



# RieslingRangers

**GOOD RIESLING CAN BE ELUSIVE BECAUSE IT DISLIKES HEAT WITH THE RESULT THAT FEW WARMER COUNTRIES TAKE THE TROUBLE. ALTHOUGH SOME DETERMINED 'RIESLING RANGERS' ARE FINDING COOL TERROIR AND CAN MAKE EXCELLENT RIESLING, THE CLASSICALLY AROMATIC, MOUTHWATERING STYLE WITH ITS RACY PURITY STILL COMES FROM GERMANY WHERE WINEMAKERS DO EVEN BETTER NOW, WHAT THEY ALREADY DID BEST, SAYS **ELSIE PELLIS**.**

Refreshingly high in natural acidity, it will drink joyfully from birth to considerable old age without the crutch of oak or high alcohol, and makes wines through the sweetness spectrum with a precision that reflects the character of its origin.

That said, it has been fighting for its rightful place in consumers' hearts despite high praise by well-respected wine scribes. This could be a hangover from the characterless sweet wines that flooded the market after laws changed in 1971, or just an inability to decipher the labels. Many Riesling crosses exist of which Müller-Thurgau is perhaps best known and often the guilty party in mass-produced, bland Riesling pretenders. Several unrelated grapes also share the name, such as Welschriesling, Italian Riesling and previously Cape Riesling, unsuccessfully trying to reflect some nobility by implication and adding to consumer confusion. It is perfectly placed to fulfill the demand for easy drinkability, less wood and lower alcohol that I see among consumers and happily an awareness of the great value locked away in new-generation Rieslings is growing.

It is at home in all regions of Germany, notably the Mosel (5 400ha), Rheingau (2 500ha), Pfalz (5 500ha) and Rheinhessen, each delivering its own unique expression. This can range from flowery and feather-light, tense, smoky-dry and mineral-laden or lusciously sweet with perfectly balanced fruity acidity, generally gaining weight from north to south while retaining that magical combination of acidity and extract.

Bird's eye view of Schloss Johannisberg towards the Rhine River.

**R**iesling is my pick for the greatest white variety in the world. Crowd-pleasing Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc could be contenders but both lack the longevity of Riesling which can age for decades, often with a similar trajectory to top-growth Bordeaux. Wherever it grows, it maintains varietal identity and transmutes unique site expression straight into your glass.

Riesling needs long, cool ripening and is considered early ripening except in Germany where it ripens later than varieties developed to suit short summers. When planted in hot climates such as South Africa or Australia, selecting a cool site is critical to extend the ripening period. Warm weather, excessive sun exposure and water stress can result in flavourless, dull wines and these factors can increase the precursors of the grape's so-called petrol aroma, identified as 1,1,6-trimethyl-1,2-dihydronaphthalene, or TDN for short. This characteristic develops early in bottled Rieslings from warmer climates but much later in wines from cooler regions. Too much too soon can be undesirable.

The Rheingau region with its rich history is Riesling's spiritual home with 80% of vineyards planted to the variety. Vineyards face the Rhine River to the south with the thick forests of the Taunus Hills to the north in a theatrical stretch which becomes progressively steeper from Hochheim to Lorch, with the finest wines made on the steepest slopes. The river moderates local temperatures creating an almost Mediterranean-style climate which results in wines with a full, rather aristocratic expression, austere minerality and focused length. This contrasts with the delicate poise and fruity elegance of wines from the slopes of the Mosel and the sumptuous wines from the warmer Pfalz/Palatinate.

Historically, its great institutions were abbeys, later followed by aristocrats with some renowned estates and vineyards located around the villages of Rudesheim, Johannisberg, Winkel and Eltville. One could fill books but a few places illustrate the depth of the region's vinous tradition.

Geisenheim with its respected wine research institute and university has been a place of learning for many South African winemakers. The glorious 12<sup>th</sup>-century Cistercian Abbey, Kloster Eberbach, with its impressive Romanesque and early Gothic architecture, lies tucked into the hills overlooking the Rhine and bears witness to the monks who established and tended these vines for centuries.

Towering atop a quartzite hill stands the imposing castle, Schloss Johannisberg, commanding a view of vine-covered slopes sweeping down to the Rhine. Viticultural history on the site dates back 1 200 years, but Benedictine monks founded a monastery here in the 12th century and named it in honour of John the Baptist. They planted the first Riesling vineyard in 1720 and harvested the first Spätlese in 1775, after the messenger carrying permission to harvest arrived very late. Auslese and later Eiswein had their origin here and they still produce only Riesling. Schloss Johannisberg and Schloss Vollrads are both independent appellations with no additional geographical designation required.

Since the early 19th century it belonged to Fürst von Metternich whose family restored it after WWII. On entering the 900-year-old vaulted cellar lined with enormous vats made from oak grown on the property, one feels history come alive. The underground library preserves liquid history in thousands of bottles of centuries-old wine rarities dating back to 1748.

It is heartwarming to see that the leadership of domain administrator Christian Witte and oenologist Hans Kessler still creates wines that do justice to this iconic site – winning them the title 'International Winery of the Year' from the Wine and Spirits Magazine in 2009 and 2010. Historically, various colours of wax seals had been used to distinguish wine qualities, continued currently with coloured capsules. With release of the 2012 vintage, a new VDP classification follows the Burgundian model and the Rheingau, as the rest of Germany, will use the term 'Grosses Gewächs' (Grand Cru) to indicate dry wines produced in their best vineyard sites. The 2006 Schloss Johannisberger Silberlack 1st Growth impressed with vibrant acidity, fine mineral undertones and spicy white peach – it was slow-fermented in old oak for six weeks using the estate's own yeast and spent seven months on the lees, resulting in increased complexity and weight.



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Ten minutes away lies Schloss Vollrads with its impressive moated tower on a forested slope facing the river. For 29 generations the estate had been in the Greiffenclau family's hands until the death of Count Matuschka-Greiffenclau in 1997, and it is currently owned by a bank. Fortunately it goes from strength to strength under the management of the charismatic Dr Rowald Hepp whose passion and knowledge ceaselessly inspire ways to improve and innovate.

Schloss Vollrads exclusively grows Riesling, taking meticulous care in the vineyard with yield reduction and selective hand-picking to separate grapes at different sugar levels for Kabinett, Spätlese and Auslese. Grapes for five different wines could end up on the sorting table at the same time. It uses its own yeast selections for fermentation to ensure the best terroir expression.

Tasting its range of wines back to the 2003 Trockenbeerenauslese, I was reminded of an earlier tasting in London where I witnessed the near immortality of Rieslings from these slopes going back a century. The wines are elegant with stony minerality and perfect balance between extract and acidity, which is the hallmark of great



Schloss Vollrads, perfectly positioned on the Southern foothills of the Taunus Mountains. Moated Tower built in 1330 which served as residence for the noble Von Greiffenclau family for three centuries. Inset below: Kutcherhaus and Vinothek View Schloss Vollrads Schlossberg Riesling QbA. VDP, Grand Cru (Grosses Gewachs) View from Greifenberg (towards Schloss Vollrads) The courtyard with Tower and Vinothek in Spring.





Rheingau stock pic.

## READ THE LABEL

### QUALITY CLASSIFICATION

The VDP (Association of German Prädikat Wine Estates) has 197 member estates from 13 regions. Its goal is to create a terroir-based classification of German vineyard sites.

German wine is classified into four quality categories based on must weight measured in Oeschle:

- *Deutscher Wein*
- *Landwein*
- *Qualitätswein (QbA)*
- *Prädikatswein*

The latter is further divided into levels of ripeness: Kabinett, Spätlese, Auslese, Beerenauslese, Eiswein and Trockenbeerenauslese.

Up to Auslese level, wines can be Dry, Medium-Dry or Sweet in style.

Riesling. The 2011 Jubiläumswein, bottled to celebrate 800 years of selling wine, is certainly worth a celebration and the 2011 Schloss Vollrads Erstes Gewächs was proudly awarded Premium Gold at the international Prague Wine Trophy.

Further south, the Pfalz/Palatinate is the largest producer of Riesling in the world. The gentle landscape might lack the dramatic beauty of the Rheingau, but it is an exciting region to visit with picturesque half-timber villages, delicious wines and friendly people. The densely forested Haardt Mountains protect the region from rain and winds and are largely responsible for its mild, dry climate, resulting in plump, full-bodied and expressive wines. The Mittelhaardt forms the core and extends north from Neustadt. The villages of Wachenheim, Forst, Deidesheim and Ruppertsberg are well known for wines with substance and finesse. Many producers follow organic or biodynamic principles and walking through the vineyards one can almost hear the buzz of activity in the soil. Bürklin-Wolf in Wachenheim produces delicious dry Riesling chock full of flavour from its humblest to grandest bottlings. The owner, Bettina Burklin-von Guradze, is the driving force behind its biodynamic approach which is paying off with depth of flavour in the glass.

At Reichsrat von Buhl, comparing wines from four different Grand Cru sites indulged my geeky leanings and demonstrated excitingly the expression of each individual site in the glass. I am always in awe of Riesling's ability to almost migrate the soul of the grape into the bottle, apparently with little human intervention. Tourism is well organised and producers are welcoming and a pleasure to visit.

## Riesling in the Cape

**A**lthough our warm climate does not allow Riesling to be widely grown, a handful of producers are making stylish wines worth seeking out.

At De Wetshof in Robertson, Danie de Wet makes a delicious wine paying homage to his years of studying in Germany. Groote Post in Darling established vineyards on the south-facing slopes of the Kapokberg facing the icy-cold Atlantic and makes an exotic, semi-sweet version. Nitida in Durbanville selected its perfect dry-land Riesling vineyard site with cooling sea breezes and mists from the Atlantic counterbalancing summer heat. Its hands-off approach in the winery results in a pure-fruited wine with staying power and gravitas that will reward lying down.

The Constantia area is a natural with Klein Constantia making a wonderfully fragrant wine filled with spicy lime and stone-fruit flavours. It has a track record of ageing well and the racy 2012 deserves time in the bottle.

Jordan in Stellenboschkloof has made their characterful Real McCoy Riesling for more than two decades. The high-lying dryland vineyard, planted with Geisenheim Clone 239, delivers full-flavoured

wines made in an off-dry style, perfect for sipping or with spicy food.

Hartenberg has been bottling Riesling since 1984 and currently makes four distinct expressions of the grape. The full-bodied, dry Hartenberg version has 15% botrytis berries giving it lovely richness. The dry and full-bodied Tenacity is old oak-fermented. The late-picked Occasional Riesling, with 50% botrytised grapes, has 12gm/l sugar, considerable extract and perfectly balanced acidity. An unctuous Noble Late Harvest completes the picture. Hartenberg hosts a Riesling Rocks Festival in January every year where the top Rieslings are showcased, paired with delicious food. One for the diary next year!

Paul Cluver in Elgin planted its first Riesling in 1987 and is the biggest single producer with 12.9 hectare planted. It makes several excellent wines through the sweetness spectrum. Ferricrete Riesling 2013 with 10.5% alcohol is poised and elegant with strong lime and orange-blossom tones. Close Encounter with balanced 34.7gm/l sugar is mouthwateringly moreish, while 2012 Dry Encounter is delicately dry with a whiff of terpene (8.6gm/l). The world-class NLH has the riveting fruit intensity and class only Riesling can deliver. This golden elixir elevates the spirits and makes one feel quite invincible.

Some fine wine stores and importers stock selected German wines but the local pleasures are available (see page xx for ideas) and can be enjoyed on their own or with food and deserve a place on every table. Try them! ♦



Hartenberg grapes.