



Written by
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South Africa's Riesling Warriors



In my recent [account](#) of trying to find top quality Rieslings to pitch against Austria's finest, I dismissed South Africa as a possible source, stating my belief that the grape is thoroughly out of fashion there. I am clearly way out of date, as Bruce Jack of Flagstone, South Africa's most energetic young wine producer, and one of the ground ripple of SA Riesling Warriors, so eloquently writes:

Just read your FT article on the wonderfully audacious Austrian Marketing Riesling initiative. Now, I know with only one vintage under the belt The Jack & Knox Frostline Riesling (a past [wine of the week](#)) is hardly deserving of a place in the line up you paraded, but like at Wimbledon there is the Wild Card tradition and it would have been a privilege to be shown up against that field!

But that's not really why I am writing. South Africa is actually doing the exact opposite of what you state - sorry. There is a revolutionary ground ripple of Riesling Warriors here. To begin with we are fighting the old school wine plutocracy to call Riesling - well, Riesling. At the recent annual Cape Wine Guild seminar - the most important wine seminar in the country - a whole flight (a third of the tasting) was dedicated to German Riesling and Austrian Grüner Veltliners. We are serious, adventurous and wild-eyed - like a cross between guerrilla freedom fighters and extreme sportswomen.

Cast your mind back to the first South African Sauvignon Blancs, and how gloomy the pronounced "English" outlook was. It would, I suggest humbly, be a mistake to write off the South African Riesling Revival with such (unintended, I know) superciliousness just when we are getting revved up.

There are four important peaks of potential we can realise. Firstly, we have older soils than anyone else (please challenge me on this, I have been waiting to bore someone with all my recent research) and, as Germany has shown, the age of terroir seems to play a masons' role in

the complexity of this ethereal grape. In South Africa, we need to shred our Calvinist conservatism and genuflect before the unknown afterlife of alluvial soil and guaranteed yield. We need to gaze drunkenly skyward to our bizarre, wild, dangerous slopes - the possible promise of Riesling Nirvana.

Secondly, we have thousands of vineyard sites cold enough at night, some plummeting to below 10 degrees each early summer morning to naturally retain a sensual memory of freshness I believe this grape yearns for. We need to cast behind the apparently stupefying holy grail of "cool" days and brazenly savour this Energy of Release crisp nights bring. They are like the electric collapse into a cold pool after too many hot, sweaty hours picking bent over a trellis.

Thirdly, we have wind. More wind than any other winemaking country in the late growing season. I am collecting data from almost everywhere to show this to those masses interested (OK, so there might be three people).

As I am sure you know, a Riesling vine spends roughly 50 per cent of its energy trying to grow skywards. If she ascends using only 20 per cent of her energy my gut feel is that she will not be too bothered to send her protégée seeds anywhere else and will therefore not concentrate her mesmerising powers on producing a really delicious packaging of her pip - the esoteric Riesling grape. She has robust physiology to handle wind, but a completely unexpected tendency to sulk when thirsty (sounds like my wife). At the same time she hates dampness and feigned generosity; wet, vigorous soils and unnecessary fertilisation make her feel used. Her soil it seems must be both her challenge and champion, and we have these soils.

From a more complete terroir perspective, Riesling seems to rear her head to the pitch of a lone trumpet while refusing the drudgery of a drum beat. I believe that's how and why she sometimes grows beautiful flavours, and other times gives up. And that's why she touches the souls of brilliant, renegade scouts, not infantrymen. Her home needs to be comfortably on the edge.

Philosophically this place suits revolutionaries and therefore Riesling. Give her water, but make her climb, not against the jail wires of a vineyard pole, but against the ethereal element of the wind, her ravaging, challenging cohort.

Give me about 350 years and I'll try to prove all this to you.