

# Riesling Revival

This vastly underappreciated, noble grape is finally emerging from the shadow of the mighty Chardonnay to regain its rightful place as 'the finest white grape.'

By Thomas M. Ciesla

**Riesling is a late-ripening grape with a moderate yield,** making it difficult to grow, especially under unpredictable and temperamental climate conditions.

Back in the 1970s when Americans were still calling Chardonnay "Pinot Chardonnay," my refrigerator usually held wines with names like Blue Nun, Piesporter, and Liebfraumilch. Sweet and cheap, these wines were approachable by the immature palate and served as an entry point into the world of wine. In a sense, these wines were the precursor of today's white zinfandel. Sadly, the stigma of sweet and cheap created by these brands has lingered for decades and broadened its reach—when referring to German wine, it's these three wines that pop into most folks' minds. Though the Riesling grape is sometimes used in the production of these wines (more often it's the Sylvaner grape), this category of wine has little to do with a true Riesling.

The Riesling (pronounced reez-ling) grape, also known as Johannisberg Riesling, White Riesling, Weisser Riesling, Rhine Riesling, and Riesling Renano, has been grown in Germany's Rhine and Mosel valleys since the 14th century. It is the most planted grape in the Rhine Valley: people who talk about a Rhine wine are talking about a Riesling. It has also been the dominant grape in the Alsace region of France. These two countries have come to define how a Riesling should be grown and produced. Known as the noblest of the noble grapes, Riesling wines were also popular in England over the centuries; so popular in fact, that the wine found its way into literature. In *Hamlet*, the wine that the Danish court gets drunk on is a Rhine wine.

## Terroir!

One distinguishing fact about the Riesling grape is that it can produce wines across the entire spectrum of style, from a dusty dry, almost flinty, to a magnificent, sweet nectar. This Riesling chain is a celebration of a winemaker's vision and restraint. Riesling's superiority over other grapes stems from its late ripening cycle, allowing it time to extract the minerals and trace elements in the soil, giving full expression to the *terroir* (literally "soil" in French, but in the context of wine grapes, it alludes to other geographic factors in addition to the soil). Everything the vine has experienced in the vineyard can be sensed in a single glass of wine.

While it is true that other wines can express *terroir* with uncanny precision, their character is often altered by oak treatment. This isn't the case with Riesling, where new oak plays no part in its production, though European winemakers will use older, neutral oak in 1,000-liter oval casks to finish the wine. The

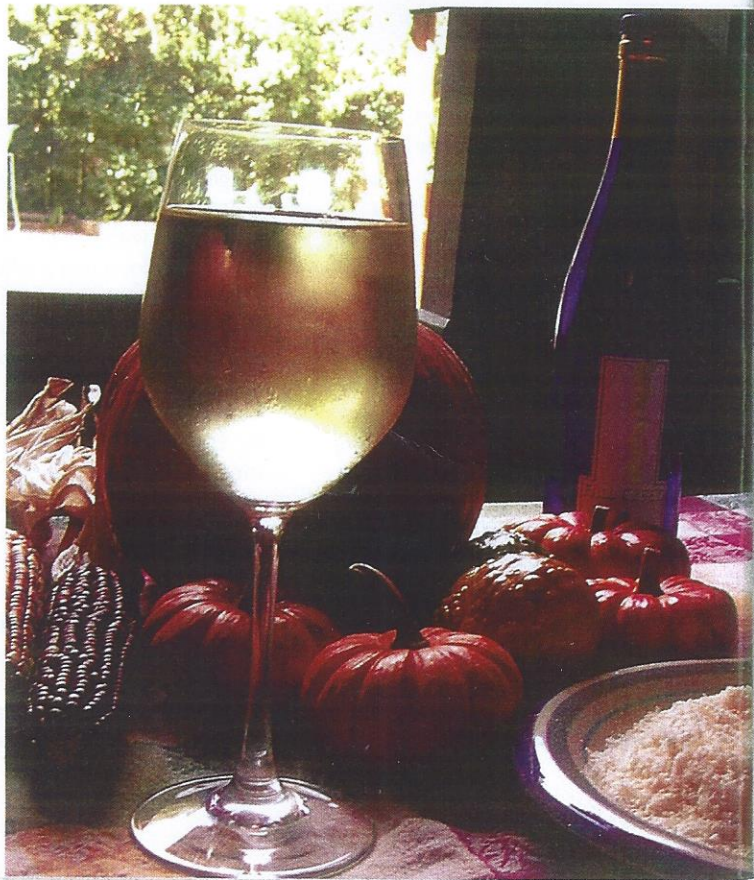
typical low alcohol levels of Riesling also help the nuances of the vineyard to be expressed.

## Styles of Riesling

Riesling is usually produced in three distinct styles: dry, semi-dry, and sweet. Picking the grapes early, when the sugar content is low, results in a crisp, fruity, aromatic wine that is low in alcohol. If you wait a bit longer to harvest, the sugar levels rise slightly and you produce a semi-dry Riesling. If the harvest is done late in the season when the berries have fully ripened, the sugar content is high, resulting in the classic sweet Riesling, with complex bouquets.

During the 20th century, Riesling grape-planting spread from the Old World to wine regions throughout the northern and southern hemispheres. However, with a few exceptions, these newer wines lack the unique character expressed by the conditions in the Mosel and Rhine valleys. There, the cooler climate allows the grape to ripen over an extended growing period, and the predominantly slate soils impart a mineral component to the wine. Still, a number of North American and Australian producers are committed to creating high-quality Riesling.

**With Riesling, everything the vine has experienced in the vineyard can be sensed in a single glass of wine.**



## New World Rieslings

In the United States, Riesling is seeing a renaissance in New York state's Finger Lakes region, as well as Michigan, California, Washington, and Oregon. The cooler climate and slate soils of the Finger Lakes area come close to the conditions in Germany, but Washington

crop produced in the state. The winery produces three Rieslings: a dry at zero percent residual sugar, a semi-dry at 1 percent residual sugar, and a late harvest at 8 percent residual sugar. According to Amber Bagwell, director of public relations and marketing for the winery, their 1 percent residual sugar outsells the zero percent residual 10-to-1. Several other Texas wineries include Riesling in their wine portfolios, usually offering both a semi-dry and a sweet version. However, just as with California, Riesling is not expected to be a major component of the Texas wine industry.

Surprisingly, Australia is now at the forefront of the Riesling revival and is known worldwide for the purity of its Rieslings. These bold and aggressive Down Under producers are setting the new world standard for the best dry versions of the varietal. Their wines offer unique regional characteristics, and their aggressive marketing efforts are sure to elevate Riesling awareness in the United States. The Clare Valley in South Australia is the source for most of Australia's best Riesling; two enclaves, Watervale and Polish Hill River, are especially renowned.

## Riesling and Food

Riesling is perhaps the most versatile food wine in the world. Where Chardonnay often slaps food, Riesling caresses it. Its marvelous acidity cuts through the flavor of rich cream sauces and softer delicate cheeses. It also matches well with meat or poultry dishes, and most seafood and shellfish. Riesling is also perfect for pairing with spicy Asian or Cajun dishes. For salty foods in general, the sweetness or fruitiness of Riesling is a match made in heaven.

The key element in matching a wine with food is identifying the strongest tasting element in the dish and then matching a wine to it. Today's cooking tends to focus more on sauces, or herbs and spices, and Riesling wines work well to accentuate these flavors. Therefore, by identifying the overriding taste component of a particular dish, you can generally choose the ideal Riesling wine style to accompany the taste.

A sweeter barbecued or caramelized

dish would generally match well with a semi-dry or sweeter-style Riesling, whereas a cream sauce or very simple seafood entree would work better with a dry Riesling. Here are some other pairing tips:

- Dry Riesling  
Most fish, lighter pastas
- Semi-Dry Riesling  
Barbecued, grilled, or smoked pork, poultry, and seafood
- Late Harvest Riesling  
Glazed ham, pork, poached pears, spicy food

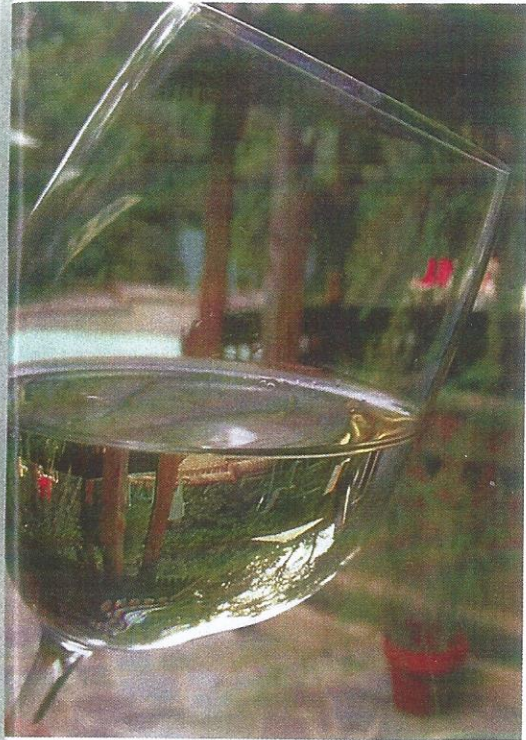
Riesling also is a great match with vegetable dishes and is one of the few wines that goes very well with asparagus. As the selection of New World Rieslings continues to expand, wine drinkers have an ever-increasing selection of producers to choose from in all price point categories. Experiment a little! Try a Riesling with those fish and chips, charcoal-grilled chicken, or Thai fish cakes and sweet chili sauce. You won't be disappointed.

## Riesling's Future

Has the new Riesling movement just begun? For Old World and New World winemakers, the answer is an unequivocal yes. German winemakers are experimenting with more dry Rieslings to appeal to a broader market, but confusing labels and difficult-to-pronounce words may hamper marketing efforts in the States. Experiments in new Riesling styles by New York and Washington winemakers and the flood of Australian Rieslings filling our restaurant lists and retail shelves will definitely help wine drinkers take notice of new interpretations of this noble grape. Wouldn't it be ironic if the grape that once washed ashore as sweet and cheap became the darling of America as a dry version of its former self?

As for me, well, I'll simply use a line from *The Godfather*: "I drink more wine than I used to." Increasingly, Riesling is part of that consumption. **TWG&L**

**Thomas M. Ciesla** lives in Texas and writes on topics such as wine, food, science, and architecture and landscape design. He is co-author of *Touring Texas Wineries* and editor of [texaswinetrails.com](http://texaswinetrails.com).



State is the largest producer of Riesling at this time, thanks to one winery, Chateau Ste. Michelle, which is currently bottling 200,000 cases of Riesling annually. California is home to a number of Riesling producers, but experts feel that the wine will never be a predominant component of the California wine market, one dominated by Chardonnay and other trendy white wines.

In Texas, like California, the generous amounts of sunshine ripen the grapes quickly, resulting in a Riesling that is more gentle and less intense. The short time on the vine prevents the grape from doing what it does best—absorbing the character of the vineyard. In the Lone Star State, production of Riesling grapes has remained relatively the same for years, at roughly 120 acres. One winery, Messina Hof Winery & Resort, dominates the market, using roughly 85 percent of the