

AT THE BAR riesling



# RIESLING

[ THIS DELICATE, COMPLEX WHITE WINE IS REVERED FOR ITS VINOUS DIVERSITY, BUT IS IT MISUNDERSTOOD? ]

— BY DEBORAH GROSSMAN —



Ste. Michelle Wine Estates, Woodinville, Wash., the largest producer of riesling in the U.S., held its triennial Riesling Rendezvous conference in Seattle in July 2013. Attendees agreed that riesling shows its grape-growing environment, or terroir, more clearly than most grapes, but even the experts could not identify the origin of many dry rieslings at a tasting.

Given these results, Ernst Loosen of Loosen Estate in Germany's Mosel region, asked, "Is riesling too complicated for the average consumer?"

Few other grapes offer the diversity of styles that appear on the riesling shelf, and winemakers across the globe manifest a passion for it rarely seen with other wines. But how does one introduce this chameleon?

Sheila Nicholas, co-owner of Anam Cara Cellars in Newberg, Ore., surprises red wine drinking guests. "When they try our dry Nicholas Estate Riesling with its acidity and complexity, they often like it. They think all riesling is sweet and simple, and I show them it's not," says Nicholas.

In the last five years, riesling was one of the fastest growing wines in the U.S., but overall growth slowed in 2012. Yet, Ted Baseler, president of Ste. Michelle Wine Estates, says, "Our sales and production of dry riesling has doubled in the last two years."

## EUROPEAN CLASSICS

Germany is the world's largest producer of riesling, with nearly a quarter of the country's vineyards planted to the grape. Loosen's family has made wine for more than 200 years, and the winemaker is known as a global riesling evangelist. His most well-known wines are from the Mosel region, with its stony, slate soil and steep, south-facing slopes that enable the grapes to ripen slowly to retain acidity.

About 75% of the Rhinegau, the wine region where the Rhine runs east to west in Central Germany, is planted to riesling. Growers here first recognized the value of *botrytis cinerea* (noble rot) in crafting *spätlese*, or late-harvest sweet wines, in the 18th century. The top sweet wines, or *goldkapsel*, are often designated by a gold cap.

At Schloss Vollrads in the Rhinegau village of Oestrich-Winkel, Rowald Hepp welcomes visitors to the historic winery by explaining the quality standards for its 11 different rieslings. "Finding quality is like a jigsaw, putting all the pieces together—the different soils and elevations—to find the best grapes," he says. "We pick selectively by vineyard and hand-sort the grapes for each label."

Austria also produces iconic European rieslings. Many Austrian producers are sustainable, and employ biodynamic practices that follow seasonal changes and use natural elements to fertilize the soil.

The biodynamically produced Loimer Steinmasst Kamptal DAC reserve 2011, from Weingut Loimer in the Niederösterreich



region, is an example of riesling with *nervosité*, a French term for the tension and minerality that the best dry rieslings show. Winebow, Inc., with headquarters in Montvale, N.J., is the importer for Loimer. Jesse Becker, MS, import portfolio specialist for Italy and Austria, notes that quality levels are increasing dramatically for Austrian riesling. A new appellation system, DAC (*districtus austriacae controllatus*), defines regional style and quality in similar ways to those used in Germany. "With this system, you can study smaller zones of production within each country," says Becker.

At the Riesling Rendezvous, the results of a marketing study by the International Riesling Foundation (IRF), Canandaigua, N.Y., a group of producers and experts on the wine, showed that consumers were looking for quality—and they wanted to know what style they were drinking. The IRF initiated the Riesling Taste Profile, a voluntary scale used by wineries to indicate the relative dryness or sweetness of the wine. The scale is a way to translate the technical aspect of the ratio of total (titratable) acidity (TA) with residual sugar (RS) in a wine.

## RIESLING IN THE U.S.

Riesling is the most-planted white grape in Washington state. Ste. Michelle Columbia Valley Riesling is the top-selling riesling in the U.S. Ste. Michelle produces riesling from several subregions of the Columbia Valley appellation in Southeast Washington. With warm, sunny days, cool evenings, and a multitude of soils and elevations, the Columbia Valley is conducive to growing riesling in several styles.

Opposite: top, Chateau Ste. Michelle Horse Heaven vineyard; bottom, Anam Cara riesling grapes at harvest 2013. Above: Riesling Schloss Vollrads

## AT THE BAR riesling

### NEW YORK FINGER LAKES RIESLING RISING

New York is the third-largest wine-producing state in the U.S. The microclimates of the Finger Lakes region are especially suited for growing riesling. The lakes moderate the temperature by keeping the vineyards cooler in the summer and warming up the vines in the winter.

Nearly 10% of the Finger Lakes' vineyards are planted to riesling—and the region's fame with the grape is growing. May has become “riesling month,” with support from the region's 115 wineries participating in the Finger Lakes Wine Alliance program. A scan of several of the Finger Lakes yields these notable riesling producers:

#### Keuka Lake

**Dr. Konstantin Frank's Vinifera Wine Cellars**—pioneer in planting vinifera grapes from Europe, including award-winning riesling

**Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard**—known for several labels of dry riesling

#### Seneca Lake

**Fox Run Vineyards**—produces the Riesling Geology Series based on distinctive vineyard blocks

#### Cayuga Lake

**King Ferry Winery**—crafts dry and semi-dry wines under the Treleaven label

**Long Point Winery**—produces dry and semi-dry styles of riesling

**Sheldrake Point Winery**—offers estate wines, including well-regarded riesling ice wine



For more than a decade, Ste. Michelle has partnered with Loosen to produce Eroica. Winemaker Bob Bertheau notes that the wine reflects the fruit-forward flavors from Washington combined with elegant Germanic inspiration. A new addition to the portfolio, 2012 Gold Eroica harkens to the German tradition of *goldkapsel* riesling.

Walla Walla, a small sub-appellation of Columbia Valley, is home to several riesling producers. At Seven Hills Winery, owners Vicky and Casey McClellan have offered riesling since their first vintage in 1988. According to marketing manager Erik McLaughlin, the Seven Hills Columbia Valley Riesling from two older, low-yielding vineyards is often the top seller in the tasting room. “Guests are attracted to the off-dry style with a small amount of residual sugar to offset the natural acidity and low alcohol content,” he says.

The Columbia Valley boasts two hours more sunlight a day than prime wine-growing regions of California. Though riesling ripens fully with sunshine, the grape thrives in cooler climates. Select areas of California produce well-regarded riesling, though the acreage planted to the grape amounts to only 5% of the vineyards growing chardonnay.

Chateau Montelena in Napa Valley made its reputation on chardonnay, but the winery's Potter Valley Riesling from northern Mendocino County consistently sells out.

The El Dorado Hills AVA in California is known for heat-loving Zinfandel and Petite Sirah, yet wineries such as Madroña Vineyards in Camino craft an elegant riesling, noted as semi-dry on the IRF profile. “In the early 1970s, we planted vines on a higher, cooler elevation to keep acid levels high,” says winemaker Paul Bush.

A cool-climate California wine region is Arroyo Seco in Monterey County. This funnel-shaped area offers steep, south-facing slopes and deep, rocky soils where riesling thrives. Wente Vineyards' Riverbank Riesling epitomizes the region's riesling. “I'm a student of all grape varieties, but especially riesling,” says Karl Wente, senior vice president of winemaking for Wente Family Estates. “It ripens so well in Arroyo Seco, but also maintains underlying acidity to make it food-friendly. I have some interest in the IRF profile to help consumers know the level of sweetness, which for us is off-dry.”

In the 1980s, riesling accounted for a quarter of Oregon's wine production. Now there is three times more pinot gris planted than riesling. Yet, a passionate group of 30 riesling producers organized the Oregon Riesling Alliance (ORA) to share technical excellence and promote the varietal.

Riesling comprises only 7% of production at Chehalem winery in the Willamette Valley. Of the three labels, Chehalem Sext Riesling is a sparkling wine in homage to German *sekt*. But Harry Peterson-Nedry, ORA member and founder/winemaker/managing partner of Chehalem, says, “If I could make only one white wine, it would be riesling.”

Nicholas of Anam Cara Cellars participates in the ORA technical tastings. Production of her dry riesling has increased tenfold in recent years because of sellout conditions.

Left to right: Anam Cara Riesling 2012; Chateau Montelena 2012 Riesling; Wente Riverbank Riesling; Ste. Michelle Wine Estates Eroica Gold Riesling

Closer to the coast in Elkton, the newest Oregon appellation, Terry Brandborg is another fan of riesling. “We moved to the Elkton area to make riesling and pinot noir,” he says. “Cool-climate riesling is the best white wine in the world. But people still remember the overly sweet, low acid, not food-friendly German versions of the past.”

Brandborg Winery’s 2009 Umpqua Valley Riesling is full-bodied with a long finish. The interplay of honey flavors with tart green apple and low acid leads to versatility with food pairing.

## SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE RIESLING

A pioneer New Zealand producer, Villa Maria Estate, offers several bottlings from Marlborough: Reserve Dry Riesling, Cellar Selection Late Harvest Riesling and Reserve Noble Riesling Botrytis Selection.

Mud House Winery offers riesling from the Waipara Valley south of Marlborough. Though the winery is best known for its pinot noir and sauvignon blanc, winemaker Ben Glover looks for the ideal mix of acid and sweetness during his hyper-vigilant care at riesling harvest. “I taste and look for honey flavors,” he says. “I feel the bunches. They should feel a bit fleshy, not hard or too soft.”

Rippon Winery is located in Central Otago, a southern region famed for pinot noir. Rippon Mature Vine Riesling from old vines is an example of cool-climate riesling grown at 45° south latitude, a similar distance from the equator as Oregon’s Willamette Valley.

So, with a general consensus that consumers find riesling appealing if they taste it, how can awareness increase?

Tyler Balliet, founder/president of Second Glass, Los Angeles, a wine-event company that attracts millennials, recommends simplifying the descriptors for riesling. “Selecting a wine is like listening to music,” he says. “Many people don’t know how to read music notes or play the guitar, but they can tell you if they like or dislike a song.

“Telling someone the wine has ‘notes of pomegranate and hits of lychee’ is the best way for a table to order the cheapest bottle. Few know how this description relates to wine.” Balliet adds, “The IRF profile is an ideal way to avoid confusion. Print this on the menu—seriously.” ■



## RIESLING, A PERFECT PAIRING

Riesling has a reputation as the ultimate wine for seafood and spicy Asian meals. Yet according to John Sarich, culinary director at Chateau Ste. Michelle, Woodinville, Wash., it goes with almost everything. Talking about the lunch served at the 2013 Riesling Rendezvous conference, July 2013, in Seattle, Sarich said: “Today, we wanted a heartier menu with a richer dish—roasted chicken breast with morel mushroom demi-glace. Even a braised pork shoulder would have worked. The acidity of the wine works so well with food.”

Vintners have eclectic tastes in riesling pairings. Sheila Nicholas, co-owner of Anam Cara Cellars, Newberg, Ore., a native of Scotland, reaches for fish and chips with her dry riesling. Terry Brandborg of Brandborg Vineyard and Winery, Elkton, Ore., recommends sushi, shellfish, crabs, clams, oysters, scallops, grilled salmon and pungent cheeses—and wife Sue’s signature pizza with caramelized onion, black pepper, fresh chopped rosemary and Gorgonzola cheese.

Riesling is also a classic pairing for a variety of desserts. Michael Rotondo, chef at Parallel 37 in The Ritz-Carlton, San Francisco, recently delighted guests—as well as Justin Kindel, wine director and riesling fan. Kindel selected four rieslings for Rotondo’s dessert duo of chocolate meringue ice cream sandwich and warm semolina cake topped with cream fraiche sorbet and homemade ricotta with lavender and blood orange gelée garnish. The wines, Kindel says, match with any of the dessert elements, but he recommends these pairings:

**Koehler-Rupprecht, Kabinett Trocken, Kallstadter, Pfalz 2010 (dry)**  
**Pewsey Vale, Eden Valley, South Australia 2012**

“These two wines pair well with the semolina cake and display how terroir-driven this grape is. The Australian riesling is more focused on intense, white floral elements rather than the citrus and dried stone fruit of the German wine.”

**Meulenhoff, Riesling, Kabinett, Erdener Treppchen, Mosel 2011 (semi-dry)**

“These Mosel vines grow on red slate, iron-rich soils that bring high minerality and balanced acidity in the glass. The classic tangelo citrus and sweet herbal notes of this wine pairs well with the ice cream sandwich and blood orange garnish of the dessert.”

**Dr. Pauly-Bergweiler, Auslese, Bernkastler Badstube, Mosel 2004 (sweet)**

“The sweet apricot, white and yellow peach flavors of the riesling walk hand in hand with the cream fraiche sorbet and hints of lavender in the dessert.”

Left: Mud House Riesling Waipara Valley 2011. Above: Dessert duo with four rieslings at Parallel 37, The Ritz-Carlton, San Francisco.

DEBORAH GROSSMAN IS A SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA JOURNALIST WHO WRITES ABOUT PEOPLE, PLACES AND PRODUCTS THAT IMPACT THE FOOD-AND-WINE WORLD.