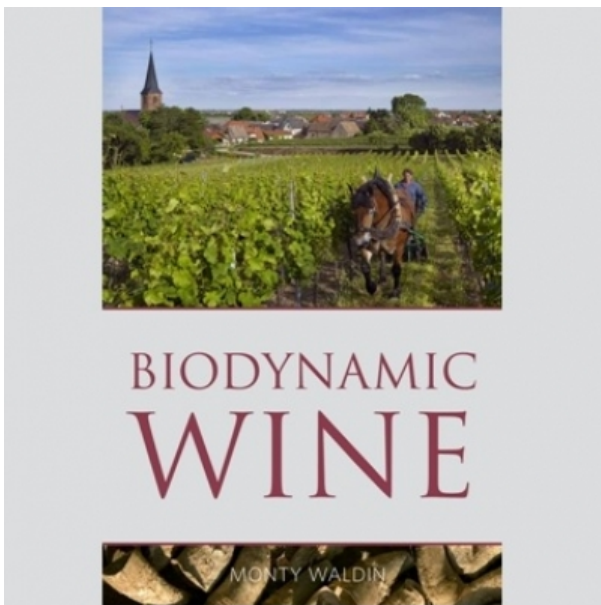


Written by
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Book reviews - production part 2



For links to all of Tam's reviews of wine books published in 2016, see [this guide](#).

12 January *We're republishing this free as part of our Throwback Thursday series. See Tam on [Monty and biodynamics](#) below.*

5 January *This was originally published for members of [Purple Pages](#).*

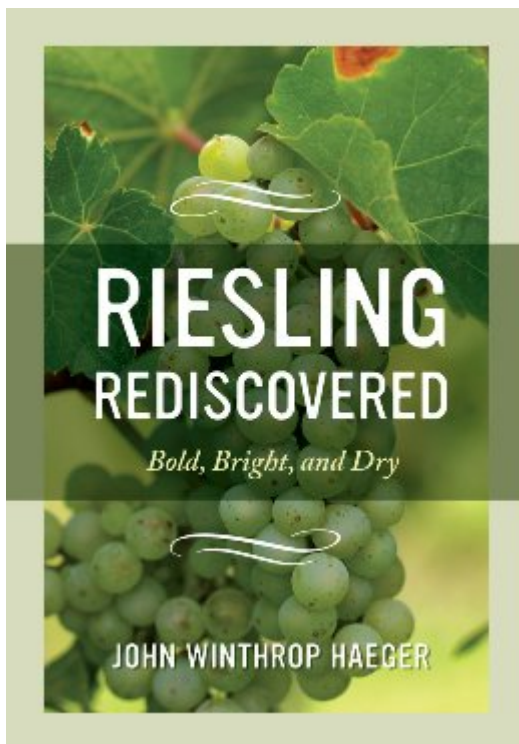
Riesling Rediscovered

Bold, Bright, and Dry

John Winthrop Haeger

University of California Press

£27.95, \$39.95



The heterogeneity of wine writers has never struck me so forcibly as during these reviews. From chiropractors to lawyers, they come at wine from every possible angle and background. John Winthrop Haeger is no exception. He has a doctorate in Chinese history and specialises in the history of the Sung Dynasty. An obvious leap into wine from there? Perhaps not, but it was at university that he started developing an interest in wine, and he has written two books on Pinot Noir. This is his third book.

And it's a forensic examination of Riesling. This is putting Riesling through the MRI scanner and under the electron microscope. No corner left unprobed.

Well, maybe only a large corner, the size of the entire southern hemisphere. The author does admit, in the introduction, that 'considerations of time, budget and expense' meant that he couldn't include Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Chile and Argentina. Which I think is a great pity, as it does seem to leave rather a gaping hole in this otherwise staggeringly detailed portrait of Riesling. But by noting that 'important chapters remain to be written', he's left me hoping that there might be a sequel.

Part 1 of the book is largely concerned with the general image of Riesling, the characteristics of the grape and vine itself, its history, styles, vinification and viticulture generally taken from a global and regional perspective. Part 2 is the drilldown. A full 89 sites (vineyards) are looked at much more closely.

He starts with a chapter called, 'The Riesling predicament', and at one point comments ruefully that 'Riesling carries more stylistic baggage than any other major international variety'. The chapter attempts to dissect the knotty sweet-dry conundrum of Riesling that has taken the variety on a rollercoaster of styles throughout centuries, no more so than in the current one, and dogs people's perception and understanding of the grape variety. This is the conundrum that has caused such controversy and disagreement, and still presents problems for the winemakers, sellers and consumers of Riesling all over the world. Scattered throughout the book are 'boxes' to highlight and ring-fence certain hot topics. In this chapter there is a particularly good one called, 'How is "dry" defined?' By the time you've finished reading that, you

understand what the author means by 'predicament'. The lack of definition, the differing protocols, the flaky parameters of dry and sweet which persist all over the world contribute significantly to the problem. Perhaps the whole chapter could be summarised by the headline he saw on the wine list of the Hearth Restaurant in New York:

'The glory of Riesling is the multiplicity of styles.

The problem of Riesling is the multiplicity of styles.'

'Riesling behaviours, typicity and terroirs' is the title of his second chapter, and I'd like to tell you that prior to reading this book I could tell my Riesling vine from my Sauvignon Blanc vine, but that would not be true. I now might have a fighting chance of recognising Riesling from 'the bumpy, slightly quilted look' of the top surface of its leaves to its small, tight cylinders of golden grapes. This chapter goes into exceptional depth of detail on the physical and sensory characteristics of Riesling, from its behaviour in the vineyard to the specific chemistry behind its aromatic structure. Geisenheim's Hans Reiner Schultz says of the grape that makes one of the most graceful wines in the world, 'Riesling is like a donkey'. And, indeed, when you read about this vine that has exceptionally hard wood, is resistant to many diseases and problems such as mildew, buds late to avoid frost but also copes admirably with frost, has easy-to-tend upright shoots, fares well in fertile and infertile soils, can be planted in just about any kind of environment, is fine with stress, winter cold and drought, and doesn't seem to flag much even when high-yielding, then you do wonder how this tough, rugged plant could ever produce anything other than workhorse wines. The section on the flavour chemistry of Riesling is also fascinating: a behind-the-curtains look at all the terpenes and norisoprenoids and thiols that contribute to what we know as Riesling, and how their co-existence seems to produce a unique set of flavours and aromas.

Winthrop Haeger takes a close look at terroir. Having just read Mark Matthews' book, *Terroir and other Myths of Winegrowing*, I was particularly interested in the study on Riesling-producing sites by the Department of Viticulture and Oenology at the Dienstleistungszentrum Ländlicher Raum in Rheinland-Pfalz (published in 2011), in which wineries made wines from '25 sites spread across five regions chosen specifically to represent all major bedrock types on which German Riesling is grown'. The wines were tasted by trained judges soon after vintage and several years later, using a controlled vocabulary of sensory descriptors. The findings, which show a very strong correlation between bedrock types and sensory descriptors, fly in the face of terroir dissenters. I'd love to know what Matthews would have to say about the study.

Chapters 3 and 4 look at the history of Riesling, from recent scientific analysis and DNA fingerprinting right back to ancient documentary evidence, before taking a closer look at the journey from sweet to dry, back to sweet and back again to dry. He looks at why the styles changed, particularly from the 1920s to 1970s, when Germany was swept away under the rising tide of sweet wines. Cold weather, rationing and sugar beet may have something to do with it.

The next chapters are for the serious geeks: a long, serious observation of all the possible options and traditions of making dry Riesling (which is what this book is ostensibly about, although sweet Riesling gets quite a bit of game time), and a minute investigation into Riesling clones. I had no idea that 'Riesling seems to be a genuinely gooey variety' to the extent that some vintners even use pectolytic enzymes to reduce viscosity. The paragraph where Monika Christmann disputes the view that Riesling is a difficult variety to ferment (with 20 years' experience fermenting many different varieties, she says that 'Riesling is no more problematic to ferment completely than any other variety') made me pause - she has a number of interesting theories as to why winemakers run into trouble, most of them pointing to the winemaker. I wonder what her fellow winemakers have to say about that.

It was also an eye-opener to read about the swing from traditional mass selection to clones and then back, more recently, to mass selection. Haeger writes, 'Just as the "won war" against many human childhood diseases is now the backdrop for some parental decisions not to vaccinate children against smallpox and polio, the dramatic reduction of leafroll and fanleaf through clonal selection and disease-elimination therapies has permitted many winegrowers to imagine that the need for disease-free material has lessened. In the United States, this has even taken the form of *sotto voce* assertions that "a little viral infection can be good" for wines, said to impart "more authentic flavours". How far back does the pendulum swing, one wonders. And I loved the idea of Geisenheim's 'budwood safaris'. I couldn't help imagining oenology professors with camouflage jeeps and huge Nikon cameras stalking through 200-year-old non-clonal vineyards, desperately trying to be the first one to snap the lesser-spotted ungrafted vine. Of course, they are much more serious and much more worthy than my irreverent suggestion!

The last two chapters of Part 1 focus on Riesling habitats in Western Europe and North America. These chapters are themselves incredibly comprehensive. For each of the Rhine basin, Danube basin, Adige basin, eastern North America and western North America, he looks at macroclimates, latitude, elevation and topography. He also covers the history, politics and cultures that had an impact on the regions and their relationship with Riesling. He looks at the styles of wines made in these regions and their markets. A few producers outside of these specific areas, such as in Piemonte, get a mention.

Part 2 is not, Haeger states, a list of the world's best Riesling sites, nor a list of his favourite Riesling sites: 'Every one has, however, produced at least a few vintages of very good dry Riesling in the hands of at least one maker... Taken together, these sites constitute a good picture of the present state of the art'. And thus he takes his electron microscope to 89 clusters of Riesling vines, 56 of them in Europe. It's a wide selection, from the northernmost grand cru of Marienburg in Pünderich, Mosel, at 50° N, to the southernmost vineyard on Kick-On Ranch in Los Alamos Valley, California (34° N). This is the minutiae of Riesling. They may not be his favourite sites but he describes them with reverential detail, taking us to the winemakers who own them and work them, giving us a breakdown of everything from the percentage of the fermentation relying on natural yeasts, to who adds malolactic starters and when. One gets the impression that Haeger has got to know not only the vineyards but also the wines and the people behind them very well.

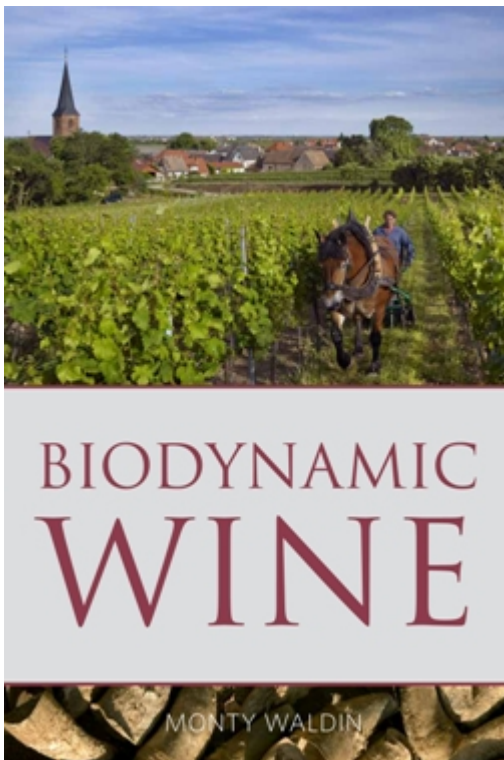
This is not a book for someone with a passing interest in Riesling. And I wouldn't recommend it to a Riesling neophyte. It's for the properly obsessed; for the geeks; for the lifetime lovers of Riesling. The detail in it is both fascinating and a little gruelling. In an ideal world, I'd like to have read it much more slowly, breaking it up with something a little lighter in between - perhaps a chapter a week, with a glass of Riesling in hand? That notwithstanding, it's a milestone book for the variety, and as I said at the start of the review, the other half of the story now really does need to be told.

Biodynamic Wine

Monty Waldin

Infinite Ideas

£30, \$39.95



Monty Waldin's name crops up in 72 articles on JancisRobinson.com, at least half of them on biodynamics. Richard reviewed his last book on [biodynamic wines](#) in 2013. His name, in the UK at least, is almost synonymous with biodynamics, Mr BD himself. So it's fitting that, for their Classic Wine Library series, Infinite Ideas should ask Monty Waldin to write the book.

In his introduction, which places grape farming in the four categories of traditional subsistence, industrial, organic and ecological, Waldin writes that 'if consumers are to be successfully encouraged to change their environmental habits then eco-warriors must play a part by altering their relentlessly downbeat message and offer instead a happy future to look forward to rather than a bleak one to avoid. Biodynamic wine is ... capable not just of encouraging that change, but of leading it'. He goes on to say that it is his firm belief that biodynamics is the best tool with which to make high-quality, terroir-driven wine while investing in the vineyard rather than depleting it.

The book begins with a chapter on the origins of biodynamics, although the first three pages are slightly tangential, plunging in - a little prematurely, it felt - to a preamble on the nine biodynamic preparations and a discourse on how people ridicule the spiritual side of biodynamics. Thankfully we quickly get back on track with Steiner's 1924 'Agriculture' course - a series of eight lectures published as 'Spiritual Foundations for the Renewal of Agriculture'. From this lecture series, Waldin reverses a little to revisit Steiner's background and upbringing, the dreamy child of the station master and the count's maid who studied science at university in Vienna, and gave it up after a chance meeting on the train. Under the influence of Goethe, he starts to become increasingly convinced that chemical farming (artificial fertilisers) weakens crops.

In 1912 he founded the Anthroposophical Society, with the belief that science and spirituality went hand in hand, and that the vitality of life depended on the vitality of the earth. To preserve the latter was to enhance the former.

The second chapter is called, 'The biodynamic preparations 500-508'. Waldin then spends quite

a bit of time on each preparation, explaining what it is composed of, how it is made, how it should be used (the dosage) and the role it performs from a 'spiritual', anthroposophical perspective and from, as much as he can, a scientific perspective. Although he does admit that, 'to my knowledge, science has yet to explain why cow manure stuffed into cow horns and interred from autumn to spring transforms into as dark humus-rich material which is pH-neutral and endowed with especially high levels of microbial life'. Of horn-manure 500 he explains that it 'works with the etheric or life-force energy of the earth itself ... allowing the forces of the nearer planets (Moon, Mercury and Venus) to help plants grow and reproduce'. The level of detail he goes into is not for the faint-hearted. Among other things, there are a couple of paragraphs dedicated to the art of cleaning animal skulls, including preferences for kosher-killed animals (the skull is intact) and fresh rather than frozen.

Chapters 3 to 6 are equally thorough instructions on biodynamic compost, dynamising (stirring) and other biodynamic sprays and techniques. This includes a section on really sensible-sounding things such as pruning washes and weed ashing, and then rather less logical things such as cosmic pipes and field broadcasters.

'Working to celestial rhythms' is taking a big step back from the soil (and cow horns), and taking a more aerial view - or perhaps I should say cosmic view. Steiner believed that 'everything on earth is actually only a reflection of what is taking place in the cosmos'. He also believed that human life has been almost totally emancipated from the cosmos, with animals less so and plants still very firmly embedded in cycles affected by the moon and the sun. Even the most cynical among us can't help but agree that thanks to electricity and technology and drugs we can live almost totally independently of seasonal and daily cycles of nature, whereas plants (without human intervention) are still very dependent on them. Following much experimentation on the impact of celestial bodies on plants, Franz Rulni produced a biodynamic calendar in 1948, elaborated and refined by Maria Thun some years later. Waldin gives a comprehensive explanation of the calendar, going into much more technical detail than I have ever seen with sections on the planet alignments, eclipses, nodes, occultations and transits. If you think I'm talking Klingon, please read the book; the translations are all there.

I almost breathed a sigh of relief when I got to the final chapter, 'Certification'. Solid ground. Facts and figures, rules, regulations, trademarks, and subjects such as converting from organic to biodynamic. This chapter felt a bit like one of those meals when everyone is speaking Croatian for the first three courses and then, when the coffee comes, they remember there's an English speaker and switch to talking about how to get back to the hotel in English. Ha! Part of the conversation again! Just at the fun bit.

I don't think that I've vacillated so wildly in any book I've read so far. Personally, I believe in biodynamic winemaking. From the little (oh so little, I now realise) that I understood of it, and knew of the wines that resulted, it seemed to make sense to me. I'm spiritual to begin with, so it wasn't a huge step onwards. So I thought. Reading this book made me realise that I knew next to nothing about biodynamics, and a bit like a committed carnivore visiting a chicken farm for the first time, it wasn't terribly easy to digest. I drink dandelion tea every day, but, hypocritically perhaps, reading about dandelion mesentery pillows buried during the descending moon with Virgin in the northern hemisphere for overcoming obstructions to the flows of forces in the farm's surroundings had me rubbing my eyebrows (something I do in times of great consternation). I'd read a section and think, 'No. No. This is too much.' Then I'd read the next section and go, 'OK. Maybe. This kind of makes a lot of sense'. Then I'd read the next section...

Monty writes well. That's not something I need to say, and this book is no exception. Apart from

the first three pages of the first chapter, there is no sense of someone on a soapbox with a banner and a can of spray paint (or preparation 500). He approaches this incredibly-close--o-Harry-Potter world as if he's writing a textbook on how to prune vines. No drama, no apology.

PS I still believe in biodynamic wines. I'm just not sure now whether I'm more mad than I thought I was.