

RIESLING CHALLENGE

Riesling appears in an astonishing range of guises around the world. SIMON LOFTUS surveys the many incarnations of this fascinating, uniquely versatile grape

Riesling's reputation has suffered from a plethora of problems, none of its own making. Germany, its natural home, has deluged us with poor wines, rarely made from Riesling, but which taint its renown by association. Other, unrelated grapes have assumed Riesling's name and produced, in Central Europe, some of the duller wines in the world. And in Australia, source of many wonderful examples of the real thing, Riesling was until recently used as a catch-all name for a whole gamut of grape varieties.

But Riesling can produce some of the finest dry white wines in the world and some of the most delicious sweet – and every variation in between. It can make simple, affordable wines of character and quality, or produce rare treasures, necessarily expensive because every grape is individually harvested.

Through all these permutations, Riesling retains its distinctive identity, strong in character but with subtle complexity of flavour, even in the sweetest wines. It can produce wines which last longer than those of any other variety, developing splendour with age.

THE OLD WORLD

Sub-zero temperatures in northern Europe bring out the inherent toughness of Riesling vines. Given optimum conditions – lengthy summers, noble rot after ripening, bouts of frost – Riesling fruit ripens slowly, shrivels and occasionally freezes, producing in peak years rich, concentrated wines of tremendous balance and finesse.

Germany

In Germany there has always been great emphasis on the individual vineyard site and the German quality scale is traditionally based on sugar levels, lateness of harvest, selectivity, risk and sheer viticultural nail-biting stress. In recent years this has changed somewhat, with the emphasis moving to *trocken* (dry) or *halbtrocken* (off-dry) styles, intended for drinking with food, but it is difficult to make good Riesling in this way unless the grapes come from an exceptional site and are fully ripe. Fans of German Riesling still tend to prefer the traditional styles, ranging from Kabinett to Beerenauslese, which combine the scents of fruit and flowers, the flavours of ripe fruit and lively acidity and low levels of alcohol.

Alsace

In Alsace, most winemakers aim for a dry but intensely flavoured style of Riesling with little or no residual sugar. The finest examples come from austere Grand Cru vineyards on the high granite slopes of the Vosges foothills and on the limestone ribs



Riesling growing above the Danube near Durnstein, Austria

which project from this rocky spine. Deep rooted, low-yielding vines produce flavours unmatched elsewhere. Nowhere is the relationship between yield and quality more vividly expressed, nowhere are differences of soil more apparent in the taste. The grandest Rieslings of Alsace provide the perfect rebuttal for those who think that this grape is incompatible with food.

Austria

Austria produces more Welschriesling than true Riesling, but the latter can produce exceptional wines from the best sites in

Wachau, Kamptal or Donauland. Austrian Riesling tends towards the Alsace style rather than the delicacy of the Mosel.

THE NEW WORLD

By the middle of the 19th century, transported by German émigrés, Riesling was thriving in far-flung sites across the globe. In the balmy climes of Australia and California, the variety began behaving oddly, developing a fascinating array of hitherto latent characteristics. In common with their Old World counterparts, however, these Rieslings were all anchored by excellent natural acidity. Furthermore, the better examples could all stand up to prolonged bottle ageing, becoming toastier, oilier and more deliciously complex for anything up to 30 years in bottle.

One of the most important achievements of New World wine-makers has been to demonstrate that Riesling can produce wonderful wines for food, particularly the rich array of seafood coming from Australia, New Zealand and the west coast of America.

Australia

The best Australian Rieslings come from the Clare and Eden valleys, but the variety is grown in most other wine regions and some notable examples come from Victoria. As in many parts of the world there is a sharp divide between those who look for lightness and elegance and those who prefer what a wine waiter in Sydney once memorably described to me as 'a Riesling with grunt'. Almost all Australian Rieslings are dry, and go terrifically with food.

New Zealand

The same characteristics that make New Zealand the perfect source of so many other fruits encourage the classic balance of fruit acidity and ripeness which is the hallmark of true Riesling. The wines of the South Island tend to be lighter and racier in character; those from the North Island richer and nuttier in style. The huge potential of this grape variety is only now being explored. ►

RIESLING FACTFILE

Habitat: flourishes in a variety of climates from the Rhineland to Australia. Forbidden in France except for Alsace.

Hardiness: extremely hardy, good resistance to low temperatures.

Yields: capable of very high yields.

Styles: can produce anything from a concentrated, intensely sweet honeyed spicy dessert wine to bone dry, austere steeliness.

at a glance...

**Riesling
Challenge**

50 tasted

Award Winners

2

**Highly
Recommended**

11

Recommended

26

Quite Good

11

Acceptable

0

tasters...

Simon Loftus

Adnams Wine
Merchants

Ciaran Lynch

Stratford's Wine
Agencies

Freddy Price

wine consultant

Phil Reedman MW

Tesco

Brian St Pierre

food and wine writer

Steven Spurrier

wine writer and
consultant

RIESLING CHALLENGE

How do they compare? Is there a common thread that links them? *Decanter* lines up the Rieslings of Germany, Alsace, Austria, Australia and New Zealand and asks if this grape is as versatile as many people imagine. SUSAN KEEVIL reports

I always think of Riesling's as a character act. Like Jimmy Stewart, you know, he goes through all those roles yet as good as he is, he's always Jimmy Stewart.' Brian St Pierre's perspective summed up the premise for this tasting: the idea that, adaptable as it is, wherever it is planted, Riesling retains its own essential character.

These were young wines, all showing primary characters, and all with comparable sugar levels. Specialists in the wines of each of the five countries were consulted – as well as *Decanter's* tasting archives – in order to line up the premium wines from each country. The Aim? To evaluate Riesling's 'plastic' ability to charm wherever planted.

How did each country perform?

The first task was to differentiate. Ciaran Lynch was the one member of the panel to point out broad style groups: 'I thought Germany, Austria and Australia tended towards that more minerally, flinty type of style. New Zealand had moments of fragrant glory and Alsace even more so, it was really good, glyceriney, lip-smacking and super-concentrated.' Others saw five individual styles:

Germany: Phil Reedman MW was surprised by the drier German wines, finding them far more approachable than he'd anticipated. Lynch agreed: 'The dry, minerally, delicate style requires a different mind-set to appreciate – they're almost a direct contrast to what you are going to get from somewhere like Alsace. I also thought there were a couple of Mosel styles where the acidity was so crystal-like, definitive, unique! That's a quality that doesn't exist in any of the other areas.' (The panel agreed that these wines were showing well, but Freddy Price and Simon Loftus were anxious to reinforce that the drier styles are not where Riesling excels...)

Australia: Here the main surprise was the lack of the characteristic exuberance we have learned to expect from Chardonnay et al. Reedman found ripeness and limey intensity, and Price the 'much more petrolly nose' which he found typified Australian Riesling – and South African too. Steven Spurrier found the Australian fruit 'a little bit lemony, a bit obvious', and the style 'all over the place' – but then, observed Price, different Australian regions do present very different facets.

Lynch had the summation: 'I thought these wines looked lean and were very tight. There was lots of

clean winemaking as you would expect, and certainly the flavour and the concentration, but they weren't as fragrant as New Zealand's. There was very good consistency but nothing that really leapt out.'

New Zealand: 'The New Zealand Rieslings were all over the place,' said Brian St Pierre: 'You get one where they have obviously been making Riesling for a long time, then another from an area where perhaps they shouldn't be making it at all. I've certainly had some wonderful New Zealand Riesling with a lot of promise, but I didn't see it here!'

St Pierre wasn't alone in his regrets: 'One New Zealand wine was submerged by some very peculiar winemaking,' observed Reedman; Price offered that perhaps it was this one that actually seemed 'like Müller-Thurgau!' He went on to say that the lightness of New Zealand wine was only to be expected but that ultimately, from this tasting, there were more minerally, floral, flinty tones rather than anything immediately recognisable, appealing or attractive. 'I don't think they have succeeded in working out the way to make Riesling yet,' he finished.

Despite some argument from Lynch that 'a sort of fresh, clean, mountain-air type fragrance comes from the island', most dismissed the bathroom-freshener idea and agreed that these wines did not show up well against the others.

Austria: Lynch had the kindest words to say about Austrian Riesling. 'Some of them had that sort of minerally fragrance, certainly austerity, some good concentration, some very good winemaking. But there was nothing outstanding or individual. Just a sequence of wines that amongst what we tasted were not particularly exciting.' To St Pierre they were 'damp and subdued', to Reedman, 'wobbly'. 'Judging by the samples today, one region stands out as being *unsuitable*, and that is Austria,' complained Loftus. Yet, interestingly, there was no dispute in nominating one Austrian wine for an award....

Alsace: As far as suitability went, there appeared to be a clear winner. 'Not only for balance, but the ones that worked had a clear definition about them. There was a flavour profile that just grabbed me by the tie and said "I'm Riesling". The Alsatians came through loud and clear for sure,' St Pierre exuded enjoyment. Spurrier offered a word of warning about the residual sugar ('I hate it'), but Price liked the 'harmony' it gave, as did Lynch: 'I really thought Alsace was outstanding. It presented itself as a



complete individual amongst this range. The wines were alcoholic but balanced, full-bodied and flavour-some, mostly with very good concentration. Most of the rest were from the “neutrality” end of the spectrum, but all of a sudden with these you got exotic!

Did the Riesling character show?

There had been near consensus on regional suitability but not everybody agreed the inherent Riesling character travelled well. Price found all the characters too disparate to identify a common thread, and Loftus’ worry was that there would only truly be an answer to this once the wines were mature.

Other palates, however, found themes: ‘For me it was quite clear: there were different intensities of a limey citrus character and there was a slight mineral vein through a lot of the wines. The best examples from each region all had that certain poise that Riesling has at its best,’ offered Reedman.

‘I’m with Phil,’ emphasised Lynch, ‘they are all clean, glassy, with a certain clarity of flavour and precision. The definitions are climatic, is it full-forward or is it light and restrained?’

Spurrier’s conclusion was that Riesling carries its character probably more than any other variety.

Not an ideal tasting...?

Finding a basis from which to compare the wines of five countries is always going to be difficult. The main points worrying the panel were, firstly, that Germany’s Qualitätsweins – its finest expressions of Riesling – were not present. Reason? They were thought too sweet for comparison in this instance.

Loftus’ criticisms were that *Decanter* had opened out the tasting too far: ‘It is a nonsense to try and understand German Riesling in this way. This tasting does not allow for the fundamental varietal and terroir characteristics that come through. The wines have no bottle-age.’ But Lynch reinforced the aim: ‘It was intriguing because it gave us a global perspective,’ and St Pierre hit back with: ‘We are dealing with market realities: if someone wants to go out and buy a young Riesling, then age it, they still have to make a judgement based on what’s presented *now*...’

The benefits of age

If the ideal follow-up tasting to this would be of ‘mature’ Riesling, publisher Sarah Kemp was keen

to know how we – and more to the point, the consumer – would know when the wines were mature?

Price answered: ‘Riesling in Germany shows its fruit characteristics for two years then a lot of the wines go gently to sleep. They wake up at five years old with terroir coming through...’ ‘The answer is the same for all wines,’ agreed Loftus, generalising himself this time: ‘Drink as young as you possibly can, or leave it for a long time and then come back to it.’ When should you do that? ‘For New World wines that means five years, for Old World eight to 10.’

Global conclusions

One, from Freddy Price: ‘I think this proves just how difficult Riesling is to produce well. There were a lot of wines where I didn’t feel that harmony of acidity, alcohol and sugar essential to Riesling.’

Two, from Phil Reedman: ‘I think what we are seeing here is that Riesling is suitable in all of these regions, as long as there are good winemakers, good vineyard sites and probably a good vintage too.’

Three, from Simon Loftus: ‘I think this tasting was more enjoyable than if we had been tasting a comparable number of young Chardonnays, or virtually any other white grape. So in that sense, it does say Riesling is the terrific grape we all believe it is.’

Four, from Brian St Pierre, on versatility: ‘I can’t think that there’s another grape you could tackle horizontally and vertically at the same time...’

Pointers for the future...

Through all the manifestations, this tasting did throw up one major concern. Loftus voiced it: ‘I think there is a danger with Riesling as it comes out of its ghetto. Are the enthusiastic winemakers who made it with such passion in the past moving towards a greater internationalisation of wine-making style to make it more appealing to a wider audience? And is that to Riesling’s detriment?’

The panel felt this problem centred around Germany, and that as the ‘home’ of Riesling, it was perhaps setting a bad example: ‘I hadn’t thought about the move to dryness in Germany as one towards an international style, but you’re dead right,’ summed up St Pierre, ‘they are chasing a chimera... they’re saying “we’ll make it dry, that’ll take care of that!” and in fact they are getting into an area that is not their strength.’ ▶

at a glance...

the Decanter verdict

- The Alsace Rieslings shone out as being the most luscious and balanced manifestations
- Austria’s wines fared least well, condemned by the panel as dreary – but the best obviously stunner: one wine achieved an award
- New Zealand Rieslings showed little consistency
- Australia’s wines were admired but seemed to lack the complexity of Old World counterparts
- German Rieslings were the most sophisticated, with an award-winner among them
- Poise and precision: a fine balance between acidity and sugar levels was the common trait shared by all these wines

TASTING RESULTS

DECANTER
AWARD ★★★★★

GERMANY

SCHIEFER TERRASSEN
MOSEL-SAAR-RUWER
TROCKEN 1997, Weingut
Heymann-Löwenstein

'Very elegant with a complex bouquet. Good harmony on the palate and a clean finish.' (FP)
'Very intense floral nose. Ripe apples and spicy flavours. Great balance and length.' (PR)
£9.40: M&V

AUSTRIA

SPATLESE 1997,
Weingut Dr Unger

'Complex Riesling bouquet. Full, ripe, fruity palate with good balancing acidity.' (SS)
'Smokey nose. Ripe, limey fruit on the palate, together with good acidity, slight mineral character, good balance and length.' (PR)

HIGHLY
RECOMMENDED ★★★★★

GERMANY

FORSTER UNGEHEUER
SPATLESE TROCKEN 1996,
Weingut Dr Bürklin-Wolf

'A marmalade botrytis complexity to both nose and palate, with good balance and length.' (PR)
£16: Tan, Pip, Fra, Lar

RHEINHESSEN KABINETT
TROCKEN 1996,
Antoine Balbach

'Restrained, elegant, slightly

mineral nose. Attractive balance of mineral fruit and acidity on the palate, with real class.' (FP)
£7.99: Sie **£**

KALLSTADTER SAUMAGEN
PFALZ SPATLESE TROCKEN
1996, Weingut Koehler-Ruprecht

'Subdued nose but ripe fruit character on the palate. Balanced with good length.' (PR)

NEW ZEALAND

MARTINBOROUGH 1996,
Palliser Estate Wines

'Very strong petrolly nose. Fully mature, with a relatively high level of alcohol.' (FP)
£7.10: ABy **£**

AUSTRALIA

SILVER LABEL 1996,
Wolf Blass Wines

'Absolutely typical pungent Australian Riesling nose. A relatively high level of residual sugar and alcohol.' (FP)
£5.79-£6.49: Vic **£**

WESTERN AUSTRALIA 1996,
Howard Park

'Lime cordial on the nose. A breadly complex limey palate. Well-balanced and floral. Very good length and balance.' (PR)
£10.50: Bal, P&S, Nsn, Ham

ALSACE

HERRENWEG DE TURCKHEIM
1996, Domaine Zind-Humbrecht

'Petrol and apples on the nose. Very full, with lots of character. Fresh, with good depth.' (BSP)
£13.42: ABy, DBy, VII, Thr, Vig, EWG

GRAND CRU FROEHN 1996,
Jean Becker

'Complex, floral, honeyed nose with a citrus zest. Very complex but not overwhelming on the palate. A very fine wine.' (PR)

SOMMERBERG GRAND CRU
1995, Domaine Paul Blanck

'A very rich, unctuous wine with plenty of natural sugar and alcohol.' (FP)

CUVEE FREDERIC EMILE 1993,
F E Trimbach

'Good concentration, length and depth of fruit on the palate with a real Alsace richness and a super finish.' (CL)
£17.95: WRa, F&M, Grg, Sel, Rbs

GRAFENREBEN 1996,
Domaine Bott-Geyl

'Beautifully rounded, soft Riesling with a lovely aftertaste.' (FP)
£9.60: Mnt

RECOMMENDED ★★★

GERMANY

DEIDESHEIMER LEINHOHLE
PFALZ AUSLESE TROCKEN
1997, J L Wolf

'Somewhat simple, fresh, appley nose, reflected in the palate, which shows good acidity and a slightly earthy finish.' (SL)
£11.99: Sie

URZIGER WURZGARTEN
MOSEL-SAAR-RUWER
SPATLESE TROCKEN 1997,
Dr Loosen

'Gently fragrant, flinty, mineral nose. A dry and well-balanced

palate with a lovely light weight of concentrated fruit. Quite elegant.' (CL)
£15.79: Sie

HOCHHEIMER HOLLE
RHEINGAU SPATLESE
TROCKEN 1997,
Weingut Franz Künstler

'A real petrolly Riesling nose, with a nice refreshing spritz on the palate and a rather dry aftertaste.' (FP)

NIERSTEINER ORBEL
RHEINHESSEN SPATLESE
TROCKEN 1996,
Weingut St-Antony

'A floral, fruity nose; a touch of white peaches on the palate with good acidity. Will improve with time.' (SS)

RUDESHEIMER BERG
SCLOSSBERG RHEINGAU
TROCKEN 1996, Georg Breuer

'Honey and spice on the nose. A quite simple, appley palate with a marked length. Needs more time.' (PR)

AUSTRIA

ZOBINGER HEILIGENSTEIN
ALTE REBEN TROCKEN 1997,
Weingut Brundlmayer

'Rich Spätlese style with a lot of alcohol and good fruit concentration.' (SS)
You

DURNSTEINER KELLERBERG
SMARAGD TROCKEN 1997,
Weingut F X Pichler

'Fuller style than most but still quite dry and lean with a good finish.' (CL)

'The majority of the rest were from the "neutrality" end of the spectrum, but all of a sudden with Alsace you got exotic!'

STEINBUHEL KABINETT 1997,
Weingut Malat Gerald

'Good limey, mineral style. Good acidity, length and balance.' (PR)

SPITZER SINGERRIEDEL
SMARAGD 1997,

Weingut Franz Hirtzberger
'Ripe, peachy flavours. A big, aromatic wine.' (SS)

SENFTEMBERGER PIRI PRIVAT
1995, Weingut Martin Nigl

'Slightly botrytised feeling on the nose. Well balanced with a pleasant aftertaste.' (FP)

NEW ZEALAND

ICON SERIES PREMIERE
SELECTION 1997,

Nobilo Vintners
'Medium body, with a great concentration of rich, pure varietal fruit and a lovely length.' (CL)
£9.99: Ave

WAIHOPAI VALLEY WINERY
MARLBOROUGH 1997,
Grove Mill

'Quite rich, ripe nose from fully ripened grapes. Rewarding on the palate.' (FP)

MARLBOROUGH DRY 1997,
Jackson Estate

'Lively fresh nose with a hint of pine trees. Good intensity and leanness on the palate.' (SL)

STONELEIGH VINEYARD
MARLBOROUGH 1996,

Corbans Wines
'Citrus fruit with developing kerosene aromas on the nose, with plenty of fruit flavour.' (CL)
£4.99: Bot, Thr, WRa

AUSTRALIA

CLARE VALLEY HAND PICKED
1997, Tim Knappstein Wines

'Very fragrant and refreshing, with just enough residual sugar to balance. Drink now.' (FP)
£5.99-£6.99: Men

CLARE VALLEY 1997,
Leo Buring

'A lean, light, dry wine with good middle palate weight and fruit concentration.' (CL)

ST HELGA EDEN VALLEY
1997, Orlando

'A youthful wine, very dry but with good concentration.' (CL)
Cax

CLARE 1997, Petaluma
'Fatter and fuller than the other Australians but just as dry. Good concentration of flavour.' (CL)
£9.99-£10.99: Men

COONAWARRA 1997,
Wynns Coonawarra Estate
'Lovely limes on the nose. Fresh, good acid character which builds to a good finish.' (BSP)
£4.99: Sai, Maj, Odd, Sel, Eld, Psa

RAWSON'S RETREAT BIN 202
SOUTH AUSTRALIA 1997,

Penfolds
'Sweet, ripe fruit cut well with balancing acidity on the palate. Layers evolve with fine length.' (PR)
£3.99: Som, Wai, Unw, WRa, Odd, Thr

FRANKLAND RIVER 1997,
Alkoomi Wines
'Appealing palate; fuller and spicier with good astringency.' (SL)
£9.95: Sto

ALSACE

FLORIMONT GRAND CRU
1996, Bruno Sorg

'An attractive, orthodox, well-made and well-balanced wine.' (FP)
Tan, Par, Sel, Unc, Mar

DOMAINE WEINBACH
CLOS DES CAPUCINS
CUVEE THEO 1996,
Colette Faller et ses Filles

'A rich, concentrated palate with an extraordinary depth of flavour, great complexity and a good length.' (CL)
£14.50: JuB

MEYER-FONNE 1996,
Francois et Félix Meyer
'Lovely palate with good weight and fullness of flavour. Long and interesting.' (CL)
£8: L&W

HEIMBOURG 1995,
Cave Vinicole à Turckheim
'Lively, minerally Riesling fruit on the nose. A good, lively wine with a very good expression of the *cépage*.' (SS)

CRU DE BOLLENBERG 1995,
Materne Haegelin et ses filles
'Light, minerally aromas. A very pretty, well-balanced wine.' (SS)
£6.66: Maj, ABy, VII

QUITE GOOD ★★

AUSTRIA

SONNHOF ZOBINGER
HEILIGENSTEIN URGESTEINS
1997, Josef Jurtschitsch
Nur

KRESMER KOGL RESERVE
1997, Weingut Erich Solomon

WEISSENKIRCHNER
ACHLEITEN SMARAGD 1997,
Freie Weingärtner Wachau
£12.50: FWW

WEISSENKIRCHNER RIED
KLAUS SMARAGD TROCKEN
1997, Weingut Prager

NEW ZEALAND

MARLBOROUGH RESERVE
1997, Villa Maria Estate
£9.49-£9.99: OdF

NEUDORF MOUTERE 1997
£10: Els, VWS

HAWKE'S BAY 1996,
Coopers Creek

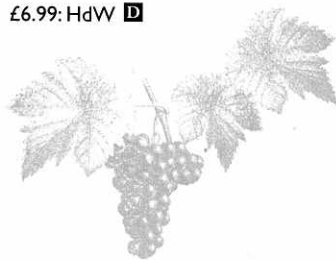
MARLBOROUGH DRY 1995,
De Redcliffe Estates
£7.99: Ful, Oxf, Chr, Wmb, Unw

AUSTRALIA

POLISH HILL CLARE VALLEY
1996, Jeffrey Grosset

JULIUS EDEN VALLEY 1997,
Henschke & Co
£9.95: L&W, AWC, DBy, Rbs

BAROSSA RHINE 1997,
Krondorf
£6.99: HdW D



“...there were different intensities of a limey citrus character and there was a slight minerally character through a lot of the wines. The best all had that certain poise...”