

# Riesling Report

The voice of Riesling

MAY/JUNE 2002

## Riesling in the Pacific Northwest

*Progress in the war on mediocrity*

Chateau Ste Michelle's Cold Creek  
Vineyard in the arid Columbia  
Valley of Washington state.

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:  
**Riesling Revival Redux**  
**Australia's Seppelt Drumborg**  
[www.rieslingreport.com](http://www.rieslingreport.com)

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### Pride of place

**WHEN YOU GROW UP** in a place so full of natural wonders as what we have here in the Pacific Northwest, it's easy to become prideful to the point of hyperbole. It's not at all uncommon to hear the phrase "God's country" thrown about in a place like this, often from the mouths of mere visitors. We cherish this place and mightily defend its honor.

Until recently, however, there wasn't a whole lot to be proud of when it came to the local wines, Riesling in particular. A few pioneers have been making good wines here for several decades now, but overall the Pacific Northwest wine industry is still quite young. We are just now starting to see the emergence of clearly defined stylistic features and a distinct personality for the wines of our area.

But the industry is developing rapidly, in terms of both quantity and quality, and the future is promising. We are anticipating very good things for Pacific Northwest Riesling over the next couple of decades. We just hope that by the time our wine industry begins to reach maturity the fashion pendulum has not again swung away from our most cherished white wine variety.

We dream of a future where Riesling has pride of place throughout all of the world, and Pacific Northwest Riesling will have played some part in the it's resurrection.

*—Kirk Wille, editor & publisher*

## Next issue: Finger Lakes

**ANOTHER AREA OF NORTH AMERICA** that is making good progress toward fine, distinctive, high-quality Riesling is the Finger Lakes region in New York state. A definite signature of terroir is developing there and the wines continue to improve. Plus, signs are good that these wines will have excellent longevity, as has been demonstrated through vertical tastings at some of the area's oldest wineries.

In the July/August 2002 issue of Riesling Report, we will have a comprehensive review of the Finger Lakes region and it's best Riesling producers. We will explore what it is that makes the wines unique and why they are worthy of your consideration.

In addition, we'll have complete results from the International Eastern Wine Competition and their first-ever World Riesling Championship.

**Riesling Report** is published electronically six times a year by Kirk Wille and Peter Liem. A one-year subscription is just \$32.

To subscribe, and for more information, please visit the Riesling Report Web site: [www.rieslingreport.com](http://www.rieslingreport.com)

We welcome letters, comments and suggestions. Interesting and thoughtful letters will be published in future issues. Unproductive ranting will be disregarded. Useful suggestions will be adopted.

If you would like to tell us about a particularly thrilling Riesling experience you've had, or would like to ask us some questions, please direct your correspondence to:

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RR14

# Weingut Keller makes a splash at VinItaly

GERMANY'S WEINGUT KELLER has received the prestigious VinItaly International Award in recognition of the wine estate's serious commitment to quality and their innovative entrepreneurial spirit. VinItaly has become one of the most highly regarded international wine exhibitions and each year since 1996 two of these top awards have been given, one to an Italian winery or wine personality and one international award. This award puts Keller in with some very impressive company. Past recipients include Incisa della Rocchetta, makers of Sassicaia (1996), Château Margaux (1997), Robert Mondavi (1998), Vega-Sicilia (1999) and Penfolds (2000).

Through fanatically meticulous vineyard work and attention to detail in the cellar, Keller has been making insistently precise and unashamedly fruit-driven wines for many years. Since Klaus Peter Keller finished his winemaking studies at Geisenheim and has joined his father, Klaus, full-time at the estate, the purity and boldly modern style of the wines has only gotten better. The wines are all the more remarkable when you consider that the estate lies in the midst of what is generally regarded as Germany's land of cheap: Rheinhessen.

The Kellers have overcome the poor image of the region through their high-powered wines and their fairly aggressive marketing efforts. This has caused something of a split in opinion among wine professionals and journalists in Europe. For the most part, the Keller estate is absolutely adored in the wine press. Armin Diel, co-author of the Gault Millau *Weinguide Deutschland*, has long been a big supporter, consistently putting Keller among the top ten producers in Germany each year. Plus, Klaus Keller was named Winemaker of the Year in the 2000 edition of *Weinguide Deutschland*. Other journalists, such as the highly respected Michel Bettane of *La Revue du Vin de France*, seem somewhat leery of the adulation that others lavish on the estate. He finds the wines impressive, but lacking in subtlety and finesse.

We, too, have been seduced by the utter power and sheer beauty of the Keller wines. The wines we've tasted show clearly the dedication and focused vision that goes into their creation. The question of style is always open for debate, and only time will tell if the Keller style will succeed in revealing the nuances of variety and vineyard. In the meantime, enjoy these rare treasures (low yields from just 12.5 hectares) for their ultimate class and polish.

## VinItaly's Communicator of the Year

Each year, VinItaly also recognizes a wine journalist or educator who has contributed significantly to popular understanding and appreciation of fine wine. This year, the Communicator of the Year award went to British wine writer and television personality Matthew Jukes, whose latest book *The Wine List 2002* already has sold over 70,000 copies.



Klaus Peter Keller and his wife, Julia (center), receive the VinItaly International award from the Italian minister of agriculture at the April, 2002, awards ceremony in Verona.

## Weingut Keller

### Vineyard area

12.5 hectares (31 acres)

### Varieties

Riesling 40%  
Pinot Gris & Pinot Blanc 30%  
Pinot Noir & other reds 25%  
Rieslaner & Huselrebe 5%

### Best vineyards

Dalsheimer Hubacker  
Monsheimer Silberberg

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# Schlossgut Diel celebrates 200 years

**IN SEPTEMBER**, the Schlossgut Diel estate in Germany's Nahe region will celebrate its bicentennial in lavish style. It was two hundred years ago that the ruins of Burg Layen came into possession of the Diel family, and current owner Armin Diel will be opening his doors for a weekend of fine wine, food and revelry to mark the occasion, and you are invited. And believe me, if there's anyone in Germany who knows how to throw a party, it's Armin Diel.

The celebration begins on Friday, September 6, 2002, with a presentation of the estate's collection of wines from the 2001 vintage. In addition, Armin's friend and winemaking colleague, Stephan Graf von Niepperg, will present the 2000 vintage from his estates in Bordeaux: Châteaux Canon La Gaffelière, La Mondotte and Clos de L'Oratoire in Saint-Émilion, and Château L'Aihuilhe in Côtes de Castillon. Friday evening there will be a special wine dinner at star chef Johann Lafer's excellent restaurant in the historic Stromburg castle, located in the nearby village of Stromberg. Five courses will be served to accompany a selection of wines from the private cellars of Diel and Niepperg.

On Saturday there will be two special vertical tastings: ten vintages of "Cuvée Victor," Diel's blend of the best barrels of his white Pinot varieties (Gris and Blanc), followed in the afternoon by a 10-year vertical of Schlossgut Diel Eiswein. The really big bash will be held on Saturday evening, as Diel is joined by top chefs and winemaking friends from all over the world. Every room, every courtyard, every garden of the estate will be filled to bursting with fine food and world-class wines from the likes of Champagne Billecart-Salmon, Champagne Jacquesson, Château Phélan-Ségur, Domaine de Chevalier, Paul Jaboulet Aîné, Alois Lageder, René Muré, Domaine Comte de Vogüé, Domaine Jacques Prieur, Domaine Dujac and at least 10 of Armin's German winemaker colleagues. Without question it will be a party of legendary proportions.

Sunday will be the estate's day to open the doors to the public for free tastings and tours of the uniquely decorated cellars. All to the accompaniment of music from the local musical guild and men's chorus.

If you have any chance at all of being in Germany in September, this is definitely a celebration that you won't want to miss. Tasting and touring on Sunday is free of charge, but all of the Friday and Saturday events have a set price and will most likely be limited to a manageable number of people. For complete information and a response form to book your place at any of the events, you can contact Armin Diel directly (see the contact information to the right). Aside from the great tasting, dinners and a real blowout party at Schlossgut Diel, the Nahe region is a beautiful area to visit and September is a wonderful time of year to be there. How much more enticement do you need?



This placard recounts the history of Burg ("castle") Layen since it was built in the 12th century. The last sentence states that the castle has been owned by the Diel family since 1802.

## Schlossgut Diel

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## The Riesling Revival continues apace

**RIESLING REALLY IS COMING BACK.** It's happening slowly and even the most optimistic Riesling promoters acknowledge that the variety will always be a niche player, but there is definitely something afoot. All around the globe, wine lovers and professionals are gathering together for a host of tastings, seminars, workshops and festivals, with ever-increasing emphasis on the versatility, complexity and pure pleasure of drinking Riesling.

### **LONDON: The Great Riesling Tasting**

In February, four leading importers of Riesling in Great Britain got together and staged a day of Riesling tastings and seminars for the wine trade. Once a booming market for cheap German wines, the United Kingdom's thirst for Riesling has waned in the past few years. These importers were determined to show London's wine professionals what real Riesling is all about. Apparently the London wine trade already has some idea. Organizers of the event had hoped for 180 attendees and ended up with nearly 500.

The tide seems to be turning back toward German wines, with a greater emphasis on top-quality Riesling rather than the cheap stuff. "A lot of younger decision-makers were there, so we hope that is a sign that the old school, anti-German type is a dying breed and younger, more open-minded people are on the case," said David Wright of London's Walter Siegel Wines. As we see elsewhere, the charge is being led by the new generation of chefs and sommeliers who find the purity of Riesling to be a much better match for their fresh and inventive new styles of cooking than heavy, oaky wines.

Jancis Robinson, Britain's celebrated wine writer and educator, had agreed to conduct a Riesling seminar for the trade and ended up doing two because of the extraordinary response. Robinson is a steadfast Riesling supporter and has been preaching its virtues for decades. But she's a realist and offers this explanation as to why Riesling probably will never become a mass market favorite: "Riesling has a strong flavor," she said, "a certain percentage of wine drinkers will not like it. Unlike Chardonnay, it almost has too much personality."

### **SYDNEY: Frankland Estate International Riesling Tasting**

The second edition of Frankland Estate's biannual Riesling event was another resounding success. (Please see our complete report, from Australian wine journalist Peter Bourne, on page 7) In addition to a healthy and enthusiastic turnout for the tastings, workshops and Riesling dinner, the event is helping to build a global exchange of ideas, winemaking techniques and marketing opportunities.

What was most interesting to hear was just how seriously the Australians take their Riesling. For winemakers there, producing a great Riesling has become something of a rite of passage. It's the way to prove yourself as a vintner and the



Long-time Riesling supporter Jancis Robinson MW leads a seminar for the wine trade at London's "Great Riesling Tasting" in February.

tacit competition to produce the very best is vigorous. More and more we're hearing that Australian wine estates are moving back to Riesling. The wave of ripping out Riesling vineyards has subsided and now a producer is more likely to plant new Riesling vines than Chardonnay.

### **NEW YORK: Wine Industry Workshop**

In April, Cornell University's Enology Program and the New York Wine and Grape Foundation held the 31st New York Wine Industry Workshop in the Finger Lakes town of Geneva. Riesling is becoming more and more important to the New York wine industry, primarily in the Finger Lakes, and it was the focus of this year's workshop. Over three days, winemakers had the chance to attend seminars, panel discussions and presentations on every aspect of growing, making and marketing Riesling.

Guest presenters from around the world came to share their experience and expertise in all things Riesling. Among them were Hans Schultz from Germany's viticulture school in Geisenheim, Isabelle Sipp-Mack from Alsace, big-time wine marketer Peter Sichel from Germany, Dennis Martin of Fetzer Vineyards in California, Erik Olsen from Chateau Ste Michelle, as well as several Riesling experts from the Finger Lakes area.

### **VANCOUVER, B.C.: International Wine Festival**

The 24th annual Vancouver Playhouse International Wine Festival took place the week of April 22, 2002, with a special focus on the wines of Germany, Riesling in particular. Among the many tastings, dinners and special events were two seminars presented by British wine journalist Robert Joseph, founder of WINE Magazine. In the first, called "News from the Continent: German and Portuguese Revelations," Joseph turned his dry English wit to similarities that the wines of these two countries share in the perception of the public.

The challenge he laid before the winemakers and trade professionals in attendance, was to turn their perceived weaknesses – difficult names, little known varieties, unfamiliar wine styles – into marketing opportunities. The New World, in particular, he pointed out, is always clamoring for something new. The interesting paradox is that Germany and Portugal – both countries with centuries-long wine-making traditions – now have the chance to present their forgotten wines as something totally new to the general wine market.

Joseph's second seminar, with the familiar title "Riesling Renaissance," laid out the stylistic differences among German Rieslings from different regions and gave those in attendance the complete rundown on nomenclature. He then proselytized about the inherent quality of the grape that true Riesling lovers have long understood: purity of flavor, transmission of vineyard character, ability to pair with food and aging potential.

A third seminar highlighted German Eiswein, from different regions, various varieties and several vintages. Ice wine has become quite an industry in Canada, but even here most agreed that true German Eiswein still holds the edge in terms of elegance, varietal purity and structural balance. All in all, Riesling had quite a good showing here and the young, eager-to-learn Vancouver crowd drank it up with gusto.

### **German Wine Society 25th Anniversary Celebration**

The German Wine Society has been keeping the Riesling flame alive in the United States for a quarter-century. To fan the flame even brighter, they will be celebrating their 25th anniversary with a gala event in Washington D.C., May 17 to 19, 2002.

Tasting events will include wines from all 13 German wine regions, as well as presentations from well-known U.S. importers and wine writers such as Terry Theise and David Schildknecht.

For more information, visit the GWS Web site:  
[www.germanwinesociety.org](http://www.germanwinesociety.org)

Even if you can't attend the anniversary celebration, you can find out if there is a chapter in your area and learn how to become a member.

# Frankland Estate International Riesling Tasting

## THE WORLD OF WINE IS BOTH CURIOUS AND EXCITING.

Imagine a fledgling wine producer, at a remote vineyard almost four hours south of Perth in Western Australia, staging an International Riesling Tasting after a mere 10 vintages of making their own Riesling. Winemakers, commentators and passionate fans of this most versatile grape variety have converged on Sydney not just once, but twice, in early 2000 and again in February this year for two days of tastings, workshops, dinners and fun.

The brave winery is Frankland Estate, owned and painstakingly managed by the Smith family, led by Judi Cullam, the dynamic wife and partner of the steady and reliable Barrie Smith and willingly aided by their three children, Elizabeth, Hunter and Trilby. The Smiths had grazed sheep for almost 20 years before planting their vineyard in 1988, on a ridge now described on their labels as Isolation Ridge. Their international success in such a short time is attributable as much to their clear vision as their (sometimes naïve) enthusiasm and commitment to quality on their vineyard site that Professor Harold Olmo of UC Davis foreshadowed as a great viticultural site when he visited Western Australia in the 1950s.

Frankland Estate in the Lower Great Southern is a vast and disparate geographic region slit into several sub-regions including Frankland River, a region gaining a solid reputation for Riesling in a country that has known and respected the variety for over 150 years. If the idea of such a celebration of Rieslings from around the world seems just a tad crazy – then adding Stuart Pigott to the equation would seem perfectly natural.

Antipodeans know little of Stuart Pigott, but ask any European Riesling producer about Stuart and you'll get a reaction – almost always favourable, though I'm sure his forthright comments and quirky English sense of humour has put one or two winemakers and cognoscenti on the back foot. Stuart lives in Berlin with his energetic food and wine-writing wife, Ursula Heinzelmann, and has been writing about Riesling for over 10 years with a passion only those bitten by the Riesling bug could fully understand. Having recast the Hugh Johnson *Wine Atlas of Germany* into one of the most definitive texts, Stuart has cast his Riesling net wider afield to include Austria and more recently Australia.

Stuart's introduction to Australian Riesling was latent when Judi Cullam invited him to be the keynote speaker at the inaugural Frankland Estate International Riesling Tasting (FEIRT) in 2000. Having never been to Australia Stuart accepted, and the event was drawn together via fax and phone (later e-mail). Stuart came with Ursula and a number important German producers and their wines including the likes of Ernst Loosen, Bernhard Breuer and Fritz Hasselbach. The wines they brought with them were not just mainstream but those from top sites off the best estates – some old, some sweet, but mostly dry as the cornerstone of the FEIRT event is to celebrate dry Riesling and its wonderful



## Frankland Estate International Riesling Tasting 2002

### WORKSHOPS

*Anything but Artichokes*  
Riesling and food: combining the unfashionable with the unconventional.

*Terroir on Trial*  
Austrian and German experiences with terroir.

*Beyond Dry*  
The qualities and characteristics of seet and semi-sweet Riesling styles.

*Regional Rewards*  
Defining the distinguishing characteristics of Riesling-producing regions.

### SYMPOSIUM

*Riesling.com*  
*Riesling in the 21st century*  
Examining the future a variety that is still considered "ludicrously unfashionable."

flexibility at the table and in the glass. To say the first event was a success would be putting it mildly, though in commercial terms it could be questioned. So with equal enthusiasm, outstanding generosity and real passion a second FEIRT event was planned for 2002.

This time communication was better, the planning longer and the result an absolute triumph that culminated in a Grand Riesling Dinner at Sydney's benchmark restaurant Celsius. Award-winning chef, Peter Doyle, presented sublime food which carefully underplayed a raft of outstanding Rieslings, including a bracket of Austrian wines that "blew the socks" off many unfamiliar with these great wines. The menu and wine list attached details the Celsius dinner and the other wines tasted during FEIRT 2002.

A panel made up of Stuart Pigott, Ursula Heinzelmann, Judi Cullam and myself selected the hub of the event, the wines for the main tasting of dry Riesling. We meet in Berlin in May, 2001, to taste a line-up of over 60 wines to hone the number to 30 for the final event. Stuart led the tasting and shaped the wine selection to give a balance of winemaking styles, geographic regions and to feature a wide variety of styles and makers. Several wines that were unsuitable for the main tasting but considered important expressions of Riesling were reserved for the final symposium. Additionally four workshops were planned to cast both a wider net such as sweet styles (the main tasting focused exclusively on dry wines), to explore the matching of Riesling with food and to tackle the perennial hoary question of terroir – in Germany, Austria and Australia.

FEIRT 2002 was a lot of hard work eased by a generosity of spirit from presenters, producers and all involved. Open-minded guests were exposed to unfamiliar styles, regions and countries (many Australians Riesling lovers had first tasted an Austrian riesling at FEIRT 2000) and an even wider range and a number of Austrian wines at FEIRT 2002.

And that was the nub of the success of both events – not commercial but rather to entice European producers to come to Australia and discover, not only our Riesling, but Shiraz, Pinot noir and Semillon. The Austrian contingent spent a week travelling around Australian wine growing regions and meeting our vignerons. This has opened the international winemaking door and it's now possible to hear the twang of an Aussie accent in the cellars of top German and Austrian producers. The event has also been the catalyst for a number of journalists and Riesling lovers to travel to Alsace, Germany and Austria to taste both sweet and dry and to become enmeshed in the passion, the devotion and the delights of this most marvellous variety. The web of Riesling lovers is spread wide, Frankland Estate having helped to draw those that share the passion into a tighter knit group which continues to celebrate this outstanding variety.

Will there be a FEIRT 2004 and where will it be held? Stay tuned to Frankland Estate via e-mail. Send a message to <info@franklandestate.com.au> and they will put you on the mailing list.

#### **About Peter Bourne**

In Australia, Peter Bourne is referred to simply as "The Wine Man." His name is synonymous with enthusiasm and passion for all things vinous. He has worked in and around the Australian wine industry for 25 years. He presents tastings, teaches wine classes, develops wine lists for restaurants, trains restaurant staff, manages private wine cellars, judges at wine competitions and provides marketing expertise to Australian wineries. In addition, Peter is a very active wine journalist, writing for *Australian Gourmet Traveller* and *The Wine Magazine*.

## **Frankland Estate International Riesling Tasting 2002**

### **Riesling Dinner at Celsius**

Tuesday, February 5, 2002

#### *Apéritif*

2000 Frankland Estate Isolation  
Ridge Riesling, Frankland River,  
Western Australia

1998 Klaus Zimmerling Riesling  
Sachsen, Germany

#### *Confit of Ocean Trout on Blue Swimmer Crab with Cucumber*

1993 St Antony Niersteiner  
Oelberg Riesling, Rheinhessen,  
Germany

#### *Steamed Snapper Fillet on snow peas, black funghi & chervil*

1983 Georg Breuer  
Rüdesheimer Berg Schlossberg  
Riesling, Rheingau, Germany

2001 Frankland Estate Isolation  
Ridge Riesling

#### *Glenloth Squab, boned with Foie Gras on Morels, Asparagus & Spinach*

2000 F.X. Pichler Dürnsteiner  
Kellerberg Riesling, Wachau,  
Austria

1997 Knoll Dürnsteiner Schütt  
Riesling, Wachau, Austria

1998 Franz Hirtzberger Spitzer  
Hochrain Riesling, Wachau,  
Austria

#### *Lotto Cotto with Spiced figs & Raspberries*

1996 Rebholz Riesling Eiswein  
Pfalz, Germany

1999 J.L. Wolf Forster Pechstein  
Riesling Trockenbeereauslese  
Pfalz, Germany

#### *Coffee & petit fours*

## Austria's Grüner Veltliner

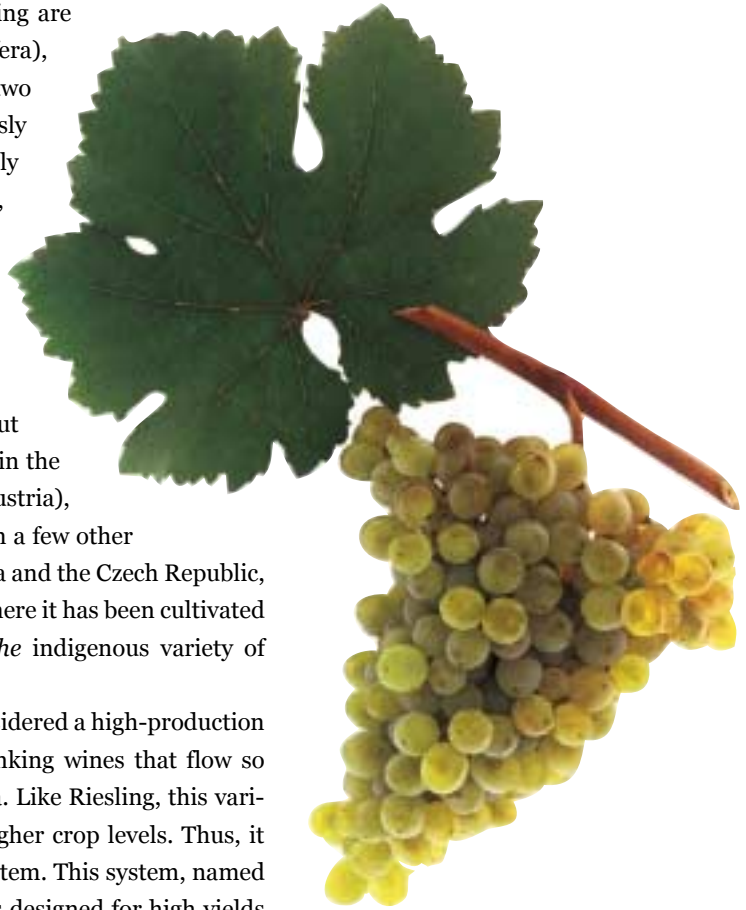
**GENETICALLY SPEAKING**, Grüner Veltliner and Riesling are not related beyond the genus and species level (*vitis vinifera*), which includes all wine grapes, red and white. But the two varieties share stylistic characteristics that are endlessly fascinating and appealing to fine wine lovers. It is simply not possible to talk about the great Rieslings of Austria, without also discussing, tasting and enjoying the incredible wines that are being made from Grüner Veltliner these days.

Grüner Veltliner is the most widely planted grape variety in Austria, accounting for 37 percent of the country's total vineyard area. That puts the variety at about 20,350 hectares (50,875 acres). Most of these vines are in the large wine region known as Niederösterreich (Lower Austria), along the Danube River north of Vienna. It also grows in a few other Eastern European countries, such as Slovakia, Yugoslavia and the Czech Republic, but the variety is most closely associated with Austria, where it has been cultivated since Roman times. Simply put, Grüner Veltliner is *the* indigenous variety of Austria.

Until recently, Grüner Veltliner had always been considered a high-production commercial grape, best suited for the simple, easy-drinking wines that flow so freely in the ubiquitous Heurigen (wine pubs) of Austria. Like Riesling, this variety adapts easily to many soil types and can tolerate higher crop levels. Thus, it seemed a natural fit for the Lenz Moser vine training system. This system, named for the famous Austrian producer who developed it, was designed for high yields in widely spaced vineyards that could easily be worked with machines to reduce labor costs. The result was light, simple wines – and lots of them.

Since the early 1980s, when the quality pendulum started swinging back toward the positive side in Austria, the Lenz Moser system has fallen out of favor. Austria's serious winemakers have discovered that, with lower yields and higher ripeness, Grüner Veltliner can produce stunningly intense and concentrated wines. Even the simple wines, from overcropped vines and underripe fruit, can have very pleasant citrus and grapefruit aromas, with a hint of the variety's most distinguishing characteristic: the spicy fragrance of freshly ground white pepper. Today's better wines, however, from top sites and lower yields (often as low as 30-40 hl/ha), can be astonishingly complex, full of exotic tropical fruits, white pepper and lentils. They can also show aromas of green beans or asparagus, an engaging 'vegetable' smell that is seldom 'vegetal', especially when grown in mineral soil.

There is a vast amount of ordinary Grüner Veltliner grown in the Weinviertel, a district within Niederösterreich and Austria's single largest winegrowing area. There is some potential here, but mostly the wines are of the simple sort and are still consumed locally at the many wine pubs. Currently the best wines from this variety are being made in the three smaller, adjoining districts along the Danube: the Wachau, Kremstal and Kamptal.



### Grüner Veltliner

Photo courtesy of the Austrian Wine Marketing Board

In just a couple of decades, the Wachau has become widely known as the source of some of the most powerful, incisive dry Rieslings made today. The steep, terraced vineyards and very warm climate here provide exceptional ripeness for massive, big-boned wines. The predominance of primary rock soils (granite and gniess) gives the wines a nearly monolithic structure that is mysteriously nimble. The wines are forceful without being overbearing; big without being heavy. Grüner Veltliner grown in these soils also shows this massive build, becoming deeply perfumed and complex as they age. It is like drinking liquid stone.

While the finest Grüner Veltliners from the Wachau are deep and powerful, the most elegant examples of this variety come from the Kremstal and

Kamptal. Here, the sandy loam and loess soils are lighter than in the Wachau, but still very much mineral in composition. Grüner Veltliner finds it's finest balance in loess, the fine-grained, densely compacted glacial dust that has been blown in over many thousands of years. The best from this type of soil will age gracefully for many years, becoming ever more elegant and refined as the decades pass.

It's ability to age beautifully is one of the many interesting characteristics that Grüner Veltliner shares with Riesling. Both varieties have naturally high acidity, which is an essential component of a wine that is going to age well. With today's improved winemaking technology, it is still too soon to say how the modern versions of either of these wines will age for the long term, but the indications are quite positive. And in the Wachau, the consensus seems to be that Grüner Veltliner will ultimately be the longer lived of the two varieties.

Grüner Veltliner also matches Riesling's ability to capture the essential character of a particular vineyard through its crystalline clarity and purity of flavor (i.e. lack of oak). Thus, it is very interesting to taste examples from different vineyards side by side, especially wines that have some age because, with time, they become more and more expressive of their origins.

In Austria, however, it is still very much the tradition to drink the wine as young as possible, which is somewhat regrettable; and to drink them with food, which is absolutely correct. Grüner Veltliner is perhaps the single most versatile food wine in the world, often surpassing even Riesling because of its ability to pair with "difficult" foods such as artichokes and asparagus.

Except for an occasional dessert wine made from botrytis-affected grapes, Grüner Veltliner is a full-bodied dry wine (up to 14% alcohol) with a firm mineral backbone, giving it the strength of character to work well with many cuisines. It is especially well suited to modern cooking that focuses on the fresh flavor of local ingredients and the variety is eagerly being embraced by creative chefs and innovative sommeliers around the world.



The northeastern corner of Austria, a region called Niederösterreich (Lower Austria) is where most of the best Grüner Veltliner is grown. The best of the best comes from three small wine districts: the Wachau, Kremstal and Kamptal.

## Great Grüner Vineyards

### Wachau

Loibenberg  
Ried Schütt  
Kellerberg  
Achleiten  
Steinriegl  
Hochrain (Wösendorf)  
Honivogel

### Kremstal

Senftenberger Piri

### Kamptal

Käferberg  
Ried Lamm  
Spiegel  
Zöbinger Heiligenstein

## Riesling of the Pacific Northwest

ASK ANYONE WHO LIVES IN THE Pacific Northwest region of the United States and Canada to describe where they live and they'll undoubtedly talk of towering Douglas firs, snow-capped mountain peaks, gray skies and rainy weather. But if you then ask about wine, they'll tell you that most of the wine growing takes place in semi-arid, near-desert conditions where irrigation is a way of life.

This seeming rift between perception and reality comes about because of a picturesque range of mountains known as the Cascades. This still-active string of volcanic peaks runs from California to Canada and absorbs nearly all of the wet marine weather coming off the Pacific Ocean. This divides the lush rainforests in the western third of Oregon, Washington and British Columbia from the dry brushlands to the east.

For the most part, the areas west of the Cascades are too cold and wet to ripen grapes for making wine. Oregon is the exception because of a smaller Coast Range that provides just enough protection for grape growing in the Willamette Valley. Overall, growing conditions in the Pacific Northwest are typified by long hours of sun, hot days, very cool nights and mineral-rich alluvial soils. This combination of elements has the potential for producing wines with good ripeness, a firm acid backbone and pure varietal character.

There is no question that some wonderful wines are being made here, but the modern wine industry in the Pacific Northwest is still quite young and it's too soon to tell if the area is capable of producing wines that have true regional distinction. There are positive signs, however. In Oregon, for example, a definite regional signature for Pinot Noir is emerging and the wines are gaining international acclaim. Riesling has not been so lucky, but change is in the air.

The biggest problem for Riesling in the region has been overcoming the cheap and simple reputation that is still holding on from forty years ago. It has so permeated the cultural consciousness that even the winemakers have long assumed that Riesling is just a commodity grape for producing weak, overcropped slurping wine. The global image of Riesling is steadily improving, however, and a number of young, energetic winemakers are driving a quality revival throughout the Pacific Northwest. There is still a lot of mediocre Riesling produced, but finally we have some excellent wines to talk about as well.



Oregon's Mt. Hood is part of the Cascade range, which divides the western third of the Pacific Northwest from the larger eastern part where most of the wine is grown.

## Washington State

THE STATE OF WASHINGTON, in the very northwest corner of the United States, is a distant second to California in terms of total wine production. But the wine industry here is growing rapidly and quality is on the rise as more and more serious winegrowers learn better how to work with the state's natural gifts. Red wines dominate, particularly Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, but the state has a solid reputation for Riesling.

Most of the 29,000 acres of vines in Washington are planted on light gravel and silt soils that were deposited about 15,000 years ago when a huge ice dam in Montana collapsed, sending a bible-worthy flood from the ancient Lake Missoula west toward the Pacific Ocean. This flood carved out the dramatic and breathtakingly scenic Columbia Gorge that now forms the border between Oregon and Washington. These sedimentary soils also contain a fair amount of volcanic ash, most recently deposited in 1980 when Mount St. Helens blew her top. Some higher-elevation vineyards (1,100 feet or more) are above the Missoula Flood line and still have their original heavier clay soils.

The climate in eastern Washington, where nearly all of the winegrowing takes place, is dry and hot. Pioneers from Europe have been growing grapes here and there since the late 1800s, but it wasn't until large-scale irrigation was introduced at the turn of the 20th century that winegrowing became a sizable enterprise. The long, hot days of the growing season are tempered by very cool nights, which keeps the acidity level of the grapes from dropping too much. This, combined with the light soils, produces fruity wines that have a firm, clean structure.

There are two main AVAs (American Viticultural Areas) in Washington. The largest is the Columbia Valley, centered around the confluence of the Columbia, Snake and Yakima rivers. Within the boundaries of the Columbia Valley is the smaller, and generally cooler, Yakima Valley AVA. There are many thousands of acres of potential vineyard land that are still available in Washington, so there is plenty of room for the industry here to grow. It will all depend on whether or not a distinctive style for the state's wines emerges over the next couple of decades.

### Washington's big guns of Riesling

Washington is the largest producer of Riesling in the Pacific Northwest. In fact, thanks to one very large and very dynamic company, it is the largest producer of Riesling in the world. Chateau Ste Michelle has put a lot of time and energy into their Riesling program and they deserve much of the credit for the current resurgence in quality. Of the 2,291 acres of Riesling planted in Washington, Chateau Ste Michelle owns 1,280 acres and controls much of the rest through grower contract



The two main wine-growing areas of Washington State are the Columbia Valley (yellow area) and the Yakima Valley (green). The smaller Walla Walla Valley (purple) is becoming known for red wines. There is a small amount of wine grown in the Puget Sound area (red) west of the Cascades, but the real action is in eastern Washington.

arrangements. There are over 170 wineries in Washington, but Chateau Ste Michelle is by far the largest, selling nearly 90 percent of all the wine produced in the state. They produce over 200,000 cases of Riesling every year.

Their dominance of the Washington wine industry makes Chateau Ste Michelle and its corporate parent, Stimson Lane (which also owns the Columbia Crest and Snoqualmie brands), an easy target for naysaying about the ability of a large company to make great wine. Chateau Ste Michelle definitely is imbued with a corporate way of thinking, but it cannot be denied that they have done more than any other company to improve the quality and image of Riesling in their state. For years now they have been scientifically studying every facet of Riesling growing and winemaking in the arid vineyards of Washington. The result has been a steady improvement in the quality of the wines.

Erik Olsen is the winemaker in charge of white wines at Chateau Ste Michelle and his meticulous hand has brought an elevated level of consistency. In addition to stylish Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Semillon, he generally produces three bottlings of Riesling, assuming vintage conditions allow it. The estate's basic Johannisberg Riesling is a clean and satisfying wine that sells for around US\$7. It is their largest production with nearly two million bottles. There is also a smaller quantity of dry Riesling produced, and the just-released 2001 is excellent. It captures wonderfully the mineral character of the sandy, gravel soils in a wine that enlivens the palate and makes a wonderful partner with lighter seafood dishes, such as crab cakes. Olsen is justifiably proud of this wine.

At the top for Chateau Ste Michelle is the Cold Creek Vineyard Riesling, which represents less than one percent of their total Riesling production. Cold Creek is a large vineyard in the Columbia River Valley that is wholly owned by Chateau Ste Michelle. Of its 665 acres (266 hectares), a good 150 acres are planted with Riesling on well-drained silty loam. The vineyard is curiously named, since it is one of the warmest and driest vineyards in the state. For Olsen, Cold Creek Riesling always stands out from the many different lots that he tastes through each year. In 1998 he decided to start putting the best Cold Creek batches into a single-vineyard wine. The 2000 vintage has an engaging, citrus and mineral aroma, with good intensity of flavor and an energetic crackle on the palate.

#### **Eroica: A heroic endeavor**

Stimson Lane's former CEO, Allen Shoup, was the prime mover and shaker behind the Riesling quality revival at Chateau Ste Michelle (and, thus, also in the entire state). In 1999, Shoup put together a joint venture agreement with Ernst Loosen of Germany's Dr. Loosen estate. The result was a wine called Eroica, now in its third vintage. Again, we have to give Stimson Lane due credit for boldly going where no Washington winery had gone before: a serious, top-quality Riesling selling for \$20 a bottle. It was a definite gamble for a company that doesn't like to take gambles. But the collaboration has paid off, both in terms of wine quality and in the amount of positive press it has generated for Washington Riesling.

The Eroica project has also had a significant impact on other Riesling growers in the Pacific Northwest, who now see that the wine-consuming public *will* pay



Chateau Ste Michelle's Cold Creek Vineyard, lies on the south side of the Columbia River, below Mattawa (see map on page 12).



more for better quality and a more interesting wine. Of course, most other producers don't have Stimson Lane's financial resources or marketing muscle, but the bar has definitely been raised and they all stand to benefit. All that is required is the will and understanding to produce better Riesling.

It all starts in the vineyards. This is certainly no shocking revelation, but it is surprising how this critical factor seems to fall by the wayside where Riesling is concerned. Fortunately, that attitude is gradually changing as Washington winegrowers come to see Riesling as a commercially viable grape for high-end wines, rather than just a high-production bulk wine. The first thing that the Loosen-Olsen winemaking team did was to reduce yields for the vineyards that were being considered for Eroica.

The second important factor for winegrowing in Washington is irrigation, the subject of extensive and ongoing research throughout the industry. When to begin irrigating and how much are basic questions under study and with each passing vintage, more is learned. After three vintages of Eroica, one thing seems certain: Riesling does not respond well to the technique of deficit irrigation – withholding water to control vine vigor – that is being used so extensively for red varieties. Riesling needs at least some water to produce good, fruity aromatics and to avoid bitter phenolics. Instead, it's looking like a program of more frequent hedging and pruning is the better answer to control vine growth for Riesling, and to avoid the unappealing 'vegetal' aromas that too-vigorous growth can impart to the wine.

Eroica is a true collaboration between Loosen, Chateau Ste Michelle's Erik Olsen, the vineyard management teams and a number of contracted growers. "I didn't come here with the attitude that I was going to be this Old World guy telling these New World youngsters how to make Riesling," said Loosen, "our goal was to see if we could find the true character of Washington Riesling, a style that would become as recognizable as our wines from the Mosel. There's no question that I've learned as much from them as they have from me. Probably more."

During the growing season, the trans-oceanic winemaking team confers about vineyard management via phone and e-mail. As harvest approaches, specific vineyard plots are selected for consideration as part of the final Eroica blend. Harvest is done in the cool of night to preserve the freshness and fruitiness of the grapes, which are pressed in a processing facility in Mattawa. The juice is then trucked to the winery, three hours away at the Chateau in Woodinville, just east of Seattle.

The various batches of juice are fermented separately using a variety of yeasts and fermentation techniques. Long, cool fermentations using German yeasts supplied by Loosen appear to produce the best results for the elegant, fruity style of wine they want for Eroica. Loosen travels to Woodinville several times a year to taste through the different lots of wine and work out the final blend.

Loosen and Olsen are pleased with the progress they are making with Eroica. Each new vintage seems to have more of the complexity, finesse and elegance that they are looking for. The 2001 is the best yet, with fine litchi and citrus fruit and crisp, lively acidity on the palate. It is also the largest quantity they have produced so far (10,000 cases) making availability much better this year.



Eroica collaborators Ernst Loosen (center) and Erik Olsen (right) in the Cold Creek Vineyard with vineyard manager Jim Herrmann. Cold Creek is one of the primary sources of fruit for Eroica.



**TBA – Washington style**

A second, very special wine that Loosen and Olsen are making together is the incredibly intense Single Berry Select, made like Trockenbeerenauslese from completely shriveled, botrytis-affected grapes. The 2000 crop weighed it at an astonishing 54° Brix (260° Oechsle) and took over a year to ferment. It is massively sweet, with complex apricot fruit and enormous acidity. Truly a stunning wine, it is due to be released soon. The quantity is somewhat higher than the debut 1999 vintage release, but it is still quite limited and the price will remain at \$200 for a half-bottle (375 ml).

**More Washington Riesling producers**

While Chateau Ste Michelle clearly dominates the Washington Riesling scene, there are other wineries that are making good wines, or at least showing good promise. The first among them is Columbia Winery, one of Washington's venerable estates that got its start in the early 1960s, at the same time as Chateau Ste Michelle. Now owned by the large Canadaigua conglomerate, Columbia continues to hum along with its very popular Cellarmaster's Reserve Riesling. With 50,000 cases annually, this is Columbia's single largest production, which is rather remarkable since they are mostly known for their high-end red wines.

Years ago, Columbia discovered that the American palate preferred by far a sweeter style of Riesling. So they abandoned the idea of making dry Riesling and concentrated on this wine, which sells out nearly before it's been released. We found the 2001 vintage to be perhaps a bit too sweet. It has a fine, focused aroma and a lot of tasty peach fruit on the palate, but it leans too far toward heaviness, putting it out of balance. But for those who really prefer a sweeter wine, it is a delicious and well-made wine. We just hope that Columbia keeps up with the times and realizes that the American palate is constantly changing, as is evidenced by the current popularity of big dry Rieslings from Austria.

Another solid producer of Washington Riesling is Hogue Cellars, a winery that has been around since 1982. Its first wine was a Johannisberg Riesling made with fruit from a vineyard that Mike Hogue had planted in 1974. In 2001, the company was sold to the large Canadian company, Vincor International, with the hope that the resources of a big company will help raise Hogue's profile in the market.

Hogue's 2001 Johannisberg Riesling is a pleasing, if uncomplicated, wine that sells for a very affordable US\$9. It has a good amount of clean, flavorful, peachy fruit, but it's rather too round and fat, lacking structure. The taste is nice, I just wish it had a little more zip to it.

We've not been big fans of Covey Run over the years, but their 2000 vintage Rieslings show some improvement, and some promise. Both the Dry Riesling and regular Riesling showed nice peach and apricot fruit, and decent texture on the palate. They're still not as clean and precise as we would like them, but it appears that new winemaker Kerry Norton, who joined the winery in 1999, has got things going in the right direction. This is another of the four Northwest wineries that were acquired by Canadaigua last year.

Another winery that was founded in 1982 is Latah Creek, located in the eastern Washington city of Spokane. The 2001 Johannisberg Riesling was the first wine of theirs that I had ever tasted, and I found it quite pleasing. It had big, peachy fruit, like so many Washington Rieslings, and was marred only by a slightly unclean element in the aroma. Otherwise, a crisp, lively wine.

**Recommended Washington Wineries****Chateau Ste Michelle**

[www.chateau-ste-michelle.com](http://www.chateau-ste-michelle.com)

- 2001 Dry Riesling
- 2000 Cold Creek Riesling

**Chateau Ste Michelle & Dr. Loosen**

- 2001 Eroica Riesling
- 2000 Single Berry Select

**Columbia Winery**

[www.columbiawinery.com](http://www.columbiawinery.com)

- 2001 Cellarmaster's Reserve Riesling

**Hogue Cellars**

[www.hogue-cellars.com](http://www.hogue-cellars.com)

- 2001 Johannisberg Riesling

**Covey Run**

[www.coveyrun.com](http://www.coveyrun.com)

- 2000 Dry Riesling
- 2000 Riesling

**Latah Creek**

[www.latahcreek.com](http://www.latahcreek.com)

- 2001 Johannisberg Riesling

**MORE INFORMATION:**

Washington Wine Commission  
[www.washingtonwine.org](http://www.washingtonwine.org)



## British Columbia

There are four designated Viticultural Areas in British Columbia: Vancouver Island, Fraser Valley, Similkameen Valley and the Okanagan Valley. At this time, only the last of these is of any significance for Riesling. As in Washington, sporadic winegrowing has been going on here since the late 1800s, but it is only in the last couple of decades that any serious effort has been made to develop a world-class wine industry. There has been good progress, but the road ahead is long and lonely. Fortunately, there is no shortage of hardy pioneers who are happy to lead the way.

The Okanagan Valley lies directly north of Washington's Columbia Valley, and is in some ways an extension of it. Nestled in a narrow valley between the Rocky Mountains to the east and the Cascade Mountains to the west, the Okanagan has a surprisingly warm climate. It is described as a "pocket desert" and can be thought of as a northern finger of the great western desert of the United States. At an even higher latitude than Washington (50° North, the same as Rheingau in Germany), the Okanagan enjoys extremely long summer days and more hours of sunshine than California during the growing season.

There are some 3,000 acres of vines in the Okanagan Valley, with many more being planted all the time. But it is a confined area, about 100 miles long and only a few miles wide, so the amount of potential vineyard land is limited. The best area for Riesling seems to be the southern end of the valley, below the lake, where it is more open and desert-like. Here, sandy soils and warm temperatures bring excellent ripeness. The best of the wines we have tasted show a lot of finesse and character, giving us high hopes for the region. Ultimately, Okanagan wines may prove to be more distinctive than their Washington counterparts.

The height of elegance in Okanagan Riesling is to be found at the Gehringer Brothers winery, where the German training of Walter and Gordon Gehringer leads them to wines with a fine fruitiness and a sleek frame. This is our most highly recommend winery in the region. They produce both dry and fruity versions every year, as well as some very nice Riesling icewine.

A couple of mega-wineries in the area, Inniskillin and Jackson-Triggs, are deservedly well-known for their icewines, but not for regular Riesling. Inniskillin doesn't even bother to make a regular Riesling, focusing instead on polished red wines (and icewine) from their Dark Horse Vineyard. Overall, Okanagan icewine is quite good, but they are often overly heavy and lacking focus. They can be extremely good values, however, usually costing far less than their German brethren.

Other interesting Okanagan Rieslings that we have tasted recently include the 2000 vintage from Gray Monk, a bright, zippy wine with an interesting earth and mineral element at the core of the mid-palate. The winemaker at Gray Monk clearly has no fear of SO<sub>2</sub> (which will be good for the longevity of the wine), so give the wine some time to open up. It will be even better in a few years.

The 1999 Riesling from Hawthorne Mountain is also quite interesting, with a burnished lime fruit aroma and a hint of brioche, something that comes with age in finer Alsatian Rieslings. There's quite a lot of acidity here, however, so give this wine some time in the cellar or try it with something strong like smoked meat.



Vineyards in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia, overlooking the long and slender Okanagan Lake.

## Recommended Okanagan Wineries

### Gehringer Brothers

Tel 250/498-3537

- 2000 Riesling Private Reserve

### Inniskillin

www.inniskillin.com

- Riesling Icewine Dark Horse Vineyard

### Jackson-Triggs

Tel 250/498-4981

- Riesling Icewine Proprietor's Reserve
- Riesling Icewine Proprietor's Grand Reserve

### Gray Monk Estate Winery

www.graymonk.com

- 2000 Okanagan Valley Riesling

### Hawthorne Mountain

www.hmvineyard.com

- 1999 Riesling

### MORE INFORMATION:

BC Wine Institute

www.winebc.com

## Idaho

The vineyards in Idaho resemble the arid sites of eastern Washington, except that here most of the vineyards are at higher elevation (up to 2,700 feet), in very light volcanic ash soils. The vineyards lie along the banks of the Snake River and the vines are all on their own rootstocks. It's a bit of a gamble not to use grafted vines, but it seems a safe bet that phylloxera won't find a welcome home in these barren soils. There is a lot of potential here – one estimate puts good unused vineyard land at 50,000 acres – but the state's conservative political climate does not provide a lot of support for a “sinful” industry such as wine production.

As in Washington, one winery dominates Riesling production in Idaho, a minor Riesling source with just a few hundred acres planted. And, like Washington, it is a winery with a saint in the name. The Ste Chapelle winery in southwest Idaho, near the Oregon border, was founded in 1976 and named for La Sainte Chapelle in Paris, the devoutly gorgeous 13th century court chapel of French King Louis IX. This winery was also acquired by Canadaigua Wine Company in 2001 and currently produces 135,000 cases of wine annually, 10,000 of which is Riesling.

Ste Chapelle's 2000 Dry Riesling has a very pretty, pure Riesling fruit aroma with wonderful balance and a crisp texture. The 2000 Riesling is another charmer, with delicate lime and citrus fruit and a nice mineral note. It is not as finely balanced as the dry version, but is lovely to drink. And it costs a mere US\$6.

Bill Stowe, owner and winemaker at the much smaller Indian Creek Winery, has built a solid name for his excellent Pinot Noir. But from vineyards planted around 1984, he is also producing a very interesting Riesling. The 2000 White Riesling has an engaging minerality in the aroma, with intriguing scents of crisp, green apple and pastry cream. In spite of the “semi-sweet” indication on the label, the wine's excellent acidity make it taste dry and racy. A very good wine for US\$8.

## Oregon

In our home state of Oregon, Riesling is even more of a bit player than in the other parts of the Pacific Northwest, with only 572 acres planted. Many have tried to grow Riesling here (and many still do), but the results are usually rather disappointing. Historically, Oregon Riesling has been characterized by watery wines with an unclean aroma of overripe apples. But we are happy to report that a few idealistic young winemakers have brought new hope for fine Riesling to Oregon.

Unlike the rest of the Pacific Northwest, most of the vineyards in Oregon lie on the western side of the Cascade Mountains, where rainfall is abundant, soils are heavier and vine disease pressure is high. Riesling does best when it has a long, slow ripening time, but that's a problem here where it's often necessary to bring in the fruit before the autumn rains wash them away. Oregon's only saving grace is that we often have a beautiful indian summer in October that gives the grapes a chance to dry out and ripen up. When that happens, the wines can be wonderful.

The biggest single issue for quality in Oregon Riesling is crop level. This has been clearly demonstrated by Bill Holloran and his winemaker, Jay Somers. When Holloran acquired 1.5 acres of Riesling vines in the Le Pavilion vineyard in 1999, Somers (who got the Riesling bug while working in a New Zealand winery) immediately persuaded him to try an experiment. Half of the vineyard was cropped at a “normal” 3.5 tons per acre, the other half at just 2.5 tons. The two finished wines showed the greater richness and concentration that the lower yield produced from these 25-year-old vines.

## Recommended Idaho Wineries

### Ste Chapelle

[www.stechapelle.com](http://www.stechapelle.com)

- 2000 Dry Riesling
- 2000 Riesling

### Indian Creek Winery

Tel 208/922-4791

- 2000 White Riesling

### MORE INFORMATION:

The Idaho Grape Growers and Wine Producers Commission  
[www.idahowine.org](http://www.idahowine.org)



Jay Somers, winemaker for Holloran and one of Oregon's most promising Riesling proponents.

Holloran's experiment shows that concentrated Riesling with intense mineral focus is possible here in the land of wet. We are also seeing the beginnings of a distinctive terroir in the wines. The Le Pavilion vineyard has excellent southerly exposure and a fairly steep slope. The soil is the red Jory clay from which the Red Hills of Dundee take their name. The high iron and silicate content of this soil gives a deep minerality and juicy red fruit flavors to both Riesling and Oregon's more famous wine grape, Pinot Noir.

By contrast, Riesling grown on silty, alluvial Willakenzie soil (named for the silt found at the confluence of the Willamette and McKenzie Rivers in Oregon) shows a finer-grained mineral texture with elegant fruit aromas that lean more toward pineapple and tangerine. Oregon's best hope here is Jimi Brooks, another young winemaker who feels some sort of inner compulsion to make high-quality Riesling.

The biggest obstacle for Brooks has been convincing area growers not to rip out their remaining Riesling vines in order to plant the more profitable Pinot Noir. He's had some success and a few local farmers-turned-winegrowers are allowing him the chance to show that excellent Riesling is possible from this soil. His primary source for Brooks Riesling is the Yamhill Vineyard, owned by brothers Ralph and Wally Stein. As businessmen, the Steins acknowledge that it would make good economic sense to give up on Riesling, but passionate pleas from Brooks and others have convinced them to hold on to a few acres. That makes us very happy, because even though the quantities are quite small, the Rieslings from Brooks and Holloran are the finest we've ever seen from Oregon.

A third promising voice for Oregon Riesling is Rich Cushman, who has been making wines here for over 20 years. Having worked for numerous wineries as a consultant over the years, Cushman recently launched his own Viento label. He is producing a few hundred cases of a very pretty Riesling from a vineyard he planted in the Columbia Gorge back in 1981. He had spent the previous year working at Bürklin-Wolf in Germany's Pfalz region and came home with Riesling on the brain, so he immediately planted a few acres of vines. The 2001 Columbia Gorge Vineyard Riesling has very bright apple and citrus fruit and a tingly texture. It just needs a bit more concentration to make it more expansive on the palate.

A few other Oregon wineries make decent Rieslings from time to time, but they seldom show the promise and class of the three mentioned above. Argyle, well-known for its sparkling wines, produces a dry Riesling that is fairly straightforward but well-balanced and nicely aromatic. Chehalem Winery makes a pleasant dry Riesling that is worth a try, and Elk Cove regularly hits a good one in the sweeter, late-harvest style. Belle Pente, a relatively new winery, has also shown promise with its bright, fruity Rieslings, but the 2000 vintage lacked concentration and purity.

Riesling in western Oregon's cool, wet climate is a marginal business, but we are thrilled that a few die-hards are showing that the wines can be superb. Both Holloran and Brooks are working to get more Riesling planted in the Willamette Valley, and we're looking forward to better availability for their wines. It would be interesting, however, if someone were to plant some Riesling in the drier, warmer climes and lighter soils east of the Cascades. But perhaps it is Oregon's lot to always be thought of as that cold and rainy place out west.



Holloran's Le Pavilion Vineyard, with its distinctive red Jory clay soil.

## Recommended Oregon Wineries

### Brooks

Tel 503/435-1278  
• 2001 Riesling

### Holloran

[www.holloranvineyardwines.com](http://www.holloranvineyardwines.com)  
• 2000 Le Pavilion Riesling

### Viento

[viento@onlinemac.com](mailto:viento@onlinemac.com)  
• 2001 Columbia Gorge Vineyard Riesling

### MORE INFORMATION:

Oregon Wine Advisory Board  
[www.oregonwine.org](http://www.oregonwine.org)



Jimi Brooks inspecting the new growth on Riesling vines in the Yamhill Vineyard.

## Seppelt Drumborg Vineyard

# Oz Riesling That Beats to a Different Drummer

FOR ANY WINE-LOVER BROUGHT UP WITH THE NOTION that a great vineyard site should be owed a degree of reverence by all who make their way to its hallowed soils, a visit to Victoria's Drumborg Vineyard in the far southwestern corner of mainland Australia comes as something of a disappointment – even to the most dedicated fan of the Riesling wines from Down-under.

After all, there are few if any features that help distinguish it from the two dozen or so other vineyards that make up the surrounding, newly-created Henty wine region. Ninety-four hectares in area, and 38 years of age, Drumborg Vineyard is undeniably the largest and the oldest of the vineyards found established within this clearly delineated region of geographical indication. Yet there are no edifices within view, no bevy of wine pilgrims to proclaim its eminence as the source of one of Australia's best Rieslings.

Forget about grand cellar-door sales facilities and state-of-the-art wineries here. The nearest stainless steel tank farm is a couple of hours' drive away. Practically all that's to be found in these parts are row upon row of carefully managed vine plantings, the odd clump of native trees that serve as a windbreaks, and groups of nondescript sheds and outbuildings used for vineyard infrastructure and machinery storage. Perhaps icon status for Seppelt Drumborg Riesling is distinction enough for owners Southcorp Wines?

Hardly. It may well be the property of Australia's largest producer of wines, but even within its home-state of Victoria, the name Drumborg is barely recognized. One wonders whether it would have the slightest profile at all were it not for the label's impeccable wine show record, and the fact that the word is annexed to the name of Seppelt, one of Australia's oldest and most respected wine brands.

It's been that way for the past 30-odd years. And given the superb quality of the Rieslings the vineyard has produced over the last quarter of a century, that in itself seems one of life's little mysteries. Indeed, wherever one turns to gain a clearer perspective of Drumborg Vineyard, the word 'mystery' bobs up no matter what the contemporary or historical context.

Take the five-hour journey by car through the network of roads and highways that connects the site to Melbourne, some 340 km (195 miles) away, and the average tourist who chances upon it begins to ponder the reasons for its very existence. It's not exactly in the middle of outback Australia, but it is remote from major centres of population in a region that historically has been dedicated to farming and grazing activities.

Step from a hire-car with its air-conditioning on the blink in mid-January, then venture onto the vineyard site with its cooling passages of on-shore sea breezes and you will soon form a different point of view. At latitude 38 degrees



### What is a Geographical Indication?

A geographical indication is a term that describes in words the boundaries of the geographical area of a particular region. Its use in the Australian wine industry began in 1993, and is aimed at protecting growers and consumers from the designation of a region's name to wines not produced from within its geographical indication.

Unlike systems of appellation, the term GI in Australia has no bearing on the viticultural or winemaking practices that take place there.

South – and situated on a prominent hillside just 22 kilometres inland from the Southern Ocean – this is one of the coldest wine-growing regions of mainland Australia. It is also one of the few Victorian regions not to have had some history of grape-growing during the 19th century.

The site’s mid-summer daytime temperatures average out to be a neat 17.5° Celsius. Heat summation figures frequently measure around the 1,260 Day Degrees Celsius mark, putting it close on the temperature scale to South Australia’s Eden Valley (1,250 HDD), Alsace’s Colmar (1,230 HDD) and Germany’s Pfalz (1,200 to 1,250 HDD) wine-growing regions.

The wind-chill factor here is high, and the sunshine hours perhaps surprisingly low. Able to benefit from barely 7.0 sunshine hours per day during the growing season from October to March, its climatic data again continues to suggest it is a viticultural site with much more in common with Strasbourg, Alsace (6.6 sunshine hours per day), than Clare or parts of the Barossa Valley (around 8.8 sunshine hours per day). Rainfall in the region is high at 850mm, with no month in the year averaging less than 28 millimetres.

At the time of its planting, in 1964, it was the most southerly vineyard on the whole continent. A couple of eccentric immigrants were beginning to dabble in viticulture on the island of Tasmania just a few hundred kilometres further south, but beyond that beckoned a few small icy land masses punctuating the long journey to Antarctica, hostile territory for any form of life.

Established one year after the then family-owned company planted what is now Padthaway, across the nearby border between Victoria and South Australia, Seppelt’s Drumborg was earmarked for the production of delicate aromatic table wines and bottle-fermented sparkling wines. The former region, Karl Seppelt correctly prophesied, was intended to become a valuable fruit source for his company’s full-bodied table wines.

Drumborg’s selection as a key cool climate vineyard site was influenced by several key factors. Principally, it came about because the South Australian-based Seppelt family was looking for an alternative and cooler site to its existing premium sparkling wine program, already in operation at Great Western in Victoria, having been commenced there in the later part of the 1800s. Because of quarantine regulations designed to limit the spread of phylloxera, suitable grape varieties were either unprocurable or in extremely short supply within the boundaries of Seppelt’s home-state. As the company couldn’t import plant material into South Australia for any new vineyard there, setting up somewhere else in Victoria seemed the only satisfactory alternative.



Map courtesy of Dept. of State and Regional Development, Victoria.

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Vineyards at Drumborg.

The lack of large parcels of land available around Seppelt's Great Western operation caused it to look further afield, the final decision to settle on the Drumborg location coming about only after extensive research and risk assessment. The company purchased two properties with a total size of 189 hectares in 1964. The first plantings mostly consisted of Ondenc for sparkling wine, with lesser amounts of Riesling, Sylvaner, Tokay and Pinot Meunier. Keen to hedge its bets, Seppelt ran trials on some 40 grape varieties there in its earliest years.

Drumborg lived up to expectation of being viticulturally very difficult. Vine cultivation and canopy management were based on the warm climate viticultural practices of the day, and were often not relevant to the region's climate and soils. As a result, Seppelt was forced into pioneering new grape-growing techniques twenty years before the term 'cool-climate' became fashionable.

"I have come to the conclusion that the Riesling is the best white wine grape we possess ... I have not during the four years I have been in the colony seen the failure of a vine..." wrote a reader to the *Melbourne Argus* newspaper in 1861. Yet one hundred years later, it was this very same grape variety that was proving to be one of the most difficult of all to be planted on the site at Drumborg.

While the varieties chosen as part of the plan to improve the quality and supply of Seppelt Great Western's bottle-fermented wines did well – and allowed for a number of premium méthode champenoise wines to be produced – others performed poorly. Single vineyard Riesling releases were few and far between in the early years due to several critical on-going problems. Prevailing coastal winds frequently upset flowering and thereby caused severely reduced levels of cropping. Disease-pressure was found to be quite intense through most growing seasons, the chief culprit being botrytis, to which Riesling is particularly susceptible, especially if conditions are cool and damp, and the vintage is a late-ripening one.

Spiralling costs of production and inconsistency in both the quantity and quality of the grapes harvested throughout the 1980s led Seppelt to seriously consider walking away from the whole venture. Given a last-minute reprieve, the vineyard saw significant alterations to trellising and some changes to varieties in that decade. Traminer planted early on was pulled out after 1985 vintage.

These days, the lion's share of Drumborg's vineyard plantings is taken up by Champagne varieties Pinot noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Meunier. Just 6.5 hectares of the site's red-brown clay-loam is dedicated to Riesling, about 4.5 hectares of it having been planted in 1965. The A2 Riesling block represents a part of the vineyard's oldest vines, being among the first block planted at Drumborg after Karl Seppelt bought the property. The remaining 2 hectares of Riesling have long since reached full maturity, after being planted in 1989.

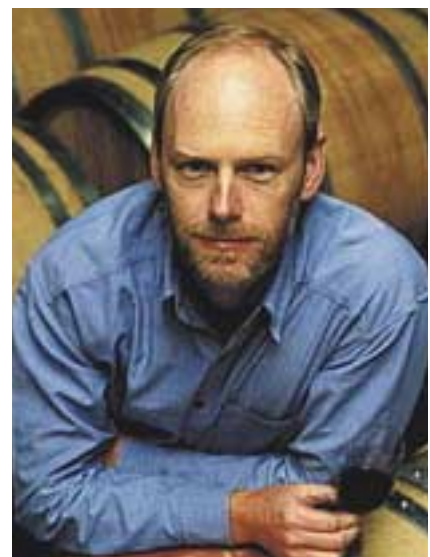
Harvest dates are typically mid-to-late autumn, anywhere from mid-April to early May. Today's yields remain almost as low as they were 30 years ago, chiefly around five tonnes per hectare. As with pruning, all harvesting is done by hand, making it a labour-intensive job for the crews employed there.

According to Paul Lapsley, white-winemaker at Seppelt Great Western where the fruit is processed, the Drumborg Riesling style falls into two categories: the incredibly tight, austere, lemon-citrus, minerally wines from the cooler years; and the classic, rich-flavoured wines from the warmer years, which are the ones to drink while the more austere styles come around in their own good time.

Fruit is picked at optimal flavour ripeness, says fellow winemaker Steve Goodwin. Samples are taken from the vineyard near the season's end and graphs



An old Riesling vine at Drumborg Vineyard.



Paul Lapsley, white-winemaker at Seppelt.

are plotted showing rising sugars and falling acids. Predictions of harvest are made, but the dominating factor is flavour. “If those flavours aren’t there when we predict them, we come back another day,” says Goodwin.

Seppelt’s Great Western winery is one of the main production centres for the Southcorp wine group and is the group’s sparkling wine headquarters. Typically involved in the annual processing some 22,000 tonnes of grapes each year – two-thirds of which are red grapes – the facility runs like a well-oiled machine during the time it deals with the 6,000 tonnes of grapes it draws from the surrounding districts.

It isn’t difficult to slot such a miniscule amount of Riesling into the expansive winemaking program that takes place at Great Western. There are two processing areas on the site for white wines – including a tank press for sparkling and premium whites – freeing up the larger pressing operation needed for the bigger volumes of commercial wines to pass through.

Little has changed in the Drumborg Riesling winemaking process since the early days. While some wines from the early 1980s may have had a little skin contact, “today we continue to use fairly simple winemaking, focusing on protection and bottling as early as possible to capture freshness and varietal character,” says Steve Goodwin.

Fruit is crushed, drained, chilled, and the free run cold-settled. Juice is then cold-fermented using a neutral yeast, and usually completed just short of dryness, with around 5 to 6 grams per litre of residual sugar left in many Drumborg Rieslings. Resulting fruit characters in finished wines are fairly austere and delicate, and predominantly minerally rather than floral. “They look like Alsatian rieslings rather than anything from Australia,” continues Goodwin. “They have high acidities and typical cool climate austerity. These are wines that typically grow in the bottle.”

Citrus characters are common descriptors. Lemon, lime, mandarin, tangerine and grapefruit often come to the fore. Botrytis occasionally appears as a complexing character in the wines but plays no significant part in the style. “If we have a bad botrytis year, the Drumborg simply isn’t made,” says Goodwin, pointing to the fact that no wine from 2001 will appear under the single vineyard label.

In any case, wine volumes are modest for a company of Southcorp’s magnitude. With just 1,000 to 1,200 cases produced annually, Seppelt Drumborg Riesling is likely to remain largely unknown to the vast majority of Australian wine consumers. That might well be seen as both a plus and a minus for committed followers of this very distinctive style. “If the volume (or the number of wineries) was greater, the region would likely rank with Australia’s best,” writes the authoritative James Halliday. (You can visit [www.winepros.com](http://www.winepros.com) to see Halliday’s tasting notes on Seppelt Drumborg Riesling.)

Those of us who appreciate the status quo see things in a slightly different light. We choose not to ponder what might have been. We simply celebrate what has been, and continues to be – an icon wine from one of Australia’s coolest viticultural landscapes.



Seppelt winemaker Steve Goodwin tastes a vertical selection covering two decades of Seppelt Drumborg Riesling.



Guest Riesling Reporter Mark Smith is Tasmania’s most widely published wine educator and Riesling lover.

Mark has complete tasting notes on an extensive vertical selection of Seppelt Drumborg Riesling, which he is happy to share. Contact him by e-mail: [winesmith@bigpond.com](mailto:winesmith@bigpond.com)