

Wine & Spirits

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SPECIAL ISSUE

breaking the code

Pathways to New Favorites
in Wine, Cheese and Cocktails

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Illustration by Siobhán Thomas-Bupphavesa

“Like every somm, riesling is my favorite grape. And I’m happy to be part of that crowd, because there’s so much going on—there are always variations to arouse your curiosity. Austrian riesling—I think I drank it for two years straight, I was so fascinated by it.”

—Stephen McGinnis, *L’Etoile*, Madison, WI

Riesling

by Tara Q. Thomas

Riesling is the grape that every sommelier wishes we’d drink more of. Seek it out in restaurants and you’re likely in for some of the best bargains on the list, as nobody is listing it just to fill space. It’s on there because few wines offer such intense flavor with such transparency, as well as such an invigorating, appetite-inducing jolt of acidity.

The reason it’s not more popular, sommeliers say, is that too many of us fear that our riesling will be sweet, a term that’s come to be associated with unsophisticated wines. “Some guests are embarrassed to order riesling,” says Paula de Pano, sommelier at the *Ferrington House Restaurant* in Pittsboro, North Carolina. “They’ve heard that sweeter wines aren’t as good as dry wines.”

So let’s get this out of the way right off: A little sweetness in your wine is *not* a bad thing. “It balances all the great acidity of the grape,” de Pano explains. A little residual sugar left in a wine can take the edge off the acidity, making the wine feel juicier and richer. (Think of how you might add a pinch of sugar to tomato sauce to curb the acidity and bring out the deeper, rounder tones of the fruit, or how a touch of sugar can help deepen the flavors of a beef braise.) In the case of rieslings from really cool climates, like Germany’s Mosel, that little residual sugar (“rs” in wine-geek speak) can keep the wine from feeling like it’s going to strip the enamel off your teeth.

It’s also going to give you a wine that feels plump and juicy rather than lean and austere, all the while supporting the fruit with an undercurrent of acidity and stone flavor.

But when you want a bone-dry white wine with the accent on acid and earth rather than fruit, riesling offers plenty of options. Look for the word “trocken” on any German bottle, or choose wines from Australia or Austria, where the local style is for dry wines.

This tasting starts with Germany, as its wine regions provide the model for rieslings the world over. In the Mosel, the combination of steep slate slopes and cool temperatures result in some of the most nervy, crisp examples available. But follow it through to see the many options available. Riesling excels in many cool regions, including Australia’s Clare Valley, the Finger Lakes of New York State, Ontario in Canada and Oregon’s Willamette Valley. There are even lean, nervy rieslings coming out of Chile and New Zealand, as well as the coast of Lake Michigan.

Dry styles tend more toward stone, mineral and earth flavors, with pithy citrus notes, while riper styles often feature peach and apricot flavors, sometimes reaching tropical notes of pineapple, papaya and mango at the ripest end of the spectrum. Our tasting begins at the lighter end of the riesling spectrum, with simple, aperitif-ready examples of a dry style and a fruity style, and works up to an array of powerful wines best suited for the dinner table.

Reichsgraf
von Kessel-
statt 2015
Mosel Wiltinger
Riesling QbA
trocken (\$19)



STONY OR FRUITY?

Say "riesling" to a sommelier, and the first place that comes to mind is likely Germany's Mosel, a region of steep, slate slopes along the Mosel River. The cool temperatures in this northern region make for whites that are bright in acidity and lean in structure; the slate seems to endow the wines with stony flavors. If you prefer your whites bone-dry, look for wines labeled *trocken* (dry). If there's a suggestion of fruit in the Kesselstatt trocken, it's lemon rind ground into stones. • The regular QbA from Urbans-Hof, on the other hand, is juicy with sweet peach flavors, yet it still feels bright and fresh, thanks to riesling's acidity. • *Drink a stony Mosel riesling with poached fish, and a fruity Mosel riesling with goat cheese salad.*



St. Urbans-Hof
2015 Mosel
QbA Nik Weis
Old Vines
Riesling (\$19)



Petaluma
2014 Clare
Valley Hanlin
Hill Riesling
(\$22)



Tierce 2014
Finger Lakes
Dry Riesling
(\$30)

FOR THE
STONIER
SIDE, START
HERE

JUICY | ELECTRIC

LEAN & ACIDIC

If you like the austerity of a *trocken* Mosel riesling, check out Australian riesling. Petaluma's Hanlin Hill comes from one of the highest vineyards in the Clare Valley, a relatively cool region where many of the country's best rieslings are grown. The lime and ginger flavors—hallmarks of Aussie riesling—combine with near-searing acidity for an electric effect. • Or look for dry rieslings from the Finger Lakes of New York State, where cool temperatures along the shale-rich lake shores make for racy, savory wines like the Tierce.

• *Drink these with lake trout.*

SAVORY

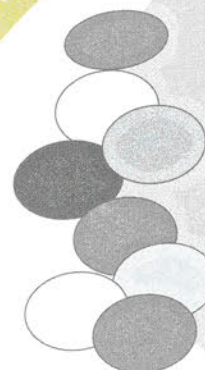
RACY

FOR THE FRUITIER
SIDE, TURN THE PAGE

BRISK

SALTY

COOL STONES



Rock hounds who love dry riesling often find themselves on the Atlantic coast of Europe, where the cold ocean air keeps the local wines crisp and acidic, and the granite soils seem to imbue the wines with a cool, firm savor. In France, Muscadet, at the mouth of the Loire, can fill in for dry riesling: The Luneau-Papin tastes almost like crisp, cool sea air. • In northern Portugal, the alvarinhos of Vinho Verde can offer a similar sensation, with a little more breadth; the Soalheiro, grown on crushed granite, feels a little rounder, with a vegetal flavor alongside the stone.

• *Drink these with raw oysters.*



Pierre
Luneau-Papin
2015 Muscadet
Sèvre et Maine
Sur Lie
Clos des Allées
(\$19)



Soalheiro
2015
Vinho Verde
Monção e
Melgaço
Granit
Mineral
Selection
Alvarinho
(\$22)

EARTHY

FLORAL

RICH

SALTY

WARM STONES



If you like savory and acidic whites, it's hard to beat assyrtiko grown on Santorini, a soil-less remnant of a volcano in the Mediterranean. Vintner Yiannis Paraskevopoulos lessens the blow of assyrtiko's acidity while building extra complexity and texture into Gaia's Wild Ferment Santorini, by fermenting a portion of the wine in oak barrels and stirring the lees; the result is simultaneously voluptuous and severe. • A less severe but distinctly savory alternative might be pinot blanc. The Bryan Creek, from a cool-climate vineyard of volcanic soils in Oregon, feels round and waxy, with a nutty, warm-stone flavor permeating its fruit.

• *Drink these with grilled oysters.*



Gaia 2016
Santorini
Wild Ferment
Assyrtiko
(\$39)



Adelsheim
2015
Chehalem
Mountains
Bryan Creek
Vineyard
Pinot Blanc
(\$25)

EARTHY

NUTTY

C. von Schubert
2015 Mosel
Herrenberg
Maximin
Grünhäuser
Riesling
Spätlese
(\$38)



Domaines
Schlumberger
2013 Alsace
Grand Cru
Saering
Riesling
(\$29)



Domäne
Wachau
2013 Wachau
Terrassen
Riesling
Smaragd
(\$31)



Kikelet Pince
2015 Tokaji
Birtok
Furmint
(\$25)



INTENSE

COOL

MUSCLE

Spät means "late" in German, and "*Spätlese*" signifies a wine made from grapes picked later in the season. Yet, riper grapes don't necessarily make for a sweeter wine; as the von Schubert shows, the wine simply packs in more flavor—more citrus and stones, more texture • Alsace rieslings also tend to fall on the ripe end of the riesling spectrum, thanks to the sunny, warm climate of this region where France meets southern Germany. The Schlumberger is nearly honeyed in its fruit sweetness, with a smoky, earthy minerality—yet riesling's snappy acidity keeps it still firmly in the savory realm.

• Drink these with fish in a cream sauce.

SMOKY

WARM

FLESHY

POWERFUL

BRAWN

The sun-drenched, stony terraces of Austria's Wachau create big, rich rieslings, the ripest of them designated "*Smaragd*." This bottling feels almost meaty in its concentration, with a huge hit of juicy, tangy, smoky fruit • Furmint, when grown on the volcanic hills of Hungary's Tokaj region, offers a similar balance—earthier and creamier in flavor, with ripe fruit flavors reined in by sharp acidity.

• Drink these with roast pork.

EARTHY

ROBUST

If/then: **Riesling/The Fruity Side**

St. Urbans-Hof
2015 Mosel
QbA Nik Weis
Old Vines
Riesling (\$19)



FRUITY

JUICY PEACHY

FULL & RIPE

Germany's Nahe region is warmer than the Mosel, and the slopes are less extreme. So are its rieslings. This Nahe wine is a Kabinett, meaning that the grapes were picked a little riper than a QbA. That ripeness comes through in flavors of pineapple and peach, although there's plenty of stony flavor to keep the wine balanced for the dinner table • In the US, rieslings from the West Coast are often made in a riper, fuller-bodied style than those from the East Coast. The 2015 Brooks is particularly ripe and juicy, with sunny, russet apple flavors. • Drink these with seared scallops.

Gut
Hermannsberg
2014 Nahe
Riesling
Kabinett
(\$25)



Brooks 2015
Willamette
Valley Riesling
(\$20)



APPLEY

WARM