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FOOD

Austrian Rieslings Set a High, Dry Standard

JULY 9, 2015

Wines of The Times

By **ERIC ASIMOV**

Riesling nowadays comes from all corners of the wine-producing earth. And happily, unlike grapes that have achieved international popularity, like sauvignon blanc, chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon, riesling has rarely been criticized for generic homogeneity.

That's because riesling, to a degree not seen in many other grapes, has the ability to express the peculiar characteristics of wherever it is grown, provided that place is in the proper sort of soils in a sufficiently cool climate.

Think about the sheer number of distinctive rieslings: Alsace, Germany, the Finger Lakes region of New York, the Niagara Peninsula, northern Michigan, Australia, Austria. Even within Germany, the perspectives of riesling are many. The Mosel, the Saar and the Ruwer, three river regions historically lumped together, differ in character, and they are all different from the Rheingau, Nahe and the Pfalz, to say nothing of rieslings from emerging regions like Swabia. As with pinot noir in Burgundy, the distinctions can be drawn finer and finer, to the delight of fanatics who enjoy discussing the intricacies of terroir almost as much as they love the wine itself.

Of all the centers for riesling, perhaps the most overlooked is Austria. If Germany is regarded as the historical center of riesling production, and Alsace is renowned for the power of its rieslings, what is the identity of Austrian rieslings? One might have said they are dry, while most German rieslings are made with residual sugar, but that's not true anymore. Yes, Austrian rieslings are all dry, and

Germany still produces sweet rieslings, perhaps more for export than home consumption. But most German rieslings today are dry, often deliciously so.

Nonetheless, Austrian rieslings can be a good deal richer than dry German rieslings, while often steelier and more finely cut than those from Alsace.

In Austria, grüner veltliner dominates white-wine production and remains highly popular. Reds like blaufränkisch and zweigelt are increasingly recognized as superb, and even Vienna has gotten into the act, making a name for itself with a revival of its traditional gemischter satz wines, blends of grapes planted and vinified together. Riesling accounts for a fairly small percentage of Austrian wine production, but among that percentage are many of Austria's best wines.

If Austrian riesling is not as widely understood as its siblings in other parts of Europe, its virtues are many. For anybody who is remotely curious about riesling, Austrian rieslings are a reservoir of boundless pleasure. This view was confirmed recently by a recent tasting by the wine panel of 20 Austrian rieslings from the 2013 vintage. For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Mia Van de Water, wine director at North End Grill in Battery Park City, and Paul Grieco, proprietor of the Terroir wine bar in TriBeCa and high priest of the American riesling revival.

Without mincing words, this tasting was wonderful. The consistency of these wines and their almost universal high quality was a testament to both the exceptional 2013 vintage and to the ability of an excellent array of growers and producers to take advantage of this opportunity to make great wines.

Speaking generally, these were structured wines of great energy with precise, finely etched flavors dominated by minerals, citrus, flowers and herbs. They are delicious now, but the best have the potential to age for years.

“For those afraid of Alsatian riesling because of its size and breadth, and those who fear residual sugar in German riesling, you can't do better than Austrian riesling,” Paul said. “These should make a lot of friends.”

For the tasting, we focused on the primary regions for riesling production, Wachau, Kremstal and Kamptal, contiguous areas west and slightly north of Vienna. Unlike German wine labels, Austrian labels are largely straightforward, listing region, grape and, when appropriate, a particular vineyard. Many wines

from Wachau, however, add an additional bit of information, using historical terms for the level of ripeness at which the grapes were picked. “Smaragd” indicates the ripest grapes. These wines tend to be richer than those labeled “federspiel.” Regardless of the designation, these wines are always dry.

Our No. 1 bottle was the only Wachau riesling in the tasting to omit a ripeness designation. It was the Bruck from Veyder-Malberg, a rich, resonant yet lively wine, with beautiful flavors of citrus fruit and great minerality. At \$76, it was the most expensive wine in the tasting, not at all cheap yet much less expensive than a top riesling from Alsace.

No. 2 was from the Loibenberg vineyard of the Wachau, a smaragd from Alzinger, a wine of power and intensity, yet not heavy, with a great balance of stony mineral and lime flavors. Both of these top wines expressed their terroir beautifully, the Veyder-Malberg from a cooler site and the Alzinger a warmer one. So did our No. 3 wine, the Nikolaihof Wachau Vom Stein, a federspiel that was textured and precise.

Each of the top three wines was on the expensive side, but we also included in the tasting quite a few less-expensive entry-level rieslings that showed themselves admirably, like our No. 4 bottle, the Bründlmayer Terrassen from Kamptal. It was zesty and energetic, with flavors of citrus and herbs. At \$25, it was our best value. Nos. 5 and 6 were not far behind in the value department. They were the textured, intense Wachau Steinterrassen federspiel from Högl at \$24 and the straightforward but absolutely delicious Kamptal Terrassen from Matthias Hager at \$19.

I would hate not to mention the intensely mineral Wachau Hochrain smaragd from Rudi Pichler or the taut, well-balanced Wachau Terrassen federspiel from Tegernseerhof. Other producers that we liked very much but who didn't make our top 10 included Prager, Knoll and Nigl. These are among the best producers in Austria, and it demonstrates the strength of quality in the 2013 vintage.

As is so often the case with fine white wines, it is important not to serve these wines too cold. As an experiment, I highly recommend pouring a glass straight from the refrigerator. Taste it immediately, then every 10 minutes for an hour, and see if it doesn't improve and become more expressive.

“Temperature is vital,” Paul said. “Too cold and the acid will screech.”

Suffice it to say that I loved these wines. We all did. They deserve more attention.

Tasting Report

★★★^{1/2} Veyder-Malberg Wachau Riesling Bruck 2013 \$76

Beautifully structured and concentrated, with tangy, resonant flavors of citrus and minerals. (Circo Vino, Tucson)

★★★ Alzinger Wachau Riesling Loibenberg Smaragd 2013 \$64

Great power and intensity yet beautifully balanced, with long, penetrating flavors of stony minerals and lime. (Terry Theise Estate Selection/Skurnik Wines, New York)

★★★ Nikolaihof Wachau Riesling Vom Stein Federspiel 2013 \$43

Textured and precise, with lovely herbal, floral and stony flavors. (Terry Theise Estate Selection/Skurnik Wines)

BEST VALUE: ★★★ Bründlmayer Kamptal Riesling Terrassen 2013 \$25

Lively and energetic, with plenty of zesty, earthy, citrus and herbal flavors. (Terry Theise Estate Selection/Skurnik Wines)

★★★ Högl Wachau Riesling Steinterrassen Federspiel 2013 \$24

Light-bodied yet textured and intense, with aromas and flavors of flowers and wet stones. (Winemonger, San Anselmo, Calif.)

★★★ Matthias Hager Kamptal Riesling Terrassen 2013 \$19

Simply delicious, with flavors of lime, herbs and minerals. (A. I. Selections, New York)

★★★ Rudi Pichler Wachau Riesling Hochrain Smaragd 2013 \$66

Substantial yet energetic, with a profusion of mineral flavors. (Winebow,

New York)

★★★ Tegernseerhof Wachau Riesling Terrassen Federspiel 2013
\$23

Taut and well balanced, with tart citrus and mineral flavors. (The Source, Napa, Calif.)

★★½ Hirsch Kamptal Riesling Zöbing 2013 \$28

Zesty and tangy, with plenty of stony herbal and citrus flavors. (Terry Theise Estate Selection/Skurnik Wines)

★★½ Loimer Kamptal Riesling 2013 \$22

Steely and herbal with stony minerality. (Winebow)

What the Stars Mean Ratings, up to four stars, reflect the panel's reaction to the wines, which were tasted with names and vintages concealed. The wines represent a selection generally available in good retail shops and restaurants and on the Internet. Prices are those paid in the New York region. Tasting coordinator: Bernard Kirsch

Recipe Pairing: **Greek Fisherman's Stew**