



Growth spurt: Wallula Vineyard, which overlooks the Columbia River in Washington state, is a center of U.S. Riesling production.

Food & wine

Riesling would like your attention, please

Classic white wine commands wider U.S. audience

One of the world's most misunderstood and underappreciated wines is enjoying a renaissance created the old-fashioned way.

Sips Riesling, the pale-gold liquid in the tall, skinny bottles that critics have touted for years as the most noble, versatile and exciting of all white wines, finally is making inroads among wary U.S. consumers. But unlike Pinot Noir's dazzling domestic revival, there is no promo boost from an Oscar-nominated film (*Sideways*, if you've forgotten), no mad rush to stock shelves with generic-tasting product and few outrageously priced cult bottles.

Riesling has become the fastest-growing white wine in the country in terms of sales, primarily because a number of North American producers are investing significant money and research to make good-quality, affordable wines. And they're working with one another, with some international counterparts, and with marketing experts to educate the public about what to expect from the bottles they see on the shelves.

The education component is key because two of the main hindrances to Riesling sales have been the public perception that the wine is always sweet and usually simple, and the baffling information (or lack of information) on the bottle labels.

A recently formed advocacy group called the International Riesling Foundation (information is on Pacific Rim Winery's website at rieslingrules.com) is addressing those challenges in two ways. This summer it produced a nifty Riesling Rules booklet (available free from the website) that clearly explains the many facets of the wine, highlighting the fact that it is made in a wide variety of styles, from bone-dry to dessert-sweet, and that its abundant nuances make it compatible with a vast array of foods.

Last month the group put the finishing touches on a "Riesling Taste Profile" that it hopes producers around the world will use voluntarily on the back labels of their bottles. The profile



The wine list

To see for yourself the progress being made on the domestic front, check out some of these currently available offerings (retail prices may vary widely):

- ▶ 2007 Pacific Rim Dry Riesling, Columbia Valley, \$10
- ▶ 2007 Chateau Ste. Michelle Dry Riesling, Columbia Valley, \$11
- ▶ 2007 Hosmer Estate Grown Riesling, Finger Lakes, N.Y., \$12
- ▶ 2007 Lakewood Vineyards Dry Riesling, Finger Lakes, N.Y., \$13
- ▶ 2007 Flying Fish Riesling, Washington, \$13
- ▶ 2007 Chateau Grand Traverse Dry Riesling, Old Mission Peninsula, Mich., \$15
- ▶ 2007 Shady Lane Cellars Semi-Dry Riesling, Leelanau Peninsula, Mich., \$17
- ▶ 2007 Pacific Rim Riesling, Wallula Vineyard, Columbia Valley, \$18
- ▶ 2006 Claiborne & Churchill Dry Riesling, Central Coast, Calif., \$18
- ▶ 2007 Trefethen Dry Riesling, Oak Knoll District, Napa Valley, \$19
- ▶ 2007 Chateau Ste. Michelle Riesling, Cold Creek Vineyard, Columbia Valley, \$20
- ▶ 2006 Handley White Riesling, Mendocino County, Calif., \$20
- ▶ 2007 Chateau Ste. Michelle & Dr. Loosen Eroica Riesling, Columbia Valley, \$25

is presented as a scale divided into four parts — dry, medium-dry, medium-sweet and sweet — and uses an arrow to indicate where that particular wine falls on the scale. Jekel Vineyards in California is the first to agree to use the scale, and many other producers are expected to follow suit with the 2008 and 2009 vintages.

(My preference would have been a three-section scale — dry, medium and sweet — so that the consumer doesn't have to ask the difference between medium-dry and medium-sweet, but that's a minor quibble with an otherwise handy tool.)

Even before these consumer outreach projects were launched, Riesling sales were beginning to take off, fueled by open-minded Millennial-generation wine lovers and by greater availability of quality bottles from Europe and the West Coast. Washington is now the center of U.S. production, followed by California, New York and Oregon, but some interesting versions also are coming out of Michigan, Ohio, Canada and a few other spots.

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Misunderstood: Pacific Rim is part of a Riesling advocacy group that has put out a booklet to educate consumers.