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Experts love it, consumers are undecided about it. Riesling lover Dr Enno Lippold explains why Riesling is worthy of great love

Riesling: The Chameleon Grape

One of the more enduring questions floating around the world of fine wine is whether Riesling is the greatest white wine grape in the world.

Ask any critic, wine writer or sommelier about grapes that can produce wines worthy of cellaring, or display diversity of profiles and make ageworthy wines, and often the first grape mentioned is Riesling.

There is little argument about it. Riesling is a fine conveyor of terroir. A versatile grape that can produce a variety of styles from bone dry to lusciously sweet. Experts often praise its ability to pair effortlessly with the complex cuisines of Asia. In short, it is a grape for the ages. The question that often follows is this: Why then does Riesling lag in the popularity stakes with consumers?

This was the first question I ask German industry veteran and Mosel producer, Dr Enno Lippold, who describes himself as a champion of Riesling. We are discussing Riesling at *La Compagnie Neal's Yard*, a popular London wine bar and Dr Lippold has opened several bottles, his own and other producers'. We taste a range of excellent Rieslings from dry to sparkling, youthful to aged, while he holds forth on his favourite subject.

"Riesling is a niche varietal, only one percent of the global vineyard surface is planted to Riesling, half of which is in Germany," he explains. "Also, many consumers are happier with uniform-style grapes like Pinot Grigio or Sauvignon Blanc from New Zealand. They find Riesling in its multiple avatars — sweet, dry or luscious — confusing." To this end, Riesling producers including Dr Lippold use the IRF (International Riesling Foundation) scale on the back label, which identifies the Riesling as dry, sweet or in between.

Enno ("Riesling lovers should be on first name terms," he says) pours me a **1995 Alter Weinhof Erdener Treppchen**, a Riesling Kabinett which carries its 20 years lightly, the primary fruit just yielding to notes of dill, sage, bergamot and apricot marmalade.

"Many insist the Kabinett style is for early drinking," he says with a shrug, "but this wine is in its transition stage and getting more complex. I believe Rieslings can age longer than any good Cabernet Sauvignons because of their natural acidity and sweetness."

Enno was recently involved in a debate at Vinitaly where several experts insisted that Riesling was a cool climate grape and could never grow successfully south of the Alps. "This belief has since long been dispelled as pure prejudice," he said, citing the example of noted winemaker Elena Walch in the Alto Adige region, whose **Riesling Castel Ringberg 2023** is exceptional.

In another example in Langhe, Piemonte, growers led by Aldo Vajra in Barolo began cultivating Riesling in 1985. His now well-established Riesling, **GD Vajra Pétracine Riesling Langhe DOC** features on multiple wine lists. The next wine is from Enno's own portfolio, the **Dr Lippold Riesling Reserve Exceptionelle 2018** from the noted Ürziger Würzgarten Weltersberg vineyard famous for its steep 60% gradient. It shows tropical fruit notes and minerality balanced with subtle sweetness.

Enno rues the fact that winemakers today are quick to release their wines on the market, which does not do Riesling justice. His own wine labels carry the stamp of a tiny snail and the words, 'Slow Wine movement'. He believes that good Rieslings should ideally be drunk when flavours and aromas start melding into a harmonious whole. "In the old days, vinification was regarded as a two-step process," he points out. "One, actual winemaking and two, ageing. Young wines need time to settle and begin development. The second phase is as important as the first."

It is a pity that the market for sweet wine is on the decline, Enno says. "In the glory days of royalty people drank hock and Mosel Rieslings all the time, and they were never bone dry." The 1901 wine list of the Savoy Hotel in London regularly featured Sparkling Hocks and Moselles priced on par or higher than top Champagnes.

"Classic Mosel Riesling was special and became renowned thanks to Queen Victoria. But the earliest proponent of Mosel wines was Empress Josephine, wife of Napoleon, who introduced Riesling to Paris in the early 19th century when the Mosel region became part of the French empire. As homage to her I have named one of my Rieslings, Empress Josephine," Enno says.

On cue, that very wine is poured into my glass. The grapes for the **Empress Josephine's Riesling 2021** come from the prized area of Ürziger Würztgarten and is stamped, 'Late Release' indicating release four years after production. Made in a Spätlese style, the hint of sweetness balances out its piercing acidity.

Photo: Dr Enno Lippold

Ürziger Würzgarten Weltersberg vineyard known for its steep 60% gradient

With climate change a totally new Riesling style has emerged, he explains. "Today rules dictate that 'Grosses Gewächs' (Grand Crus) must be trocken — bone dry or without discernible sweetness — and this has been the preferred style since 2000."

As for the belief that Riesling can only produce excellent wine north of the Alps, he adds that Germany's noted Geisenheim University has studied the growing conditions for Riesling worldwide and deduced that Riesling is adaptive to warmer regions if planted at higher altitudes. Examples abound, like Elgin or Walker Bay in South Africa, Australia's Clare and Eden Valley in New Zealand and the US west coast, where the topography allows cool winds to blow.

"Further north and east are Columbia Valley and Oregon, and the Finger Lakes region. In fact, one of the best dry Rieslings I ever discovered is the **Ravines Cellars Argetsinger Riesling** from Seneca Lake in the Finger Lakes area."

For anyone new to Riesling, a dry style is easy to appreciate, but Enno believes that the most exciting part of the journey still lies ahead, namely, the discovery of Riesling's chameleonic nature. Finally, pouring a delicious sparkling 2019 Moselle from the Saar, he concludes, "Riesling offers what few other grapes can — the ability to offer a piano scale of notes with half tones of sweetness. There is a Riesling for everyone, whether you like your wine dry or sweet." ❖

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