

## ACROSS THE DITCH



# Getting into the Riesling habit

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It didn't start out as heavenly as we drove to our day of Riesling adoration – otherwise known as 'In Praise of Riesling' – in the Waipara Valley of New Zealand's South Island in late January. In fact the heavens opened up as we approached. Was it a sign of divine intervention? Perhaps, but it certainly didn't dampen the enthusiasm of the hundred strong congregation of devotees of this grape variety.

Apart from Pinot Noir there are few (if any) other grape varieties that can create such passion and almost religious fervour among its followers. Most winemakers seem to have a deep respect for Riesling, as do most wine media. In fact most sommeliers I've encountered also seem to proudly announce they're Riesling lovers but then quickly follow with a lament that the rest of the world isn't and that's why they can't put yours on their list!

The volume of Riesling produced in NZ is tiny in the overall global scheme of things and even within a NZ context. Although it's the sixth most planted varietal, the average yield over the past few years

group it's more like preaching to the converted!

The real benefit of these types of events is to calibrate against some of the best examples in the world and there was certainly no shortage of these. The three international tasting flights in the morning featured wines from some of the greatest estates in Germany and Austria including Dönnhoff, JJ Prüm, Reinhold Haart, Pichler and Franz Hirtzberger. There were also some examples from France (Alsace), USA (Washington) and Australia (Clare Valley). The afternoon was then devoted to the worship of local wines in both structured and informal tasting activities. Over the course of the day there were some Rieslings that were praised *en masse* and others that divided the crowd and created controversy due to their distinct style. In fact an example of a bone dry wine tasted during the event, from one of Clare's icon producers, prompted Stephen Bennett MW to remark, "This wine is like getting dressed up in gas masks and hitting each other with fish – it's just not nice." (Bennett is a Kiwi of course!).

NZ is number six on the list of global Riesling

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has been 6,000 tonnes which represents just over 3% of the volume of Sauvignon Blanc harvested last year. Of this modest quantity only a quarter is then exported – less than one million litres.

So an initiative like In Praise of Riesling, which started in 2008, is either an attempt to increase interest and focus on the Waipara region (generally regarded as one of the two regions producing some of the best NZ Riesling), a serious day's effort to consume that last 25% of Riesling normally exported, or a genuine attempt to stimulate a broader interest in Riesling – possibly a flawed objective as with this largely 'industry'

producers behind the US (California specifically), Austria, France (Alsace region) and Australia which sits in second place. The biggest Riesling producer is still Germany with an estimated 22,000 hectares – five times more than Australia's plantings. Let's face it, German and Riesling go together like nuns and habits in most people's minds due to the phenomenon of that icon brand Blue Nun. It all started when Hermann Sichel decided to mark the extraordinary vintage of 1921 with a new special label – a label that turned out to be blue instead of brown due to a printer's mistake. The wine became known as Blue Nun and won

instant recognition in the UK. The word then spread across the world, gaining popular appeal until the 1970s when Blue Nun reached its peak volume of about 3.5 million bottles sold in the UK alone and became the UK's biggest wine brand. Indeed serving a bottle of Blue Nun at dinner parties was the very height of sophistication and it was especially appropriate to serve it along with toothpicks of canned pineapple and cheese or those divine matches with devilled eggs and devils (or angels) on horseback.

"The 1980s saw the brand falling behind as it failed to adjust to rapidly changing consumer demands,"

### **"Is Riesling in general really set to whip the masses into a frenzy?"**

according to Blue Nun's own history records, but a company merger in the '90s and a quality upgrading from a Liebraumilch to a Qualitätswein, and the Blue Nun became a little more grown-up and she also became a little drier, slimmer and more suited to mainstream tastes. By 2005 UK sales had surpassed their '70s peak with 5 million bottles sold. Sales are now about 12.5 million bottles globally to more than 100 countries and the Nun has become so cool you can even follow her on Twitter (@BlueNunWines) or be her friend on Facebook (Blue Nun).

So the Blue Nun is rejoicing in a comeback, but is Riesling in general really set to whip the masses into a frenzy? Recently I participated in the first Asian Riesling Forum at Wine for Asia 2010 entitled 'The Riesling Renaissance' which was moderated by Lisa Perrotti-Brown MW. Rieslings from Germany, Austria, Australia, Chile, Alsace and of course NZ were presented. It was clear at the end of the tasting the style that was generally preferred were those Rieslings that retained some level of residual sugar and those with minimal petrol or 'funky' characteristics. This was an audience still in the early stages of wine education, as with much of Asia, but it's clear the style of modern-day German producers and also the style coming from NZ, finds an easier acceptance with the novice Riesling drinkers.

One would take it for granted that there is an interest in Riesling in Asia as the high acidity and aromatic profile of the variety is an obvious companion to much Asian food which is often high in salt and spice. But the idea of food and wine matching is still a relatively new concept in Asia with most people preferring to drink status-rich Bordeaux regardless of the food.

Also on the panel of the first Asian Riesling Forum was American Joel Payne, who is the globetrotting ambassador for Germany's Riesling wines. He works for VDP – Verband Deutscher Qualitäts und Prädikatsweingüter, a century-old

Association of German estates who seek to preserve Germany's viticultural heritage by encouraging high standards among members. VDP aims to restore the glory of German Rieslings – wines that were once spoken about with the same reverence accorded to wines from Bordeaux and Burgundy. Germany certainly has a vested interest to increase both interest and status of Riesling and hopefully their efforts will help the cause of all Riesling producers given the varietal still conjures up negative associations of those sweet wines of substandard quality from the '60s and '70s.

In terms of export opportunities for NZ Riesling,

there are bright spots in the US where Riesling is the fastest growing segment recording double digit growth in recent years, albeit from a small base. As of last year the US became the world's largest wine market, so even a small segment represents a big opportunity. At the forefront of Riesling growth in the US is a Saint – naturally – a Washington State pioneering winery called Chateau Ste. Michelle whose Columbia Valley Riesling is the best-selling Riesling in the US and in fact now the leading global Riesling producer and category leader.

However the sad reality is that many boutique NZ wineries are pulling out of the US because of the difficulties of selling *any* wines at the premium end given the dropping price points, so it's unlikely that Riesling will be a saviour for any NZ producer. But the real issue is we just don't have enough Riesling to worry too much about exports anyway.

Almost half of the 1,000 hectares of Riesling grown is in Marlborough with about 30% grown in the Waipara region and Central Otago with nearly 6% – however it's the latter two regions that seem to garner an unfair share of media attention. And none of those three regions are planning any increase in Riesling production – in fact there is virtually no increase forecast for vineyard producing areas over the next three years across any variety. It seems that in spite of the continual pronouncements that Riesling is on the rise by industry commentators and perhaps just those hopeful few, NZ hasn't responded – maybe just not believing that there is a promised land for Riesling.

Maybe NZ needs to get religion and just go ahead and plant more Riesling. Alternatively, we can just continue to celebrate it at events like 'In Praise of Riesling' and try to consume the whole damned lot. To that I say, Amen!

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