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Quiet revolution of the underappreciated riesling

How do you like your riesling? Well, it's a flawed question because riesling sales are not exactly going through the roof, so there is a good chance you haven't had a bottle recently. But is this much disparaged grape variety about to come of age? Many consumers still think of riesling as being a cheap, old-fashioned variety and cringe at the thought of a sweet and nasty German wine they had in their youth. However, a quiet revolution is taking place in the world of riesling. Australians are now making German styles, and the Germans are making Australian styles. New Zealand rieslings, often labelled dry but really an off-dry style, sit somewhere in between. Winemakers are fiddling around with oak and skin contact, some rieslings are released with a little bottle age and, to top it off, new international classifications are appearing on labels.

Take the home of riesling, Germany, for instance. Traditionally speaking, you could have your pick of styles ranging from kabinett through to eiswein. But

about sweetness and can be botrytis-affected, but you can still get a dry auslese, which will have higher than normal alcohol level (confused yet?). The final two classifications - beerenauslese (BA) and trockenbeerenauslese (TBA) - are rich, sweet wines produced from overripe, botrytis-affected grapes. As an addendum, eisweins are produced when the grapes are picked while frozen. The most impressive, and expensive, dry German rieslings are coming from producer organisations such as the VDP and labelled as either Erstes Gewachs or Grosses Gewachs wines.

In Australia, while our traditional dry rieslings still dominate the market, there seems to be a growing trend to release a riesling with some residual sugar. These vary enormously. Victorian winemaker Mac Forbes draws on his winemaking experiences in Austria and extensive travels in Germany to make four very different styles of riesling sourced from Strathbogie Ranges fruit. The RS on his labels indicates his approach

Asian/fusion food when it's young but with some age it develops more complexity and the range of foods it works with also grows. Wines like this - with good acid, low pH and 10-20g/l RS have, in my opinion, the best cellaring potential - if you have 20-30 years up your sleeve!" Belinda is also experimenting with lees contact and fermenting in old puncheons.

It is these varying amounts of sweetness in riesling, and the fact that there is often no identification to the style on the label, that is confusing the drinking public. What a German or Kiwi describes as dry an Aussie would think as off-dry. That's why the International Riesling Foundation (IRF, thankfully they didn't call it an Alliance) has developed a voluntary Riesling Taste Profile with recommended technical guidelines for winemakers and a useful dryness/sweetness scale for consumers. Wines are placed on a scale from dry, through medium-dry and medium-sweet to sweet.

Peter Monro, senior winemaker in charge of Leo Buring, likes the IRF scale because it takes into account the pH, acid and the sweetness of a wine, which makes the scales based on perceived sweetness rather than relying on simply residual sugar. Leo Buring is releasing three Eden Valley rieslings with the IRF scale on them. "Historically, Leo Buring produced a spatlese-style in the 1970s, which is similar to the new medium-sweet style we have released. So in a way we have returned to what was traditionally produced," says Peter. It seems the new wave of residual sugar rieslings is a winemaker-driven trend and a rebuff to dry styles. "If you look at Leo Buring wines pre-2000 they all had around 4g/l of RS but then progressively we went dryer over the next few vintages. The new wines are about getting more texture and roundness on the palate," Peter explains. Eden Valley grapes were chosen because they are of a more linear acid profile, which makes them more suitable for producing medium-dry and medium-sweet styles, as opposed to Clare riesling.

All in all, riesling is in a state of flux, but has a lot going for it.

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on a recent trip to the Rheingau and Rheinhessen the first question I was asked when visiting a producer was, "Do you want to try our traditional rieslings or our modern, dry styles?" It was like a fork in the road; I had to make a choice.

Traditionally, Qualitatswein mit Pradikat (QmP) is the top classification for traditional German wine and means 'quality wine with distinction'. These wines have not been chapitalised. There are six sub-categories determined by the grapes must weight measured in degrees oechsle. All have residual sugar so kabinett, even at the light/dry end of the spectrum, will have a touch of sweetness to it. Spatlese is regarded as being 'late picked', but not as we would imagine it. Often you can read spatlese as simply meaning riper grapes were used. In fact, the modern dry rieslings I referred too are often labelled as spatlese trocken - in other words, a late-picked wine fermented to dryness. Auslese level is all

to residual sugar in the wine. "Our RS37 is the first fruit picked - tighter and more citrus-driven, with some slight herbal notes. The RS9 is the second-picked fruit, showing slightly more fruit spectrum, which pushes into white melon and citrus. It gives more breadth on the palate. The 'Tradition' was picked with the RS9 fruit but had three months on skins. This is a bizarre wine with lemon custard, citrus floral and almost red fruit aromas; but with a structure of fine, supple tannin." Food and wine matching is interesting with these wines. "I think foods higher in fats and protein, such as pork, are a fantastic pairing," Mac adds, and I agree.

Potential ageing is another side to riesling. Belinda Gould runs Muddy Waters in New Zealand's Waipara region. "We lease a block of riesling which supplies the fruit for our James Hardwick Riesling - this is around the 15g/l RS mark depending on the year. It's good with