

The Press Democrat

## Berger: Roundup at the Riesling Rendezvous

By DAN BERGER FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT on Monday, July 22, 2013

SEATTLE — Twenty-seven years ago during a visit to this attractive Washington city, I fantasized that it should have a logo. The one I came up with was a picture of a salmon debating whether to have a cup of coffee or a glass of riesling.

Not much has changed.

During that fourth Riesling Rendezvous, a symposium of more than three days' duration in 1986, I tasted some stunning salmon and perhaps 200 great rieslings, and saw people lined up outside the first Starbucks store.

On that visit, riesling was still a blip on the radar, and high-caliber coffee was yet to become the national splash it has become with foodies and other drink mavens. Today both are sailing along on waves of interest.

Riesling in particular has made enormous strides. Here are some well-recognized beliefs of that earlier period:

- All white wines should be consumed immediately; almost no white wines are any good with bottle age.
- Screwcapped wines are basically plonk and not very good.
- Riesling is sweet.

Today all three statements are widely known to be false. Today, classically made rieslings that have good acid and a low pH can easily age well, some gaining glorious flavors with time in a cellar. And some of the best are screwcapped, keeping oxygen at bay and protecting the fruit aromas of the wines inside.

But the greatest change regarding Riesling today is how dry it can be. Moreover, semi-sweet Riesling is better than ever, and sweet Riesling can be utterly sublime and superb.

At the Riesling Rendezvous here, sponsored by Chateau Ste. Michelle and Dr. Ernst Loosen of Germany, more than half the wines I tasted were either bone-dry or medium-dry, a term now widely used to describe wines that have a slight bit of sugar.

One topic discussed at the symposium was the continuing belief by many wine drinkers that Riesling remains sweet. Also discussed was the fact that there now exists a sweetness scale, used by many wineries on the back labels of Riesling bottles, to alert consumers to the perception of the sweetness inside.

The scale was developed by the 7-year-old, nonprofit International Riesling Foundation. Working with a number of winemakers, I drew up the scale and it now defines four general areas of sweetness — dry, medium-dry, medium-sweet, and sweet.

Winemakers can use the scale to describe any Riesling they make, and they can be assisted by technical guidelines that take into account not only the sugar in the wine, but the acid or pH as well. The parameters all play a role in the perceived sweetness of the wine. (The sweetness scale is on the IRF website, [www.drinkriesling.com](http://www.drinkriesling.com).)

For instance, a wine with 5% residual sugar after fermentation may be made with such high acidity that it is effectively dry. And a wine with only 0.6% residual sugar can have such low acidity that it is slightly sweet.

The scale now appears on millions of bottles of Riesling, but still only a fraction of Riesling producers around the world use it. At a blind tasting of 20 dry Rieslings on July 15, only five producers submitting wine used the scale.

In fact, many of the wines that didn't use the scale also didn't state anywhere on the label that the wine inside was dry. It's easy to see how such a failing could hurt sales: potential consumers seeing such wines on a shelf won't know what they're getting and will pick something else, about which more is known.

Wine of the week: 2012 Madrona Vineyards Dry Riesling, El Dorado County, Hillside Collection (\$18) — You don't find many Rieslings growing in the Sierra Foothills because it's generally thought of as too warm for the grape. But this winery is located at high altitude and cold nights keep the acids in the grape high, making this dry white wine a fascination with bright fruit and dramatic finishing acidity. (The pH is a very low 2.95). Superb wine.

Dan Berger lives in Sonoma County, where he publishes "Vintage Experiences," a weekly wine newsletter. Write to him at [winenut@gmail.com](mailto:winenut@gmail.com).

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