

## How to Put Riesling Fears to Rest

By Dave McIntyre  
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Are you afraid of Riesling? Do you pause before pulling a cork or twisting a screw cap from a tall, tapered Germanic bottle, wondering whether you are about to release a food-friendly genie who will dazzle your palate, amaze your guests and make your dinner taste sublime -- or whether a treacherous sugar monster will pour forth to crash your party and ruin your pork roast?

The **International Riesling Foundation** would like to help. This wonkish-sounding group is a hodgepodge of journalists, wine promoters and winemakers who are trying to cajole Riesling producers around the globe into employing a little truth in advertising by labeling their wines to show whether they are dry, sweet or somewhere in between.



Riesling is experiencing a boomlet in the United States, but if it is really to catch on, it must overcome two obstacles: American consumers tend to prefer dry wines, meaning wines that are not sweet. And American consumers tend to believe -- incorrectly -- that Riesling is always sweet.

Riesling is a remarkably versatile grape. It can produce a dry, racy aperitif or unctuous dessert nectar and performs beautifully along the entire sweetness spectrum. But that versatility is both a virtue and a curse. Often when we buy a bottle, we don't know how sweet it is until we open it with dinner. The frustration (and embarrassment) comes from accidentally serving a dessert wine with the entree.

As a result, many consumers stick with chardonnay.

The International Riesling Foundation was the brainchild of California-based wine writer Dan Berger and Jim Trezise, director of the New York Wine & Grape Foundation. Last summer, the group proposed criteria to label a wine's dryness based on its residual sugar content, acid levels and pH balance. That information -- of interest only to the nerdiest wine geeks and German winemakers named "Doktor" -- would be conveyed to the consumer with a simple graphic on the label, showing the wine as "dry," "medium-dry," "medium-sweet" or "sweet."

This is a worthy idea. Informed consumers will be less wary of Riesling and more likely to experiment with it if they have a clearer idea of what type of wine they are about to taste. Berger told me only eight wineries have indicated an interest in using the scale, however, so for now we are on our own.

Fortunately, there are clues we can use to determine what style of Riesling is likely to be in the bottle, but they vary widely by wine region.

Rieslings from Austria, New Zealand and Australia are invariably dry, except for dessert wines labeled "late harvest." U.S. Rieslings tend to be slightly sweet; a few helpful wineries specify "dry," "semi-dry," or "off-dry" (the latter two indicating "slightly sweet"). Rieslings from France's Alsace region also vary from wine to wine and offer no clue on the label, except for "vendange tardives" (late harvest) and the rare, unctuously sweet "sélection de grains nobles."

And then there's Germany, Riesling's homeland and producer of the world's greatest Rieslings, many of which walk a delicate tightrope between sugar and acid, sweet and dry. Much of the consumer reluctance for Riesling stems from Germany's reputation for sweet wines and its incomprehensible labeling laws. To cater to consumer demand for dry wines, some producers began labeling their driest Rieslings "*trocken*" (dry) or "*halb-trocken*" (half-dry), though those terms have fallen out of favor, and many producers now simply use the English word "dry" on labels exported to the United States.

Many Riesling fanatics scoff at the trend toward dry Rieslings. They argue that the key to Riesling is not its sweetness but the balance between sugar and the grape's natural acidity. The "fruity" style dismissed by many consumers as too sweet makes an excellent partner to many foods, including semi-soft stinky cheeses and savory entrees that include a touch of sweetness in the sauce or seasoning. The sweetness also pairs well with the panoply of sweet, salty and spicy flavors in many Asian cuisines.

These arguments are correct, and they are good reasons for Riesling-phobes to overcome their fear. They also miss the point: that consumers want to know what type of wine they're getting when they pluck a bottle off the store shelf.

## **Recommendations**

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Riesling can be delicate or full-bodied, floral with aromas of jasmine and honeysuckle, or earthy with hints of stone, mineral oil or exotic spices. Its flavor generally suggests tree fruits such as peaches and apricots, and the best Rieslings often have a citrus note that lends focus to the wine. The following Rieslings come from around the world and reflect the grape's diversity of expressions.

### **Cave Spring "CSV" Riesling 2007**

\*\* 1/2

Niagara Peninsula, Canada; \$28

This leading Canadian producer has recently begun distributing its wines in the Mid-Atlantic region. The Estate Riesling (\$18, dry) and Niagara Riesling (\$15, semi-dry) are most widely available. The single-vineyard CSV, the winery's top bottling, is dry, delicate and fine, with hints of talc and exotic fruits.

*Boutique Vineyards: available in the District at Cleveland Park Wine and Spirits; in Virginia at Arrowine in Arlington and Unwined in Alexandria; in Maryland at Mills Fine Wine and Spirits in Annapolis. Estate Riesling is available in the District at Calvert Woodley; in Virginia at Unwined in Alexandria; and at all four area Balducci's; on the list at Tallula in Arlington.*

### **Gobelsburger Riesling 2007**

\*\* 1/2

Langenlois, Austria; \$23

Light-bodied, with focused citrus flavors (like Sprite for adults), this wine can stand by itself, though its acidity gives it deceptive heft to match many foods, especially seafood. The wine is dry.

*Country Vintner in the District and Virginia, Bacchus in Maryland: available in the District at Paul's of Chevy Chase; on the list at CityZen, Palena, Proof and Zola.*

### **Bastgen Blauschiefer Riesling 2007**

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Mosel, Germany; \$14  
(Good Value)

Atypically dry for Mosel Riesling, "Blauschiefer" refers to the blue-slate soil in the impressively steep vineyards. This wine features apricot, ginger, jasmine and star anise flavors with a nice minerally finish.

*Kysela: available in the District at Magruder's; in Virginia at Classic Wines in Great Falls, Wegmans in Manassas, Whole Foods Market in Arlington and WineStyles in Fairfax; on the list at L'Auberge Chez François in Great Falls.*

### **Chateau Ste. Michelle "Eroica" Riesling 2007**

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Columbia Valley, Washington; \$24

This wine, a joint venture between Chateau Ste. Michelle and German winemaker Ernst Loosen, is reputed to be the best U.S. Riesling. While others have staked a claim to that title, this wine continues to impress; it is full and ripe with zesty citrus and stone fruit

flavors. A tad sweet, it would probably qualify as semi-dry, but only a chemist would care.

*Republic National: available in the District at Bell Wine & Spirits, Chevy Chase Wine & Spirits, Circle Wine & Liquor, Paul's of Chevy Chase, Rodman's and Wine Specialist; in Maryland at Montgomery County liquor stores; on the list at Acadiana and Sam & Harry's in the District.*

### **Cousino Macul Riesling Reserva 2006/2007**

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Maipo Valley, Chile; \$15  
(Good Value)

Chile is not known for Riesling, though Cousino Macul produces a pleasant, inexpensive one called Dona Isidora. The Reserva was introduced with the 2006 vintage, and the 2007 is just arriving. At 14 percent alcohol, it is unusually heavy for a Riesling, though it carries the weight well, with ripe peach, mango and kumquat flavors and a zesty lime finish. Dry, though not marked as such.

*Billington: available in the District at Cleveland Park Wine and Spirits; in Virginia at Wegmans stores; in Maryland at Roland Park Wines & Liquors and Wells Discount Liquors in Baltimore; on the list at Zola in the District.*

### **Leitz 3 "Eins, Zwei, Dry," Riesling Trocken 2007**

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Rheinhessen, Germany; \$20

Not only dry, but with a sense of humor about it. This lovely wine offers aromas of ripe peaches and apricots, with a slightly citrusy palate and a long mineral finish. A great match for charcuterie and seafood dishes. The off-dry "Dragonstone" Riesling is more widely available and also delicious.

*Country Vintner in the District and Virginia, Bacchus in Maryland: available in the District at Calvert Woodley and MacArthur Beverages. Dragonstone available in the District at Calvert Woodley, Chat's Liquors, MacArthur Beverages, Rodman's and Zola Wine and Kitchen.*

### **Hermann J. Wiemer Dry Riesling 2006**

\* 1/2

Finger Lakes, N.Y.; \$23

From a prime region for Riesling, this delicious wine offers flavors and scents of lime, meadow grass, apricot and mango. Despite the labeling, it tastes more like a semi-dry wine, with definite sweetness. Other Finger Lakes Rieslings in our market and worth trying are Fox Run Vineyards and Dr. Konstantin Frank.

*Bacchus: available in the District at Ace Beverage, Chat's Liquors and Dean & DeLuca; on the list at Corduroy, Enology Wine Bar and Johnny's Half Shell in the District, and at Ricciuti's in Olney.*

## **Zilliken Butterfly Riesling 2007**

\* 1/2

Mosel; \$23

Labeled "medium-dry," this wine displays perfect balance between sugar and acidity, so the sweetness is not the first thing you notice. The flavors speak of orchard fruit and kumquat, with hints of exotic spices such as curry.

*Potomac Selections: available in the District at Ace Beverage; in Maryland at Mills in Annapolis and the Wine Source in Baltimore; on the list at Cork in the District.*

## **Bex Riesling 2006**

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Mosel; \$10

This semi-dry wine is textbook quaffable Riesling, with apricot and peach flavors and good balance. Chinese restaurants should be stocking this to sell for under \$20.

*Bacchus: widely available, including in the District at Ace Beverage and Chat's Liquors; in Maryland at Finewine.com in Gaithersburg, King Farm Beer & Wine in Rockville, Rodman's in Wheaton and Olney Village Beer & Wine in Olney; on the list at Cafe Berlin, Mie n Yu, Logan Tavern and Morton's of Chicago (Connecticut Avenue NW) in the District and at Morton's of Chicago in Bethesda and Ricciuti's in Olney.*

## **Tumans Riesling 2006**

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Alicante, Spain; \$8

Spanish Riesling? This is ripe and full, with surprising acidity to keep the hint of sweetness in check. It tastes a bit like albarino, a Spanish white grape that is often compared to Riesling. Pair with mild seafood or Asian dishes.

*Monsieur Touton: available in the District at Connecticut Avenue Wine & Liquor, Pearson's and Paul's of Chevy Chase; in Maryland at Beers & Cheers in Germantown and Bradley Food & Beverage in Bethesda.*

## **KEY**

**\*\*\* Exceptional**

**\*\* Excellent**

**\* Very good**

Prices are approximate. Check [Winesearcher.com](http://Winesearcher.com) to verify availability, or ask a favorite wine store to order through the distributor.