

RIESLING ON A ROLL

Wine journalists love Riesling for its ability to transmit that 'sense of place' without losing its own character, writes Joel B. Payne. But while the general public is now taking notice, it is unlikely the grape will ever again have the fame it enjoyed in the late 19th century.

Less than a hundred years ago, German Rieslings were the most expensive wines in the world. Even today, Armin Diel proudly displays one of his grandfather's price lists from 1917, when a bottle of Château Latour cost only 7 Marks, but a Goldloch Riesling Spätlese from his own estate cost 10. "Those were the days," he says.

If only longevity and style were factored into the equation, Riesling might still claim to be the finest white wine varietal in the world, but in an era where alcohol and oak became key reference points for the market place, its days were numbered.

In fact, in style it is much closer to Pinot Noir in its ability to transmit that 'sense of place' inspired by the vineyard without losing its own character, which is why wine writers have always had a weakness for the varietal. Yet in spite of their best intentions, they have not been able to make it popular with the general public.

Collectors have long known that Riesling's unique blend of acidity and extract yields wines with incredible ageing potential, but the Germans brought ignominy on themselves with high yields and overblown residual sugars that took the heart out of their wines.

Riesling was not always the most widely planted varietal in Germany. Both Silvaner and Elbling were grown in the Middle Ages, long before the first recorded mentions of Riesling appear in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. In the 19th century, Silvaner was still the most widely planted German varietal and until as late as 1995 that honour still went to Müller-Thurgau.

Several aristocrats abetted Riesling's rise to fame. In particular, the prince

elector in Trier, who made Riesling the default varietal of the Mosel. Riesling Kabinetts from the Mosel still remain a category of their own, that offer a unique blend of bright fruit, minerality and refreshing lightness.

Only a generation ago more than 80% of all plantings there were down to that grape. Today, that number has fallen to little more than half, so that based on current rates of planting, the Pfalz will soon surpass the Mosel in total Riesling acreage in Germany.

Pfalz versus Mosel

Steffen Christmann of Gimmeldingen, the new president of the *Verband Deutscher Prädikatsweingüter (VDP)*, has just planted another hectare of Riesling in his Biengarten vineyard, with plans to bump Riesling's share of production from 68% to 80%.

He is not alone, which is why the Pfalz will soon overtake the Mosel in total plantings. The members of the VDP in the Pfalz have on average 54% Riesling, far above the 22% for the region. More dramatic are the differences in Rheinhessen (54% to 13%) and on the Nahe (74% to 26%).

Riesling's renewed popularity is apparent in other statistics, as well. Germany's total plantings grew from 17,750 hectares in 1975 to 21,700 last year. In the past two crushes, vineyard area has risen by 900 hectares - and the nurseries that provide the plants make it clear that the trend will persist. In 2003 they bred 3.6m vines for planting. Last year that had risen to 8.3m.

As vineyards with long growing seasons provide the finest results, most plantings tend to be choice sites in cooler regions. In the northern hemisphere,

"In spite of their inherent quality, the strong euro will make the 2007 Rieslings from Europe a hard sell in the American market."

David Schildknecht is the lead taster of German and Austrian wines at Robert Parker's *The Wine Advocate*



Riesling is often not picked until late October or even early November. In warmer regions, where it often ripens too early, Riesling can be flat and one dimensional, which is why it has not thrived in many parts of the New World.

For many consumers, though, the only Riesling they truly drank long came from Alsace and spoke the varietal language with a markedly French accent. The wines there are often richer, both in alcohol and sometimes, surprisingly, in residual sugar, which occasionally makes them difficult to drink with a meal in spite of their inherent quality. This became so much the norm that it was long difficult to find a dry Riesling other than those produced by wineries like Trimbach or Schlumberger.

Today, that clock is being turned back and new legislation might soon limit residual sugar for any wine marketed as merely Alsatian Riesling to six grams per litre. Even Marcel Deiss and Olivier Humbrecht, who long picked their grapes as ripe (overripe) as possible, have begun to see that residual sugar is sometimes too much of a good thing.

Riesling, although still Alsace's most widely planted varietal, has lost share. In five years, its part of total plantings has fallen from 22.2% to 21.8%, but it still remains slightly ahead of Pinot Blanc with 21.3%.

Riesling in Austria is not so important in terms of volume, but certainly in quality, with the Wachau (more mineral), Kremstal (richer) and parts of the Weinviertel producing the finest

examples. All of the country's top guns, be they named Hirtzberger, Pichler or Brundelmayer, are located on the northern bank of the Danube river just west of the nation's capital, Vienna. "We all know they are world class," says Willi Klinger, chief executive of the Austrian Wine Institute, "but our marketing focus is clearly on Grüner Veltliner."

Interestingly, Riesling costs up to 20% more there than the national favourite, Grüner Veltliner, but as Roman Horvath, managing director of the Domäne Wachau, says: "That difference is diminishing. I expect prices to be at parity in the near future."

If statistics are to be believed, the Soviet Union once had the world's largest plantings of Rieslings. Before Gorbachev's vine pull scheme, there were 25,000 hectares of vines there.

In the New World, Australia was long an advanced post for Riesling. Until Chardonnay became fashionable in 1990, Riesling plantings at 4,000 hectares outnumbered Chardonnay. Brought in by Silesian farmers, the vines did better in the cooler Clare and Eden valleys than on the Barossa floor. Although Riesling share has declined, it remains popular with growers. "Often after a tasting, we return home with a bottle of Riesling to chill down," said John Duval, who once made Grange.

In California, Riesling declined from 4,000 to 2,600 acres as Chardonnay became fashionable. In Washington the

grape also suffered from the same onslaught, but the cool northerly latitudes of the Columbia Valley, like those of the Rheingau, provide a long growing season for the frost-hardy vines.

Chateau Ste Michele, a driving force behind the American Riesling renaissance, teamed up with Ernie Loosen from the Mosel to produce Eroica, to give the varietal a new face. Together they have helped put Riesling from Washington, where the first Riesling symposium was held, back on the map.

One of the most promising areas for Riesling is the Finger Lakes in New York. The climate and soils are right; cold winters are mitigated a bit by warmth held in the region's four major lakes. Bob Madill, chair of the Finger Lakes Wine Alliance and a partner at Shelldrake Point Vine said: "If we had more Riesling, we could sell it."

Demand is also growing as international chefs begin to declare that Riesling is their friend at the table, creating fusion nuances of Thai, Indonesian, Indian, Vietnamese and chiles from Mexico to complement their dishes.

These unique wines appeal to both consumers and educated palates. If the tide against alcohol consumption continues to turn, low alcohol may one day be a selling point too. Today, Riesling probably still offers the best value of all white wines, but Armin Diel would like to change that, even if his Spätlese never again sells for the price of Latour. ■



SOURCE: VDP AND GERMAN WINE INSTITUTE

1 Riesling in Germany			
Region	Hectares	% of region	% for VDP
Mosel	5,272	58.7	97.2
Pfalz	5,238	22.4	53.9
Rheinhessen	3,458	13.1	53.7
Rheingau	2,432	78.5	84.2
Württemberg	2,081	18.1	26.5
Baden	1,173	7.4	16.3
Nahe	1,087	26.3	73.9

Some 60% of the world's Riesling plantings are in Germany. Interestingly, though, it is an affair of the elite. The members of the VDP, the association of Germany's finest estates, plant far more Riesling than their colleagues.

2 Riesling worldwide	
Country	Plantings in hectares
Germany	21,700
Australia	4,375
France (Alsace)	3,350
USA	3,000
Austria	1,750
New Zealand	770
Canada	440
South Africa	350
Chile	290
Argentina	120

There are estimated to be just over 37,000 hectares of Riesling planted worldwide. If the trend continues, that number may soon surpass 40,000.

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