

#3: RIESLING FAQ

What is Riesling?

Riesling is a highly aromatic and fruity grape variety that's been regarded as one of the greatest wine grapes for hundreds of years. Throughout history, Riesling has been revered for its pure fruit flavors, its astonishing diversity of styles, its ability to show you where it was grown, and its ability to age for decades. It's currently the fastest growing white wine in America!

Why is Riesling so hot (and so cool) right now?

Wine lovers are rediscovering Riesling lately because they are looking for something clean and refreshing, with zippy fruit flavors and a range of styles that complements today's lighter, more health-conscious cooking. That's Riesling!

Riesling is immediately pleasing, even to new wine drinkers, because it's all about pure, fresh fruit, with no oak or high alcohol or heavy tannins. It's like biting into a perfectly ripe piece of fruit, such as a crisp, juicy apple. Intense fruit aromas leap out of the glass and complex flavors explode on your palate, followed by a racy, palate-cleansing juiciness.

What is it that makes Riesling so crisp and juicy?

It's the combination of ripe fruit and brisk acidity. Acidity is what gives an apple such a crisp taste, and it's the same with Riesling, which has naturally higher acidity than most other wine grapes. If you taste a Riesling that is mushy and sort of blah, that means it doesn't have good acidity, which is usually a result of picking it too late. It's the same as biting into an overripe apple that's gotten mushy from hanging on the tree too long.

I know that Rieslings should be chilled, but what's the ideal temperature for serving?

Riesling should definitely be chilled, but good Riesling doesn't need to be ice cold. If it's too cold, the aromas and flavors don't come out as well. Usually 45-50°F is about right, a temperature you can achieve with about 20 minutes in the fridge. Rieslings with sweetness are best when chilled to the lower end of that range; dry or well-aged Rieslings usually taste better when they're a few degrees warmer. Pour them chilled and let them warm in the glass until you find them most the expressive.

Should I only drink Riesling during hot weather?

A light, refreshing, properly chilled Riesling is just the thing for a warm summer afternoon, especially if it's a lower-alcohol Riesling with a bit of sweetness. But Riesling is always an excellent choice, no matter the weather, because it comes in such a wide range of styles, from light and delicate to strong and full-bodied. A light, fruity Riesling from Germany's Mosel Valley makes a wonderful apéritif for any occasion, even when you're huddled inside around the fire. For holiday ham, turkey and sweet potatoes, there's no better match than a zesty, full-bodied Riesling from Washington state, in the U.S.. And don't forget about the great dry Rieslings from around the world, which are ideal partners for many types of food.

I don't like sweet wines. Isn't Riesling always sweet?

No. One of the most fascinating attributes of the Riesling grape is that it has a singular ability to be made in an amazing range of sweetness levels, from bone dry to lightly sweet, to sticky sweet. This astonishing versatility, however, is what can make Riesling a bit confusing. It's not always easy to guess the sweetness of a particular Riesling just by looking at the label. Often, you need to know some foreign nomenclature (usually in German), or to have previous experience with the region or producer. But with some experimentation (lots of tasting), you can easily find a few producers whose styles you like. Then, when you really get hooked on Riesling (and you will), you can explore more deeply all the different styles from other winemakers.

But don't fear the sweet! Humans love sweetness because it tells us that the fruit was fully ripe and ready to eat when it was picked. The real key to it all is balance. If a wine has some sweetness in it, it needs to have the right balance of fruity intensity and acidity (see the "crisp and juicy" question, above). With the proper balance, even a very sweet wine will taste crisp and clean, not heavy and cloying.

Why do Rieslings sometimes smell sweet, but taste dry?

Riesling is a bold, aromatic grape. When it is young, its fruit aromas are very bright and fresh, which can give the impression of sweetness before you even taste the wine. It's not until it hits your tongue that you can confirm whether there is sweetness in the wine. To help avoid this confusion, some producers are now using a Riesling Taste Scale, developed by the International Riesling Foundation. You can learn more about it here: <http://www.drinkriesling.com/tastescale>.

Where in the world is Riesling grown?

Germany is the homeland of Riesling, and is still by far the largest producer, with 54,000 acres spread across 13 wine regions. In Europe, Alsace and Austria are also important Riesling regions. Australia is the second-largest source of Riesling in the world, with 10,000 acres, followed by rapidly growing Washington state, which now has 4,400 acres.

I've just discovered Riesling and really love it. Where has it been all my life?

Riesling has a very long history in Germany, where it's been around for centuries. No one knows for sure when it first appeared, but it was first documented in the 15th Century. It has always been recognized as a "noble" grape variety, meaning that it can make extraordinary wines of great elegance and character. In the 18th Century, it was decreed that the Mosel region should be planted only with Riesling, and by the beginning of the 20th Century, top Rieslings from Germany sold for higher prices than Grand Cru Bordeaux and Burgundy. But Riesling fell out of favor after World War II, when a flood of cheap, lifeless wines was dumped on the world market. In the past 20 years, however, there has been a strong resurgence of high-quality, distinctive Rieslings from many parts of the world, and the variety is once again getting the attention and appreciation it deserves.

Does a Riesling have to be expensive to be good?

The very best Rieslings from world-famous producers can be quite expensive, because of the enormous amount of work it takes to harvest the grapes from steep vineyards. It is also very labor-intensive to hand-select the fruit for the various ripeness levels that Riesling can produce, from dry to very sweet. The most rare, limited-production wines from individual vineyard sites will always be expensive. But, with today's improved vineyard practices and cellar techniques, it's easy to find many delicious, well-made Rieslings at everyday prices.

Why does Riesling from Washington taste different than German Riesling?

Every growing region has its own style and taste, due to many localized factors. The regional climate, the micro-climates of specific vineyards, the variety of soils, different farming methods, local cultural tastes, and individual winemaking techniques all play a part. In time, a recognizable regional style emerges, such as the light and delicate wines produced in the very cool, slate soil vineyards of Germany's Mosel Valley. Even within Germany there are striking differences in style between the regions that produce Riesling.

What kinds of foods can you pair with Riesling?

Just about everything! This is not an exaggeration. The staggering diversity of sweetness levels and regional styles means that it is possible to find a Riesling that will match the weight, texture and flavor profile of nearly any dish. For more on pairing Riesling with food, please see "4-Riesling Food Guide."

I've heard that Rieslings can age well. What do they taste like when they're old? How long can they age?

Because of its firm acid structure, Riesling can age longer than most other wines, red or white. Classic German Rieslings can still be amazing after 100 years. Not all wines are made to age that long, but the best Rieslings can have a very long life. They will generally reach their peak of maturity within 20 to 30 years, but properly stored, they will stay at their peak for decades before starting a long, gradual decline.

It's important to understand that a matured Riesling will not taste at all like a young wine. As they age, Rieslings lose that bubbly, bright primary fruit of their youth. This starts to happen within two to three years after bottling. Then there can be a muted period of six to 10 years where the wines are pleasant, but not as expressive as they will be when fully matured (a similar development is common with fine Pinot Noirs, especially from Burgundy). What they gain after this, however, is greater depth and complexity. They become drier to the taste, and they develop a stronger, more earthy expression of their

inherent minerality. Extremely old Rieslings take on the subtle, earthy aroma of a forest floor — the smell of moss, wet leaves and fresh mushrooms that the French call “sous bois.” In German, it is known as “Firne” (feer-neh).

Well-aged Rieslings can be extraordinary partners for food. For example, it is traditional in Germany to serve a really old Auslese with wild game dishes. The wine tastes drier at that age, but still has an earthy fruitiness to match the earthy-sweet taste of game meats, as well as the classic sauces and accompaniments, which often include currants and other fruits. A mature Auslese will also have the weight and texture to match a rich sauce, while maintaining Riesling’s magical ability to cleanse and refresh the palate.

If I wanted to hold on to some bottles of Riesling for a few years, how should I store them?

As with any wine, store them in a cool, dark space where there is minimal fluctuation in temperature. Ideal cellar temperature is around 50°F (10°C), but what’s more important is temperature stability. It’s fine if your cellar is a few degrees warmer (up to 60°F), as long as there is very little variation throughout the year.

Cork-finished bottles should be kept on their sides to keep the corks from drying out, which can lead to oxidation or leakage. Many bottlings of Riesling these days are done with screwcaps. These, obviously, don’t need to be stored on their sides. It is still not clear how long a screwcap Riesling can age, but experience so far shows that they remain brilliant and fresh much longer than cork-finished wines.

A friend of mine is a real wine fanatic. He’s always talking about Riesling and how you can taste the soil in it. What’s he talking about, and why would I want to taste dirt in my wine?

What he’s talking about is the concept of “terroir” (terr-wahr). This is a French word that literally means “soil.” But with wine, the term has come to mean the special taste that you get from a specific area or vineyard. The idea includes every aspect of a vineyard’s climate, soil structure, location, sun exposure, rainfall, air and water drainage, grape varieties and farming methods. You don’t actually taste the dirt, you taste the influence of the dirt and all the other unique aspects of a certain vineyard.

Can different soil types and growing conditions really affect the taste of Riesling?

There is great scientific debate about the validity of the “terroir” concept, because it’s difficult to quantify and measure the exact effects of so many variables. But there’s no question that you can taste the differences in the wines, without necessarily understanding what causes them. It is this connection to a specific piece of land, and the hands of the winemaker, that can make wine more than just a beverage with some booze in it. At its simplest, wine is a delicious fruit drink to enjoy on its own or with food. But for some people, tasting a great Riesling from a distinctive vineyard site and excellent vintage can be a profound sensory and intellectual experience. Not everyone gets this fanatical about wine, but those who do find it extremely rewarding.

I looked at a German wine label once and didn’t understand a thing except for the word “Riesling.” Why are these labels complicated?

German wine labels are actually quite logical once you understand a few German terms. There are really only five things you need to look for: vintage, variety, producer, ripeness level and vineyard name (if it’s a single-vineyard wine).

- The vintage and variety are easy to read, even if you don’t speak German.
- You can recognize the producer’s name because it is usually preceded by the word “Weingut” (vine-goot) which simply means, “wine estate.”
- On finer wines, you will also see the German ripeness (Prädikat) level, of which there are six, from ripest to lightest: Kabinett, Spätlese, Auslese, Beerenauslese, Eiswein and Trockenbeerenauslese (for further explanation, please see “#6: German Wine Basics”).
- Vineyard names usually consist of two words together — for example “Graacher Himmelreich.” The first word is the village name (Graach) — the “-er” after the name simply means the wine is from that village (it’s just like saying “New Yorker”). The second word is the name of the specific vineyard (Himmelreich), which in this case translates to “Kingdom of Heaven.”