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Wine 2.0: East meets West with reasonable Rieslings

Edward Deitch takes a look behind the winning wines of Pacific Rim

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It says something about the wine world in 2008 when that bottle you're pouring tonight is based on the following: the owner of the winery is a California wine icon; the company is based in Portland, Oregon; most of the grapes are grown in southeastern

Washington but there's a splash of wine from Germany added in; the winemaker was born in France, and the wine's natural [food](#) pairings are Asian.

Welcome to the wines of Pacific Rim, which might well be the definition of Wine 2.0.

Never heard of it? Well, Pacific Rim could become a big deal as it tries to popularize the "R" word — that's right, Riesling — in this country as never before. Sure, there's no shortage of excellent American Riesling around, whether from California (Trefethen and Smith-Madrone in Napa come to mind), Washington state or New York's Finger Lakes. Not to mention all the great wine from Germany and France's Alsace, although those wines remain hard for the uninitiated to sort through.

Pacific Rim simplifies the Riesling by making it, well, simple to understand and by trying to become the brand that's synonymous with the grape. Three of its four wines are Rieslings (dry, sweet and a very sweet late-harvest "ice" wine), while the fourth is a chenin blanc.

I tasted them recently — all four from the 2006 vintage — at a [dinner](#) organized by Pacific Rim at the Chinatown Brasserie in lower Manhattan. The restaurant was a smart choice because the wines are made for the bold flavors of Chinese food (in this case superb Chinese food). They combined with a range of dishes with pinpoint precision.

Tangy ginger chicken salad, for example, matched nicely with the chenin blanc; Peking duck and the dry Riesling made for an elegant combination, while crispy orange beef, sweet and fiery at the same time, was tamed by the sweet Riesling, which wasn't about to be overpowered by the dish. It didn't matter that we





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were drinking expensive, gourmet Chinese food with inexpensive wine from screwcap bottles; in fact, this made the experience all the more satisfying. The suggested price is about \$11 for the Rieslings and the chenin, although I've seen them on the Web for as low as \$8 to \$10.

Of all the wines, the dry Riesling is the most versatile — both on and off the food court. I found it focused and complex, layered with notes of apricot, peach, pear and lime along with minerals and the intriguing, aromatic signature of good Riesling that is often described as “petrol” or wet stone.

It will also pair well with sushi and other Asian foods and appetizers such as smoked fish and prosciutto, and will serve as a sophisticated aperitif wine beyond standard-issue Chardonnay. In fact, the Pacific Rim marketing campaign includes an anti-chardonnay message that I'm not sure is necessary (nothing compares with white Burgundy, after all). But the wines should appeal easily to those looking for something different.

For a long time, Pacific Rim was a label of California's Bonny Doon Vineyard until the owner, Randall Grahm, reorganized his empire a couple of years ago. He cut the Pacific Rim umbilical cord and turned it into its own brand, making Nicolas Quillé, a Bonny Doon protégé with a passion for Riesling, winemaker and general manager.

From a practical standpoint, Quillé told me at dinner, “it didn't make sense to truck down the juice from Washington state” to Bonny Doon's winery on California's Central Coast. But it was more than that: the realization that a brand built around Riesling — good Riesling — could stand on its own on the American wine landscape in 2008.

As with just about everything that Randall Grahm has his hand in, there's a final twist here. Pacific Rim's Rieslings are blends of [grapes](#) from a number of vineyards in southeastern Washington from which the winery buys fruit. But there's something else in the mix, which may explain, in part, why the wines reminded me of classic German Rieslings with their full fruit, lightness and crisp acidity.

Pacific Rim has always been infused with a dose of German Riesling — up to 20 percent — that is shipped over from the Mosel region by Johannes Selbach, one of the best-known winemakers there and a longtime adviser on Pacific Rim's Rieslings. The aim is to provide greater depth and acidity to the wines. Talk about unorthodox — and yet it works.

Purists, of course, may turn up their wine noses at this sort of thing but for me, the bottom line is what's in the bottle, and Pacific Rim, as complicated as it is in the making, is simply delicious in the glass.

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