

germany riesling

The 11 facts you must know about German Riesling:

1. the German Wine Laws of 1971 codified a classification system based upon the ripeness of the grapes at harvest, as opposed to classifying terroir; in essence, they allow any vineyard to produce a *quality* wine.
The designations of quality are:
 - kabinett (harvested at 73° oechsle*)
 - spätlese (harvested at 85° oechsle)
 - auslese (harvested at 90° oechsle)
 - beerenauslese (harvested at 120° oechsle)
 - trockenbeerenauslese (harvested at 150° oechsle)
 - eiswein (harvested when grapes are frozen on the vine)
2. the parent grape of Riesling is Weisser Heunisch, a wild vine first formally cultivated by Attila the Hun and his wife, Tracey
3. because of the monks and their vows of hard work and heavy drinking, the great vineyards of Germany were developed between 900AD and 1800AD
4. the first written reference to Riesling was in 1435 in Hochheim
(the 1st spelling was ruesseling, then ruessling, then riesslingen and finally Riesling!)
5. in 1720, Schloss Johannisberg (an original monastic estate located in the Rheingau region) established the first monovarietal planting of Riesling
6. Clemens Wenzeslaus, the Prince Bishop of Trier, has the first Riesling stigmata, in 1787, after proclaiming on the high altar:
"this Riesling has electricity!"
7. in 1924, Rudolf Steiner told us to "become aware of one's humanity"; when you drink German Riesling, you become a better person.
How, you ask? Simply put, the wine has an absolute clarity and purity, tying us back to primordial man, when we were free of sin (well, at least that is what Pope Benedict told me in the confessional when I admitted to drinking something other than Riesling).
8. the German Wine Queen (now Julia Bertram) is the only true Queen
9. Riesling has extraordinary levels of tartaric acidity which gives power and weight to the wine
(without it, German wine would taste like new world chardonnay)
10. Germany has 61.4% of the world's Riesling vineyards
11. German Rieslings were once the most prized wines on the planet.
It is our obligation to have history repeat itself.

*oechsle: a method of measuring a grape's sugar content (each gram by which a litre of grape juice is heavier than a litre of water equates to 1° oechsle); functionally, the degree oechsle ÷ 8 = potential alcohol (i.e., 73° oechsle = 9.1° alcohol)



"Convictions are enemies of truth more dangerous than lies."

Friedrich Nietzsche

Okay, okay, so Nietzsche may not be Michael Broadbent,
but his insight offers hope that we can state unequivocally:

"German Rieslings are dry!"

So, what was this conviction that we held so dear for time immemorial?

Oh yeah, I know what it was: **"German Rieslings are always sweet."**

How wrong we were. Yes, we were influenced by that band of merry Liebfräumlch that blanketed the planet during the 1960s, '70s, '80s, but it has been relegated to the dustbin of the wine world along with Bacchus, port tongs, and turning oak into wine (aka, chardonnay). What we fail to acknowledge is that, historically, German Rieslings were almost always dry. Before WWI, Rieslings from the homeland remained in barrel for many years, allowing the fermentation to complete, insuring that almost all the sugar had been converted into alcohol and CO₂.

Only if there was noble rot in the vineyards would a truly sweet wine be made.

After WWII, however, the market did get flooded with sweet German wine.

This was due to two factors:

- sugar was expensive and sweet wine was an inexpensive source
- the introduction of sterile filtration allowed winemakers to cut the winemaking process short and get the wine into bottle and onto the market in months, as opposed to years

(the sterile filters removed the active yeasts, stopping fermentation and maintaining residual sugar)

What would be humorous if it weren't so sad is that many German winemakers made dry wines for the domestic market and sweet wines for the export market, believing that it would be what we wanted to drink.

So, once again, repeat after me:

German Rieslings are trocken!

What do we mean by trocken / dry?

-the definition of dry, in German terms, is under 9 grams of residual sugar / litre.

Considering that we detect 4 grams / litre and above, this may seem like a lot.

Just remember that the residual sugar is balanced with bone crushing acidity.

Also, please remember that the litre bottle of soda you are drinking has 106 grams of sugar / litre and it is the verboten high fructose corn syrup sugar that makes your teeth fall out and hair grow on your back.

A modern term to fully indicate a Trocken wine: **Grosses Gewächs** (or Großes Gewächs)

-the term was developed by the VdP (the most important winegrowers association in Germany) to designate a dry wine from a great growth vineyard (in the Rheingau Region, the term Erstes Gewächs is used). Since the term was not included in the Wine Laws of 1971, one cannot put Grosses Gewächs on the label (how confusing is this?!); the only indication you will see is G.G.

-even before 1971, the term *trocken* was not used on a label...

a producer would simply write *Natürlich*



Maybe the most asked question in the world is:

"Why did Paul Breitner not pull up his socks during the 1974 World Cup Final in Munich?"

After that, one generally asks:

"So why was the Messenger of the Archbishop of Fulda late in bringing permission to the grape pickers at Schloss Johannisberg in 1775?"

And then maybe, one would eventually ask:

"Are German Rieslings always sweet?"

Now, we know that is not the case, as fully, 60% of German Rieslings are fermented dry (to under 9 grams of residual sugar / litre). The key to understanding any wine is balance, and this is especially true when it comes to Rieslings from Germany; they are all about the balance of sweetness and acidity, and this balance generally rides on a razor's edge. No other wine growing area in the world can do what Germany does: consistently produce consistently great wines that are consistently balanced.

Now, how do we understand and appreciate wines like this?

-first, close your eyes

-second, think of a warm, fuzzy place

-third, remember how you felt when heard David Beckham was coming to America

-fourth, open your eyes and grab the nearest bottle of German Riesling and start gulping the stuff.

There is no diagram for mapping balance in wine.

There are no exact measurements of the myriad acids / sugars / enzymes / proteins / flavor crystals in wine that would allow one to craft balance in the laboratory.

So, how do you know balance:

it's the glory you experience when that smile erupts after your first taste.

Code Words on the Label to Indicate Über Balance

Kabinett – before the Wine Laws of 1971, the term Kabinett did not exist. However, the term Cabinet did exist and it referenced a wine of special quality that had been stored in the cellar (in a proverbial cabinet). The Wine Laws of 1971 borrowed this word and applied it to a wine made from grapes that were harvested at normal, healthy ripeness (no late harvesting or noble rot). The grapes are harvested at roughly 9.1 degrees potential alcohol.

And yes, a Kabinett Riesling will always have some residual sugar.

They are the vinous equivalent of Karl-Heinz Rummenigge...

fast, lithesome, dependable, built to play every day

Spätlese – first officially used after WWI, this term references wine made from grapes that were harvested after the normal harvest (the prefix *spät* translates as late). The potential alcohol in the wines is between 10 degrees and 11.5 degrees.* These wines definitely have residual sugar...but remember the acidity...it is crunchy!

Franz Beckenbauer is the perfect iteration of this style...

never has a more distinguished player ever walked on the pitch; über perfection.

*before 1925, a Spätlese wine might have between 10-25 grams of residual sugar. After WWII, the amount increased to between 20-40 grams of residual sugar and today we find the range between 65-100 grams. Is this the result of climate change or producers thinking they are catering to a specific market?

Halbtrocken – literally half-dry...the wine has less than 18 grams of residual sugar / litre as opposed to a trocken wine which has less than 9 grams. This term is rarely seen any more as producers believed the glass was ½ empty.

Feinherb – just when you thought that the Germans could not come up with another wine term, they go back to the lab and come up with this! It translates literally as "pleasantly bitter" and reference any wine between 18 – 45 grams of residual sugar. For most producers however, it replaced the *halbtrocken* term referenced above.

absolutely not trocken german riesling absolutely not trocken

The greatest wines in the history of mankind have all been sweet...

Christ at Cana with the amphorae...yep, sweet wine (he used süßreserve)

Galileo in Pisa...two lead balls and a glass of sweet wine

Prince composing *Purple Rain*...sweet wine on the guitar amp, with a cherry on the side

Sweet wine scares people, like the Sasquatch and goth music.

However, given a few uninterrupted moments of concentration,
the glory of these wines will be revealed.

And, once again, it is all about balance.

The measure of greatness in a sweet wine is not the amount of sugar
but the amount of acidity. And Riesling has enough acidity
to power Congress through an all-nighter of compromise and bi-partisan rhetoric.

While Germany did not make the first overtly sweet wine,
no wine region in the galaxy can achieve this consistent level of greatness.

Terms of Sweet Wine Endearment

Auslese – references a wine made from the “selected picking of late harvested bunches of grapes”. Before the 1971 Wine Law, the term was used to indicate a harvesting after the spätlese harvest or a selection of the sweetest spätlese bunches.

–these grapes are harvested at 90° oechsle, equaling a potential alcohol of 11°

Beerenauslese – now we are getting somewhere! This wine utilizes individually selected late harvested grapes...and yes, I mean picked grape by shriveled grape. If you think your job is hard (excluding Alaskan fishermen and Navy Seals), then get to Germany and offer your services this fall; your chiropractor will thank you.

–these grapes are harvested at about 120° oechsle, equaling a potential alcohol of 15°

Trockenbeerenauslese – oh lordy, now get thee to the vineyard and look for grapes affected by *botrytis cineria* and pick each grape individually. And don't mix them up with those simple, really late harvested grapes! The amount of TBA produced in any given year is barely enough to fit in an Ace of Spades Champagne bottle drunk by the Miami Heat. If you are lucky enough to ever drink one of these wines, the only greater pleasure in life might be a conversation with Jennifer Lopez...in a bubble bath.

–these grapes are harvested at 150° oechsle, equaling a potential alcohol of 19°

(personal note: I once enjoyed a TBA from the Rheingau region with over 500 grams of residual sugar. To state this another way, this wine was over 50% sugar! Talk about holy s*#t.)

Eiswein – simply put, the harvesting of grapes frozen on the vine results in an eiswein / icewine.

Since a grape is about 85% water, if it freezes on the vine one is left with über concentrated grape sugar; it is not easy to extract, however, unless you have the forearms of Conan, an ice pick, and a sledge hammer. These wines are not sweeter than a TBA (which are affected by noble rot and taste like it); they are just different.