



WORDS CLIVE HARTLEY

RIESLING DESERVES BETTER

RIESLING remains an enigma of a grape variety. It should be our most treasured variety as it comes in all styles: bone dry to lusciously sweet and is therefore a match for many dishes as well as being able to mature in bottle for decades. The only disadvantage is that it doesn't marry with oak.

But it still languishes in sales and as a sad addendum on some restaurant wine lists. In fact Australia has grubbed or grafted over 1000ha of riesling vines in the past five years and the variety has slipped behind pinot gris into fifth position on the white varietal charts.

On a brighter note, Australia has the fourth highest plantings of riesling with only Germany, France and the US growing more. Clare Valley still leads the way in plantings in Australia, with Polish Hill and Watervale the two top sub-regions. Other areas that have an excellent reputation for riesling include: Eden Valley, Adelaide Hills, Strathbogie Ranges, Mount Barker, Frankland River, Canberra District and Tasmania.

In the last 30 years Australian rieslings have traditionally been dry with racy acidity, but in the past decade we have seen the rise of off-dry styles similar to what our neighbours do across the ditch and in Germany. Dry wines still make up the majority of rieslings, but while they were once carrying practically zero residual sugar, they now contain a few grams. It is this hidden sweetness, well balanced with crisp acidity, that is adding a palate flavour and texture which in my book has improved the intensity on the palate.

It's a funny old topsy-turvy world as once upon a time I could rely on Alsace rieslings being dry, but increasingly they have some residual sugar. Germany was once all off-dry or sweet, but now the highest quality wines are dry through the excellent work done by the Verband Deutscher Pradikatsweinguter Association and their GG wines.

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A lot of old riesling vines are registered as either the McWilliams clone or the Pewsey Vale clone sourced from old Australian vineyards. Eden Valley's Pewsey Vale is an historic name dating back to 1850 with the initial vineyard being planted by Joseph Gilbert. Vines did not survive from that vineyard as it was destroyed in the 1920s, but it was subsequently replanted in 1960 and now produces what is one of Australia's iconic rieslings. In New South

Wales Kem Helm, from Helm Wines at Murrumbateman, is Australia's unofficial ambassador for riesling, having been responsible for instigating the Canberra International Riesling Challenge in 2000. He puts clonal influence well behind "place" as important factors in riesling styles. "Clonal variations on flavour are not as great as 'place'. The old clone, that James Busby introduced in 1832 from the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris, is grown in various locations and produces varying flavour profiles. However Geisenheim clones tend to produce wines with more floral bouquet no matter the climate or site."

Riesling wine making is simple and so it allows the vineyard and regional characteristics to shine through. Helm agrees: "Riesling shows its place like no other variety. Climate, soil, vine management, aspect, sunlight penetration through the canopy and even companion plants near the vineyard can influence the resultant wine flavour profile. I believe great rieslings are made in the vineyard and the winemaker is the custodian of the grapes. The winemaker has to gently take the grapes through the winemaking process and carefully preserve the five months work that the vineyard has done".

Helm sources riesling from three regions - Murrumbateman, Orange and Tumbarumba. "Murrumbateman rieslings have clean elegant acid, layered mouthfeel, aromatic flavours and lingering finish. Orange rieslings have more texture, citrus flavours and are not as aromatic. Tumbarumba rieslings

have intensity of lemon and lime, with a floral nose and normally a lingering finish," he said.

Legendary South Australian winemaker John Vickery is probably best placed to describe SAA rieslings. He once described the Eden Valley style as "floral, steely, delicate lemony flavours", while Clare Valley has "more mouth filling flavours - citrus, orange blossom, limes and not so much in the lemon spectrum. In the Barossa, riesling shows by tropical, passionfruit, citrus and geranium characters".

Clare Valley is decidedly hot in comparison to other top riesling sites across the globe. The grape likes a cool climate, so what's going on? The success of riesling in this region is due to the topography, with vineyards being located on hills and exposed aspects. Wind and cloud cover, as well as altitude, and the direction of the rows contribute to achieving the right growing conditions for riesling.

In Western Australia the Great Southern region is a hotbed for riesling. Here they seem to get more cooler evenings which retains acidity. Singlefile Wines makes rieslings from both Mount Barker and Porongurup sub-regions. "Our Mount Barker Riesling is generally characterised by a tight mineral structure with citrus characters," comments senior winemaker Coby Ladwig.

It's the compound linalool that gives us the citrus and floral aromas in riesling. Linalool belongs to a group of compounds called monoterpenes. These compounds are found in citrus fruits and

flowers. Aromatic wines that display floral, rose petal, lychee and citrus aromas such as gewurztraminer, muscat a petit grains and riesling, contain higher levels of monoterpenes. Other less important monoterpenes found in riesling are geraniol, which provides floral or rose petal aroma and lactone which produces lime aromas. These primary aromas fade over time and another controversial aroma compound called 1,6,-trimethyl-1,2-dihydronaphthalene (thankfully we refer to this as TDN) becomes dominant. TDN belongs to a different group of aroma compounds called norisoprenoids. TDN has chemical aromas of kerosene, an unusual aroma to be found in a glass of wine. When encountered, it can divide a room, with some people finding it objectionable while others say it can add complexity. Some research has pointed to TDN being caused by the grapes being exposed to water stress and sunburn, and that shading the fruit can lessen the effects of TDN, also inappropriately high cellaring temperatures can make it appear quicker. 🍷

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