



The sweet, hidden charms of Riesling: Germany's great white may be confusing - but it's an underappreciated treat, says Jon Bonné

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By Jon Bonné

Don't fear the Riesling.

For all its versatility and charm, this noble grape continues to scare off many wine lovers. That goes double for German Riesling, often the world's best and almost assuredly its most intimidating.

Some of this anxiety comes from German wines' uneven legacy among U.S. drinkers, what you might call the Blue Nun problem. Many Americans' sole contact with these wines has involved hastily made wines of marginal quality, stuck in garish blue bottles and sold on the cheap. German Liebfraumilch of the 1970s and '80s, meant for quick drinking in export markets, was only partially Riesling (and ho-hum stuff at that), blended with workhorse grapes like müller-thurgau and silvaner. It was to good Riesling what "Must Love Dogs" is to "Casablanca."

None of this has been helped by the thicket of exotic words and abbreviations found on typical German wine labels, which require the vinous equivalent of Cliff notes to parse. It's a tall order to ask a wine drinker who's finally straightened out zinfandel from merlot to comprehend the difference between kabinett and spätlese (two degrees of grape ripeness), or between QbA and QmP (two levels of wine quality).

Further complicating things are new simple-sounding terms approved by the German government. Words like "Classic" or "Selection" might have made sense to German consumers, but more than a few drinkers on these shores have been surprised to find that "Classic" Riesling - which amounts to a kabinett Riesling that's higher in alcohol and may have sugar added - is bone-dry, with none of that sweet edge that typifies most imported Riesling.

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The move was "exorbitantly stupid," says Thomas Haehn of Rudi Wiest Selections, one of the top American importers of Riesling. "They really just looked at it from a German perspective."

Recent vintages are a puzzle, too. Riesling lovers are still speaking (in hushed tones, since there's so little left on the market) of the amazing 2001 vintage, in which late-ripening grapes offered up wines

in perfect balance. More recently, the blazing heat of Europe's 2003 summer created fat wines with less acidity and more lushness: beautiful for lovers of an over-the-top style, though many wines ended up flabby, like fruit salad. In between are 2002 and 2004, more traditional years with lots of wines that balance sweet and tart.

Why bother, if it's all so complex? For one, German Riesling is a perfect food wine, low in alcohol (often under 10 percent), with acidity to cut through fatty dishes and sweetness to match spicy Asian cuisine and fish. Beyond that, you can easily indulge in some terrific wines for under \$25 - if you pick carefully.

Lessons learned

To help gauge how the latest batches from Germany stack up against their global competition, I enlisted the help of Bob Betz, a Master of Wine and formerly a vice president at Stimson Lane Vineyards (now known as Chateau Ste. Michelle) in Washington state. He invited Bob Bertheau, who as Ste. Michelle's head winemaker for white wines is in charge of the largest production of Riesling in the world, including a collaboration with German Riesling impresario Ernst Loosen on Washington's celebrated Eroica bottling. Both men can quote chapter and verse on this grape.

Some conclusions from our tasting, a global sampling of 20 Rieslings not only from several regions of Germany but also New Zealand and even Colorado:

1. Frustratingly, when it comes to German Riesling, money and value really do correlate. While we found a few standouts among basic QbA Rieslings (the bottom tier for quality wines), the best wines under \$25 are still found at the kabinett level and up. An upside of the '03 vintage? Many kabinetts were made from riper grapes but not classified that way, so you can find great wines for less money.
2. "Branded" Rieslings - those with catchy names that have no official meaning - can be charming introductory wines, but many lack depth. At one point, they were described as "Dolly Parton wines," with lots of flash upfront and nothing on the finish. Full apologies were quickly made to Ms. Parton.
3. The biggest shortfall with many of these wines came in a bitter or muted finish. Bertheau is one of the few winemakers who talks about tannins (those mouth-drying compounds) in white wine. Bertheau chalked up the finish problems to poor tannin handling.
4. That said, the German samplings still had more delicacy and structure than many American Rieslings. (My conclusion, not theirs.)
5. It ain't Germany, but Colorado makes some darn good Riesling.

If your memories of German Riesling are unpleasant, now is the time to give it another go. Despite a weak dollar, great values abound. It's a wine that even drinkers who fear big, heavy red wines can love without feeling lowbrow.

In fact, it's a grape that some of the world's most learned wine scholars choose as their personal favorite. Consider it the anti-chardonnay - misunderstood and underappreciated, yet as sublime as wine gets.

Just steer clear of those blue bottles.