

Riesling

Germany's white star



Wines of
Germany
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*“Wines of Germany offer best value for money in every price category.”
Joe Wadsack, BBC London*

one grape, endless possibilities

The noble Riesling grape yields wines of great elegance, complexity and longevity. Firm, fruity acidity is a hallmark shared by all, yet German Rieslings are remarkably diverse due to differences in region, terroir, and ripeness at harvest. These natural factors are reflected in Riesling’s broad spectrum of aromas and flavors, ranging from citrus or crisp apple, to ripe peaches or tropical fruit, often layered with a mineral, herbal or spicy finesse.

The nuances that develop with age and/or the honeyed tones of botrytis add yet other dimensions to a Riesling’s personality. In terms of body or weight, they can be as ethereal as the wings of a butterfly; steely and sleek; buxom or opulently rich. The finest linger long on the palate...wines that can make a “memory worth treasuring” or a collector’s item. Last but not least, Riesling is unparalleled in its ability to bring forth brilliant wines of all styles, from bone dry to lusciously sweet, thus making it an extraordinarily versatile food companion and welcome guest to enhance all sorts of occasions, from a casual get-together to a very special celebration.



Riesling is cultivated in all 13 German wine-growing regions, traditionally in the steep or sloping valleys of the Rhine and Mosel Rivers and their tributaries (Ahr, Nahe, Saar, Ruwer, Neckar) that straddle the 50th degree of latitude (like Mongolia, Kiev or Newfoundland). These regions are climatically influenced by the Gulf Stream and its moderate summer-winter temperature fluctuations, while regions further east (Franken, Saale-Unstrut, Sachsen) are marked by the hot summers and often, very cold winters of a continental climate that leaves grapes more vulnerable to late spring or early autumn frosts. Although less conducive to late-ripening varieties, Riesling can thrive there in the warmth of microclimates created by ancient stone terraces on many a steep slope overlooking the Main, Saale, Unstrut, and Elbe rivers.



Riesling, which develops a multitude of natural aromas only toward the end of its ripening phase, best thrives in northerly and/or high-altitude cool climates that provide a long growing season. In addition to its traditional homes in Germany, Austria, and Alsace, it is successfully cultivated around the world: in the USA (Finger Lakes/NY, Oregon, Washington, northern California) and Canada; high-altitude sites in South America; South Africa; Australia and New Zealand.

Riesling grows in Germany on about 24,000 ha. That means about 50 percent of the world's Riesling vineyards are located here.

“Riesling alone makes pure wine, innocent of oak, that precisely reflects its origin, in a range from flowery and feather-light, through tense, dry, and mineral-laden to unctuous and creamy... Nerve, tension, the character of freshness in the mouth... is the very essence of Riesling.”
 Hugh Johnson, Foreword,
Riesling Renaissance (by Freddy Price)

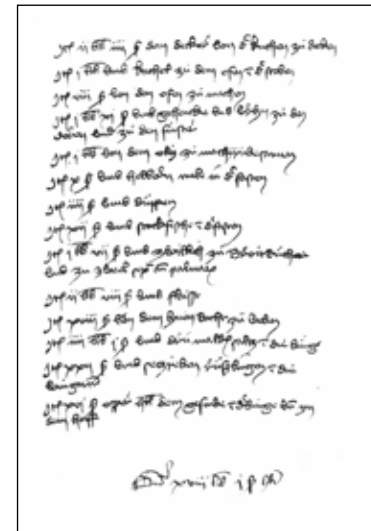




origin

Like that of most other traditional grape varieties, the origin of Riesling is not clear-cut. For years, it was assumed that Riesling was simply a descendant of the ancient wild vine *vitis vinifera silvestris* that thrived in riverside forests along the Rhine. In 2006, the Austrian scientist Ferdinand Regner published results of his DNA analysis that refine the picture, i.e., the “original” Riesling grape was, frost-resistant, had small berries, and could have been selected from wild grapes in the Rhine Valley.

Its evolution continued as a crossing (possibly, spontaneous) of Traminer with an indigenous wild grape, which probably led to improved quality; later, this grape crossed with Weisser Heunisch (in French, Gouais Blanc), which lent the grape resistance, vitality and acidity. In short: Riesling has a mixed, but feasible, lineage consisting of wild vines and two ancient varieties, all of which have long been at home on the Rhine.



There are numerous “first” mentions of the grape, yet the earliest documented mention of Riesling is an invoice dated 13 March 1435, from Klaus Kleinfisch to his lord, Count Johann IV of Katzenelnbogen, for the purchase of Riesling vines to be planted next to the castle he was building in Rüsselsheim, just east of Hochheim/Rheingau.

Equally ambiguous is the origin of the name itself. Supposedly it stems from the 15th century and could be a derivative of *Russling* (*Rus*: literally, soot; here, dark wood) or *Rissling* (from *durchrieseln*: *coulure*, or poor fruit set after blossoming). The word “Riesling” first appeared in 1552 in a Latin text in an herbal by Hieronymus Bock, reprinted in German in 1577: “Rieslings grow on the Mosel, Rhine and in the district of Worms.”





In the meantime, authentic Riesling is known throughout the world primarily as “white Riesling” or “Johannisberg Riesling,” the latter due to the important role played by Schloss Johannisberg/Rheingau in recognizing that Riesling benefited from a “Spätlese,” or late harvest, as of the 1775 vintage. In the years that followed, Johannisberg further refined the concept by selectively harvesting Riesling bunches and/or individual grapes at varying stages of ripeness, thereby setting the stage for the magnificent “Auslese” range of wines that helped establish German Riesling’s world renown. There are many imitators that have incorporated the word “Riesling” into their name – Emerald Riesling, Paarl Riesling, Laski Riesling or Welschriesling, to name but a few – yet they are neither synonymous with, nor related to, genuine German Riesling.





history

Efforts to improve wine quality led to widespread Riesling cultivation in Germany throughout the 18th century, particularly along the Rhine and Mosel. In 1720, some 294,000 Riesling vines were planted in the vineyards of the former Benedictine monastery in Johannisberg/Rheingau; in 1744, the prince bishop of Speyer/Pfalz decreed that “no more *Alben* (Elbling), but rather, more noble varieties, including Riesling,” should be grown in his vineyards in and around Deidesheim; and in 1787, Clemens Wenzeslaus, prince bishop of Trier/Mosel, issued a territorial order: all inferior grape varieties were to be replaced with Riesling.

By the turn of the 20th century, German Rieslings were enjoying a heyday during which they graced the tables of kings, emperors, and czars. They were on a par with the great white and red Pinots of Burgundy and red wines of Bordeaux – even exceeding them in price on wine lists in leading restaurants and wine shops around the world, and winning “Grand Prix” at international competitions, such as the St. Louis World’s Fair in 1904, when German Rieslings from the Rheingau (Schloss Vollrads and Langwerth von Simmern), Pfalz (Bassermann-Jordan), and Mosel (Egon Müller) all took gold.

The prestige of Germany’s unique Riesling wines suffered in the aftermath of the Great Depression and two World Wars. Early ripening, prolific new crossings supplanted Riesling. New cellar techniques fostered the mass production of inexpensive, “technically sound” wines that could be tailored to suit whatever taste profile was currently in demand.





Yet, the greatly diminished international image of German wine was ultimately a wake-up call. Finally there was a renewed focus on traditional grape varieties, particularly Riesling, as well as the preservation and cultivation of top vineyard sites. Yields were reduced. Producers large and small heeded the call to improve quality. They actively marketed their high-quality wines at home and abroad by participating in trade fairs, wine competitions, and symposiums.

An unprecedented, ongoing series of remarkable German wine vintages since the late 1980s and the input of well-educated, internationally oriented, and ambitious younger growers collectively known as “Generation Riesling” have added impetus to the upswing referred to as the Riesling Renaissance. Once again, handcrafted German Rieslings that reflect vintage fluctuations as well as varietal and site-specific characteristics are very much in vogue on a small scale. At the same time, cooperatives and commercial wineries also heightened their quality conscious-

ness in order to successfully compete in the global wine market. Their fresh, uncomplicated Rieslings with appealing fruity aromas offer millions of wine enthusiasts everyday enjoyment at reasonable prices.

Many of these volume producers have added premium-quality wines, available in limited quantities, to their portfolios in recent years. They are often prize winners in competitions, and generate positive media mentions that have helped rebuild Germany’s reputation as a country of innovative, talented winemakers.





food affinities + longevity

Entry-level quality wines made from ripe grapes – house or “bread-and-butter” wines (“Gutsweine”) – are the calling card of every producer. Since they convey the first impression of a producer’s talents, even these all-purpose, everyday wines should be well-made and reflect basic varietal and regional characteristics. Most are meant to be enjoyed in the freshness of youth. Dryish Riesling Gutsweine are terrific apéritifs to stimulate both appetite and conversation. They go well with creamy herb or vegetable soups; vegetarian dishes; and grilled poultry, pork or fish. Try off-dry or medium sweet styles with aromatic, spicy-hot or sweet-and-sour dishes of Asian, Cajun or Mexican origin; and foods prepared with salty marinades, nori seaweed sheets, and fish or soy sauces.

“Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies. In other words: Riesling will never be quite what you expect, which is exactly why you should start acquainting yourself with this often misunderstood, much loved white wine. The first step to Riesling appreciation: Lose the notion that this is just a sweet wine.”

Paul Grieco, Sommelier, New York



Prädikat wines, made from riper grapes, offer more depth and complexity. They are extremely versatile food companions, be it a delicate Riesling Kabinett or a fuller-bodied Riesling Spätlese. A particularly interesting alternative to very dry wines with a meal are traditional-style Spätlese and Auslese that have mellowed during a few years of bottle aging. It provides the time needed for ripe sweetness and Riesling’s vibrant acidity to completely harmonize; the wines become drier in taste and less austere.





“To age well the wine has to be made meticulously from carefully ripened examples of the great grape Riesling whose intense concentration of pure fruit flavour and exceptionally high natural acidity packs a young wine with all that it needs for years, decades and sometimes centuries of slow but dramatic evolution.”
Jancis Robinson, *Vintage Timecharts*

The even more concentrated Riesling Auslese range (including Beeren- and Trockenbeerenauslese) – rich, lusciously sweet wines, yet underpinned by Riesling acidity – are superb with pâtés and blue-veined cheese of comparable richness, and desserts. Mature versions are a venerable alternative to Champagne to toast a special occasion or celebrate an anniversary.

The rewards of aging Riesling merit the patience and investment: well-made Prädikat wines offer a fascinating kaleidoscope of aromas and flavors that evolve over time. When tasted every few months or so, they offer the pleasure of discovery each time a bottle is opened.

If stored horizontally (to keep the cork wet) in a location free of odors, vibrations, and bright sunlight, which offers a fairly constant temperature (ideal: 10-15°C/50-59°F; upper limit: 21°C/70°F), Rieslings can be stored for many years. Half bottles mature more quickly. Rough guidelines:

QbA and Kabinett: up to 5 years

Spätlese: 3 to 10 years

Auslese: at least a decade

BA, Eiswein, TBA: the finest can remain fresh for decades



“... Since most German wines are extremely versatile, the choices are very wide. For dim sum meals where fried and steamed dishes are served together, a crisp dry or off-dry Riesling from Nahe, Rheingau or Mosel works extremely well. The high acidity balances out any oily notes in fried dishes while it accentuates the citrus and delicate flavours of steamed dishes.”

Jeannie Cho Lee, MW, *“Perfect Pairings – German Wines and Asian Flavours”*





read on...

BEST WHITE WINE ON EARTH - THE RIESLING STORY, BY STUART PIGOTT

Stewart, Tabori and Chang
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RIESLING RENAISSANCE, BY FREDDY PRICE

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ISBN: 1-84000-777-X

rieslingrules.com/the_book/

Pacific Rim Winery's collection of facts, figures and fun information about Riesling. Jancis Robinson comments: "Pacific Rim, the Washington state Riesling specialist, has launched (2008) a truly charming...beautifully designed, very simple, 40-page booklet..."

drinkriesling.com

Official website of the International Riesling Foundation, "a private, not-for-profit association created to increase awareness, understanding, and appreciation of Riesling wines produced throughout the world."

germanwines.de • generation-riesling.de/english/

Official website of the German Wine Institute/Mainz, and the concept it initiated in order to provide younger members of the wine scene with a national and international platform.





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