

RIESLING RENAISSANCE

Although Riesling was once popular in the United States, it fell out of favour, along with German wines. With domestic Riesling selling well and imports rising, Larry Walker sees evidence of the long awaited Riesling renaissance.

There has long been talk in the United States that Riesling will be The Next Big Thing. Now the numbers are starting to bear that out. Sales of Riesling, both domestic and imported, grew by 23% in volume in 2007, the largest gain of any varietal. The runner up, Cabernet Sauvignon grew by 11% in volume. In dollars, Riesling edged out Pinot Noir as the fastest growing varietal, 23.9 to 23.7%. Based on ACNielsen reports, those numbers are likely on the short side, because they do not include restaurant sales, where Riesling has shown strong growth.

There are three major elements currently driving the Riesling revival: a change in consumer attitudes; the search for innovative food and wine pairings; and better quality wine, both domestic and imported.

A shift in consumer thinking

Stuart Smith, co-owner with his brother Charles Smith of Smith-Madrone Winery in Napa County, whose first Riesling vintage was 1977, sees a new and very welcome attitude on the part of wine consumers.

"We have always had great respect for Riesling," says Smith. "One problem with Riesling in California, though, is that it ripens at the same time as Chardonnay. Faced with a choice, most winemakers would say, 'Screw the Riesling. We'll get to it when we can, let's pick the Chardonnay'." That said, he sees a shift in consumer thinking. "Younger consumers are discovering Riesling. In the past, it was regarded as a little old-fashioned. But people in their 30s are coming along who are not burdened by old attitudes. They are tasting and buying what they like."

Younger wine drinkers are certainly

in an experimental mode. Allen Shoup, a man who has probably sold more Riesling than anyone in the US says, "I think what we are going to see in the next ten years is constant experimentation and discovery of new wines." Shoup, who in 1979 became head of Chateau Ste. Michelle, then an obscure winery outside of Seattle, is widely credited with helping put both Washington state wines, and Riesling, on the world wine map.

"At that time, 60% of the wine made in Washington was Riesling. Then along came Chardonnay and wine consumers were told they shouldn't drink sweet wines," he says. "What is wonderful now is that producers are responding as they should. We are making much better Riesling today than twenty years ago." Shoup's

Top 5 American Riesling producers*

Chateau Ste Michelle	725,000
Kendall-Jackson	180,000
Fetzer	110,000
Hogue Cellars	100,000
Pacific Rim (Bonny Doon)	100,000

* in 9 litre cases in 2007

latest project is Long Shadows, a producer of small lots of artisan wine made from Washington grapes by winemakers from all over the world. The Riesling, called Poet's Leap, has been made since 2003 by Armin Diel from Schlossgut Diel in the Nahe region in Germany.

All agree the food link is important. Jan Barnes, marketing director for Ste. Michelle, estimates that 30% of all their Riesling sales are on-premise. "We think one of

Riesling's greatest strengths is as a food wine," she said. Ste. Michelle makes eight different Rieslings, in all styles, to cater to various food matches. The palette includes Eroica, a joint venture Riesling made with Ernie Loosen from the Dr. Loosen estate in Germany. Conceived in 1999, the pair now sells 28,000 cases of Riesling at about \$23 (€14.50) a bottle, almost entirely in the US.

US Rieslings less successful

There is a downside to the focus on restaurants, at least for domestic producers. Many chefs believe German, Alsatian or Austrian Rieslings are superior to those from North America. Slanted Door, a highly rated Vietnamese restaurant in San Francisco doesn't have a California wine on its list, neither Riesling nor any other varietal.

That is an extreme case, of course, but even restaurants that will put a Washington state or California Riesling on the list are reluctant to feature more than one or two. Smith blames pricing for that. "Most Rieslings sell retail for at least \$15 a bottle. The wait staff wants to sell a more expensive wine to run the ticket higher and pocket a larger tip," he said.

That's debatable. It isn't hard to find dozens of Sauvignons Blanc selling at a comparable price on restaurant lists. The more likely explanation is that many people in the trade, as well as consumers, still have a lingering image of the bad old days of sweet, flabby Rieslings stuck in their palate.



They need to re-boot. Few North American Rieslings are bone dry, but a significant number are under the threshold for perceiving sweetness. Some producers, notably Randall Grahm of Bonny Doon and now Pacific Rim, like to leave a trace of perceptible sweetness, feeling it enhances the fruit and balance of the wine.

At Chateau Ste. Michelle, head winemaker Bob Bertheau said they have been making Riesling a little drier each year for the past several years, to meet demand.

Better viticulture

Finding the right place to grow the grapes has played an important role in the Riesling revival. In the mid-20th century, Riesling in California was planted without thought to climatic or soil needs, in response to the University of California at Davis' model of the grape vine as a mini-factory, taking in water and sunshine and producing wine grapes, regardless of location. In many vineyards, Riesling was planted next to the Cabernet Sauvignon, for example. These hot climate Rieslings produced low-acid wines with high sugar levels. Today's Rieslings, planted in cooler areas on shallow soils, are completely different wines.

In response to demand there has been an increase in plantings in California and Washington. In California, there were about 1,500 acres (600 ha) in the ground in 1997 and 2,300 today. In Washington, a planting spurt began in 2002, when there were 2,000 acres of producing Riesling. Today's total at 4,500 acres is more than double that in only five years. While waiting for new vineyards to come into production, some California producers have turned to imported bulk from Germany to meet market demand. For the past few years, Fetzer has imported enough bulk to bottle about 20,000 cases of Riesling. The German Riesling is sold in a limited number of markets, while California Riesling is sold in the rest of the country. However, Robert LaVine who is in charge of wine sourcing for Fetzer, said there may now be enough

COMMENT

"Although the niche continues to grow, I would stop short of using the term 'Riesling renaissance'. The trade talks about Riesling, and consumers no longer disdain this once unpopular varietal, but they continue to buy Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. Although 2006 was difficult to market, Riesling remains the driving force for Germany, but Austria is mostly Grüner Veltliner and Alsace will encounter problems now that they have limited generic Riesling to six grams per litre of residual sugar. What troubles me the most, though, is the weak dollar. Selling the stunning 2007s should be a walk in the park, but we will have to be very creative not to overstep sensitive price points."



Therry Theise has been one of the driving forces behind the Riesling renaissance in the US. Not only is his selection of German and Austrian wines impeccable, but his heart-felt but off-the-wall commitment to his wines has impressed the market, earning him the moniker 'Riesling Wacko'.

domestic Riesling to meet demand, saying they have "contracted with growers in Monterey who have grafted over to Riesling for the Fetzer Valley Oaks program", as well as planting vineyards in the Sacramento Delta region. "At the moment, we are not importing any bulk Riesling," LaVine said.

Grahm blends about 25% German Riesling, sourced from Johannes Selbach, into his Pacific Rim bottling. Using American regulations, Grahm can blend up to 25% of wine from anywhere in the world and use 'America' as place of origin on the label, but that could change when contracted vineyard sources in Washington come into production. Grahm is also building a 300,000 case winery there. About 85% of production will be in Riesling.

Riesling is scarce on the California bulk market, according to Steve Dorfman of Joe Ciatti & Co., a global bulk wine dealer. "Bulk California Riesling is hard to find and when you do find it, it sells for the same price as Chardonnay, \$8 to \$10 a gallon (€1.30 to €1.65 per litre)," he said.

Imports on a roll

Imports have played a large role. In 2007, the value of Riesling imports was nearly \$55m (€35m) on a volume of almost 600,000 cases, according to the Gomberg-Fredrikson Report.

Bill Maury, whose company Age of

Riesling is based in California, has been involved in the trade here since 1994. "I'm seeing something different, an interest in the dry Rieslings from Austria, Alsace and even from Germany. I'm selling more dry Riesling now than the traditional style."

He said the break seemed to be along age lines, with younger customers and sommeliers preferring the dry style and older customers preferring more traditional Rieslings.

Michael Yurch, a partner in Sherry-Lehman, a New York City retailer, agreed that the Riesling market is on an upswing. "There has been a string of great vintages in Germany and Austria and customers have responded to that. Also, the younger sommeliers have, for whatever reason, taken to Riesling, especially dry Riesling." Yurch expressed some caution, however, because of the dollar's weakness.

Riesling sales are likely to grow as younger consumers seeking new tastes come into the market. In the long run, Riesling isn't likely to challenge Chardonnay as the US's top white varietal, but it does add welcome diversity to California's portfolio. It also enhances Washington state's position, and calls attention to small production areas like the Finger Lakes in New York, helping to create distinctive markets able to withstand the global tide of corporate wine making. ■