

Drink More Riesling and Become a Better Person: Elin McCoy

Review by Elin McCoy



Wine enthusiast Stuart Piggott speaks during the Riesling Rendezvous at the Chateau Ste. Michelle winery in Woodinville, Washington, on July, 28, 2008. Source: Ste. Michelle Wine Estates via Bloomberg News

Aug. 28 (Bloomberg) -- After three days of tasting rieslings from half a dozen wineries, I'm a huge fan of dry Riesling myself, and I sampled dozens of good ones. My top picks include...[the] apple-y 2007 Pacific Rim Wallula Vineyard (\$20) from Washington

"I'm a huge fan of dry Riesling myself, and I sampled dozens of good ones. My top picks include...[the] apple-y 2007 Pacific Rim Wallula Vineyard (\$20) from Washington"

Pacific Rim Wallula Vineyard is a dry Riesling wine, not a sweet one. It has a characteristic and refreshing live-wire acidity. Think of riesling as the anti-chardonnay, with modest alcohol levels, no oak and pinpoint balance of juicy, savory, mineral-laced fruit.

So why hasn't riesling taken over the wine world? There's a catch. It's tough to tell how dry or sweet a wine is by the label. As riesling becomes more popular, this same conundrum that has always plagued sales is surfacing all over again.

Don't get me wrong. I like a sweet wine just as much as I like a gooey chocolate dessert.

But when I buy a wine for trout or sushi, I don't want to end up with a sweetie more suited to pineapple tart, and neither does any other customer. Wine lovers want to know exactly what to expect, which is surely the only reason that copycat, over-oaked California chardonnays have been so popular for so long.

Unhelpful Terms

Riesling producers have been painfully slow to devise any helpful guidelines for shoppers. To those who feel defeated as soon as they see the lines of Gothic script on a German label, I sympathize. The old dry-to-sweet terms like kabinett, spatlese and auslese aren't as useful as you think because they refer to the level of ripeness at harvest, not the impression of sweetness on your tongue.

Jim Trezise, president of the newly formed International Riesling Foundation, fires up the event when he announces that the group of more than 30 producers has embraced writer Dan Berger's proposal for a taste scale on every bottle. It would consist of a horizontal bar with "dry" to the left and "sweet" to the right, with an arrow positioned along the bar to show which way the wine's taste tilts. That's far more helpful than leaving it to customers to puzzle out what phrases like "off-dry" or "semi-sweet" mean on some U.S. wine labels.

Dry Germans

Although about half the drinkers in a recent **Wine Opinions** survey believe riesling is an inherently sweet wine, most rieslings made today are actually dry. In the grape's home territory, Germany, where most of the best -- and most complex -- rieslings come from, dry has been the reigning fashion for a couple of decades.

The first German wave of dry bottlings included plenty of tongue strippers, yet now global warming has actually helped boost quality by making it possible to ripen grapes more consistently, resulting in better-balanced wines in this most northern wine-growing country.

"We are very happy about global warming," famed producer Egon Muller tells us --- not a remark you hear from most wine producers.

In Australia, 95 percent of its refreshing rieslings are dry. Ditto New Zealand.

Top Picks

I'm a huge fan of dry riesling myself, and I sampled dozens of good ones. My top picks include powerful 2006 **Henschke Julius** (\$25) and bright, deep 2006 **Frankland Estate Poison Hill** (\$30) from Australia; savory 2007 Chateau Ste. Michelle Dry (\$10) and **apple-y 2007 Pacific Rim Wallula Vineyard (\$20) from Washington**; tangy 2007 **Chateau Grand Traverse** (\$15) from Michigan (yes, Michigan!); and fragrant, minerally 2005 Loimer Seeberg (\$35) from Austria. Of the many excellent 2007 German examples, I'll single out harmonious Josef Leitz Rudesheimer Berg Kaisersteinfels Alte Reben from Germany's Rheingau region (\$40).

For sheer grandeur, you can't do better than the profound 1995 **Trimbach Cuvee Frederic-Emile** from Alsace, which demonstrates beyond a doubt that dry riesling ages magnificently.

Sommelier Paul Grieco of New York's Hearth restaurant, a self-described riesling fanatic, likes to say that by drinking riesling you become a better person.

After a couple of hundred samples, I must be on the path to sainthood.

(**Elin McCoy** writes on wine and spirits for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are her own.)

To contact the writer of this story: Elin McCoy at **emcwine@aol.com**.

Last Updated: August 28, 2008 00:01 EDT