



Rise of Riesling

*Though Still Battling Consumer Perceptions,
this Noble Grape has Carved Out a Solid Niche*

By Jim Clarke

The drinking of Riesling makes you a better person,” says Paul Grieco of the restaurant *Hearth* and the *Terroir* wine bars in New York City, founder of the *Summer of Riesling* and self-styled “*Riesling Overlord*.” If he’s right, the moral well-being of the U.S. has risen considerably over the past decade.

Nielsen data showed Riesling sales growing 72% from 2003 to 2006, outpacing every other major variety aside from Pinot Grigio, and since then the grape has continued to maintain a similar trajectory. According to Euromonitor, international growth in Riesling sales had been a steady 3.3% annually from 1997 to 2005, but then jumped to 10.5% annually for the 2005-2010 period.

Across the U.S., Riesling seems to evoke two associations in wine drinkers: Germany, and sweetness. The former has

been more surmountable than the latter; consumers are embracing Rieslings from not just Germany but from New York, Austria, Washington and other regions as well. However, “People still have a tendency to conflate Riesling with sweetness,” says Terry Theise, who imports a number of Rieslings from Germany and Austria such as *Christoffel* and *Alzinger*. “We need to convey that Riesling is just a grape variety made in a wide range of styles. To figure out which is which takes six to ten minutes of people’s time, but peo-

ple treat it like it’s something Talmudic.”

When Grieco does a Riesling tasting, he forbids use of what he calls, “the ‘S’ word,” leaving it out the conversation to put the focus on balance instead. He also points out that 95% of the world’s Riesling is in fact dry, including 60% of Germany’s. Most of that was traditionally consumed domestically, but that’s changing as well. Chaylee Priete, wine director at *The Slanted Door* in San Francisco, says, “The range of styles has broadened considerably and I think the winemaking practices are improving so that wines seem complete, not stripped of sweetness which I had thought was a problem for some time. I do not think so any more. There are more balanced wines being offered.”

Opposite Page: scenes from New York's Finger Lakes.
Left: lake-effect fog above the north end of Seneca Lake at Ventosa Vineyards. Right: Sheldrake Point on the west side of Cayuga Lake, home to Sheldrake Point Winery.

“It’s more on-premise in terms of embracing it, but the volume sales still happen off-premise. You find one passionate retailer for every dozen passionate sommeliers.”

— Importer Terry Theise

STILL SOME DISCONNECT

While the quality of the wines is there, Theise is more circumspect about their place in the market. “Things are not that easy for really dry Riesling,” he says. “There’s no better dry Riesling than Austrian dry Riesling, but Grüner Veltliner outsells Riesling by 3.6:1. People are happy to say they drink dry Riesling but the numbers don’t support it. There’s still a disconnect between what people say and what they pony-up for.”

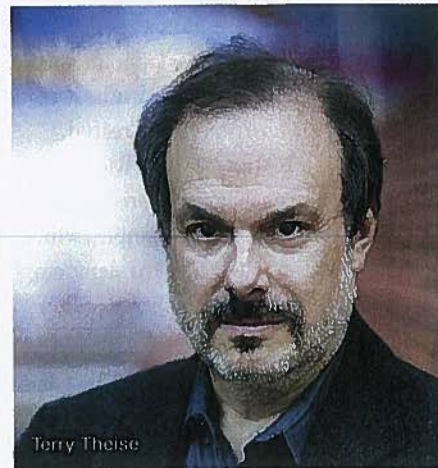
And other sweet wines are also on the rise. “Some producers say our lunch is being eaten by Moscato,” says Jim Trezise, president of the International Riesling Foundation (IRF) as well the New York State Wine & Grape Foundation. But Trezise says their research contradicts that: “Moscato and Riesling do not have the same audience.” An IRF study conceded there could be a loss of entry-level occasional drinkers at the lowest price points; but aside from that, Riesling was more highly regarded and not threatened by the success of Moscato. Whatever their surface similarities, respondents didn’t consider the wines interchangeable at all. Mark Burnett, wine director at two Five Point Bottle Shops in Atlanta, says that matches with his experience; guests who are looking for Riesling are looking for “sweeter wine, but not cloying like a Moscato.”

RESTAURANTS REMAIN VITAL

Because Riesling does seem to require more communication, on-premise sales are vital for raising awareness of the grape. “It’s more on-premise in terms of embracing it,” says Theise, “but the volume sales still happen off-premise. You find one passionate retailer for every dozen passionate sommeliers.” He adds that a list with only a couple of Rieslings “looks like tokenism,” and he encourages his distributors to waive split case fees so wine directors can, for example, buy three bottles of 12 different wines instead of a case each of three wines. He says that kind of showing starts the conversation: “The guest says, ‘Wow, what’s with all these Rieslings?’ And the server smiles and says, ‘They are so good with our food...’”



Chaylee Priete



Terry Theise

“We have trained our sommeliers and our staff to talk about how our food demands lower alcohol, higher acid wines with lots of minerality,” says The Slanted Door’s Priete. “We discuss that since our food is served family style and progresses from the lightest and most delicate dishes [spring rolls, papaya salad] to richest/sweetest/spiciest [caramelized tiger shrimp, grilled lamb, clay pot], the wines need to match pace and complement the dishes. We often suggest starting with a very light dry crisp white and moving into a Kabinett Riesling and then a Spätlese. We offer half glasses and encourage guests to try this progression even if they are just having a small amount of wine.”

RIESLING AT HOME

Food pairing extends into off-premise sales, too. Mark Burnett in Atlanta says customers are asking for wine pairing suggestions for home cooking more and more often, and Riesling often comes up in that context. Nancy’s Wines for Food in Manhattan has specialized in German wines, especially Riesling, for over a decade. Founder Nancy Maniscalco says “It’s a great food wine and a tremendous value. There are lots and lots for under \$20 that are fabulous; not a lot of re-

Rise -of- Riesling

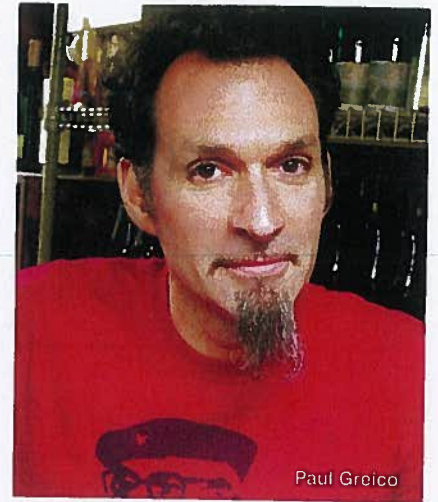
gions can say that.” She also says that having more local on-premise venues embrace Riesling has opened the door further; “This is on the list at X restaurant” gets customers interested.

Burnett notes that Riesling does much better at their store next to the University of Georgia campus, which he attributes to the apparent demographic of the new typical Riesling drinker: Millennials. “These twenty or thirty-year-olds don’t care what happened in the past,” says Paul Grieco, alluding to the rise and fall of wines like Blue Nun and Liebfraumilch in the 1970s, which left Riesling’s reputation with Baby Boomers in the doldrums. “They’re willing, even wanting, to have their own jour-

ney. It’s a new generation that wants to learn.” Theise agrees that a lot of that generation “came of age not knowing that Riesling was ‘uncool.’”

POSITIVE SIGNS

One advantage enjoyed by Riesling but few other grapes is that both New World and Old World producers label it varietally, which has encouraged international cooperation in marketing and promotion efforts (The Burgundians, for example, have little interest in getting behind a push for Chardonnay, invested as they are instead in their appellation system.) The IRF is one example; Grieco’s Summer of Riesling is another, em-



Paul Grieco

bracing and promoting Riesling wines from all over the world. Bob Madill, president of the Finger Lakes Wine Alliance, notes that their own efforts have included introducing people not just to Finger Lakes Riesling but to Riesling as a category; likewise, he says, the PR and marketing agency Wines of Germany has made a point to include the Alliance in their own Riesling-related events.

Higher-profile domestic production is helpful in its own right. “It’s exciting to see the progress of domestic Riesling,” says Theise, “especially the amount of good Riesling being made in the Finger Lakes. I think it’s tremendously encouraging. Superficially it’s competition, but the rising tide lifts all boats.”

Prospects for Riesling’s moment in the sun are still not certain. Theise concedes, “It could still be better. Maybe Riesling won’t ever go mainstream, but it could be a much bigger niche.”

“Is this a long-term trend or a blip?” is how Jim Trezise describes industry thinking. “Right now there’s momentum, there’s a wave which we can make into a growth trend and permanent thing.” ■

Jim Clarke is the sommelier and beverage manager at the Armani Ristorante in New York City; he has written for a number of trade and consumer publications and he lives on a boat in the Hudson River.

HOW SWEET IT IS/AIN'T >>>

The International Riesling Foundation (IRF) was founded in 2007 to promote the grape. Several IRF studies determined that wine drinkers who knew Riesling was available in a range of sweetness levels were more likely to choose Riesling than those who assumed it was always sweet.

In turn, one of their major projects has been to help consumers to know just how sweet a bottle of Riesling is before they purchase it. The Foundation’s research also indicated that some typical industry terms like “off dry” and “late harvest” were confusing

and probably of little use in communicating with consumers.

The IRF scale, which calculates perceived sweetness by a wine’s ratio of residual sugar to acidity and pH, has been adopted by a number of producers worldwide, including big names like Chateau St. Michelle in Washington and Schloss Johannisberg in Germany’s Rheingau.

Appearing on the back label, the sweetness or dryness is indicated on a simple line graph with a range from dry to sweet.



THIS RIESLING IS:



IRF® www.drinkriesling.com