

Riesling Report

The voice of Riesling

MARCH/APRIL 2002

Cellaring Riesling

Patience and careful selection find their reward



ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

The Saar's Egon Müller

Australia's Crawford River

www.rieslingreport.com

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Riesling for the ages

There's a lot to be said for maturity. With all of the attention lavished on kids these days – just about everything, it seems, is aimed at the youth market – it is warming to know that at least one thing old is still valued: that is well-aged wine. It's a marvelous gift of nature that we come to appreciate more and more as we get older ourselves. And best of all, we don't have to share it with those spoiled youngsters!

An entrancing, well-aged Riesling offers a meditative respite from the silly, frenetic pace of modern living. It carries us, body and soul, to a quieter place and time, lifting our spirits and engaging our innate sense of wonder. How, we ask, can such a simple fruit become such a magnificent collection of aromas, flavors and textural nuance?

On the other hand, there are times when we ask, how can such a noble little fruit turn into such a ghastly, unharmonious potion?

Not every mature wine is going to send us on a transcendent journey. Most wines, in fact, don't have a prayer of becoming something holy. Only wines that meet certain conditions of quality and origin will reward the patient cellar keeper.

Discovering those qualities that make up a cellar-worthy Riesling is part of the journey in the life of a confirmed Riesling lover. Happily, it is a fascinating and highly pleasurable journey.

—Kirk Wille, editor & publisher

Rating the wines

WINES ARE ASSESSED BASED ON THEIR perceived total potential lifespan. In an ideal world, prose would be sufficient, but we humans have a penchant for categorization and qualitative organization. Therefore, despite its flaws, we have chosen to include a numerical score in our notes, based on a hundred-point scale. *We stress that the text of the tasting notes is the matter of importance*, and that the score apart from the text is divested of meaning. A (+?) indicates the potential for an increased score.

Tasting notes are by individual tasters, and not composites of a panel. We document who is tasting the wine, where, and when the wine is being tasted, as all three of these elements are crucial to the context of the notes. In general, unless otherwise noted, all tasting notes are Peter's.

Because of extreme variability around the world, we have decided not to include prices, except for the German auction wines.

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

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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Australia's National Riesling Challenge

AUSTRALIANS TAKE THEIR RIESLING VERY SERIOUSLY.

In February, hundreds of Riesling lovers from Australia and New Zealand flocked to the Hyatt Hotel in Canberra to taste the wines and hear the results of the 2002 National Riesling Challenge. This year's Challenge (it is held every two years) drew entries from 103 wineries, representing 23 different regions from Western Australia to Tasmania to New Zealand. From the largest single assembly of Riesling in Australian history, judges awarded five trophies, eight gold medals, 13 silver medals and 36 bronze medals.

Ken Helm, chairman of the event, was impressed with the positive developments in quality that the judging revealed. "The overall quality of the entries was a vast improvement from the 2000 NRC and showed that winemakers were responding to the increasing demand by the consumer for quality Rieslings," he said. Wolf Blass, chairman of the judging panel, was also impressed. "The judging showed a wide range of styles of excellent quality. Judging was tight and the large number of award-winning wines shows that Australian and New Zealand Rieslings are leaders in the world." While these statements no doubt contain a bit of hyperbole borne on the wings of national pride, it cannot be denied that excellent Riesling is being made Down Under these days. These guys have a right to be proud.

Public events associated with the Challenge included a tasting of all the entries, as well as seminars on cooking with Riesling and the appreciation of aged Riesling. The tasting and seminars were sold-out events and Challenge organizers were elated at the response they received. To continue riding the high of the Challenge, efforts are underway to promote the top wines from each region in upcoming international wine shows, including the London Wine Trade Fair, Prowein in Germany and at Wine Australia 2002, for which a special Riesling exhibit is being developed.

The Winners

The five trophy winners are shown in the sidebar to the right. Listed below are all of the gold, silver and bronze medal winners.

NRC Gold Medal Winners

Richmond Grove, South Australia (3)
Yalumba Wines, South Australia
Babich Wines, New Zealand
Beringer Blass, South Australia
Sandleford Wines, Western Australia
Orlando Wines, South Australia



Judges for the National Riesling Challenge were (from left): Alan Dineen, Western Australian national judge and a wine retailer; Louisa Rose, senior white-winemaker at Yalumba Wines, South Australia; Wendy Stucky, senior white-winemaker at Beringer Blass Wines, South Australia; Wolf Blass, chairman of judges; Huon Hooke, a leading wine journalist from Sydney; Astrid Müllers, a top sommelier from Köln, Germany; Phillip John, chief national wine judge and a wine consultant; and Ken Helm, chairman of the National Riesling Challenge.

NRC Trophy Winners

Best Riesling

Richmond Grove Wines
(Orlando Wine Company)
Watervale Riesling 1998

Best Current Vintage Riesling

Beringer Blass Wine Estates,
Wolf Blass Riesling 2001

Best 1999/2000 Riesling

Richmond Grove Wines,
Limited Release Riesling 2000

Best Museum Riesling

Richmond Grove Wines,
Watervale Riesling 1998

Best Canberra District Riesling

Gidgee Estate Wines,
Janette Murray 2001 Riesling

NRC Silver Medal Winners

Yalumba Wines, Barossa Valley (2)	Brown Bros., Milawa Victoria (2)
Palandri Wines, Western Australia	Grant Burge Wines, Western Australia
Gidgee Wines, Canberra District	Beringer Blass, South Australia
Brian Barry Wines, Clare Valley	Pokolbin Estate, Hunter Valley
Vasse Felix, Margaret River	Selaks Wines, New Zealand
BRL Hardy Wine Company, Reynella South Australia	

NRC Bronze Medal Winners

Orlando Wines, South Australia (5)	Delatite Wines, Mansfield Victoria (2)
Beringer Blass South Australia (2)	Bests Wines, Great Western Victoria
Hamilton Wine Group, South Australia	Forrest Estate, Renwick New Zealand
Mitchelton Wines, Nagambie Victoria	Jacobs Creek, South Australia
Richmond Grove, South Australia	Yalumba Wines, Barossa Valley
Helm Wines, Canberra District	Ferngrove Wines, Frankland Western Australia
Taylor's Wines, Clare Valley	Chain of Ponds, Adelaide Hills
McWilliam Wines, New South Wales	Olssens of Watervale, South Australia
Crabtree of Watervale, South Australia	Penna Lane Wines, Clare Valley
Reillys Wines of Clare Valley	Goundrey Wines, Mt. Barker Western Australia
Villa Maria Estate, New Zealand	Grove Mill Wines, Adelaide Hills
Moorilla Estate, Tasmania	Seifried Estate, New Zealand
Chatto Wines Cessnock, New South Wales	Yunbar Estate, Barossa Valley
Babich Wines, New Zealand	BRL Hardy Wines, Reynella South Australia
Cellarmaster Wines, Australia	Peter Lehmann Wines, Barossa Valley

Riesling in Vancouver

The 2002 Vancouver Playhouse International Wine Festival, which runs for a week in April, will have a special emphasis on wines from Germany. Among the 150 participating wineries from all over the world will be a sizable contingent of German producers, eager to show their stuff. Several German-themed events have been developed with the help of the Canadian office of the German Wine Information Bureau.

Robert Joseph, editor of the British magazine *Wine*, will lead an exploration of German Riesling and its aging potential in a seminar called "Riesling Renaissance." This is the latest in a flurry of "Riesling Renaissance" events that have taken place in North America recently. Perhaps if people see it enough times, and if we say it often enough, it will actually come to be true.

Another intriguing seminar, also led by Joseph, is titled "News from the Continent – German and Portuguese Revelations." Here, Joseph will share his recent discoveries from these two countries at opposite ends of the European wine map, from Bassermann-Jordan to Taylor Fladgate. There will also be a special seminar on German Eiswein.

The annual festival was founded in 1979 (with *one* winery) as a fund-raiser for the Vancouver Playhouse Theatre Company and has become one of the major wine festivals in North America. It is designed to appeal to wine lovers of all interest levels. General tastings events offer the casual fan the opportunity to taste more than 600 wines. The more serious among us can enjoy specialized varietal and vertical tastings, as well as wine-with-food events.

In addition to the public events, the festival provides members of the wine trade with separate, professional-level educational and tasting opportunities.



Vancouver's striking convention center will be the primary site for the 2002 Vancouver Playhouse International Wine Festival.

Festival Information

**Vancouver Playhouse
International Wine Festival**
 April 22 – 28, 2002
 Vancouver Convention and
 Exhibition Centre
 999 Canada Place,
 Downtown Vancouver
 Tel (604) 873-3311
www.winefest.mybc.com

Ice Wine is Hot!

CHESTNUTS ARE ROASTING BY THE OPEN FIRE. The stockings are hung by the chimney with care. Jolly old St. Nick is on his way and you're just sitting down to get a little jolly yourself with a nice hot cup of Glühwein. Then you get the call. The temperature is dropping fast and it looks like the icewine harvest is about to happen. You bundle yourself up as best you can, leave your cozy fire behind, and trundle off to the vineyards long before sunrise for several shivering hours of picking frozen grapes. That's the life of an icewine harvest crew, and it's becoming a more and more common scene around the world.

Icewine (Eiswein in German, pronounced "ICE-vine") is fast becoming one of the hottest pieces of the dessert-wine pie. The bright, refreshing fruit and bold, palate-gripping intensity of a well-made icewine, especially from Riesling, pack a one-two punch that cannot be resisted. Even the most inexperienced wine drinker lights up like a Christmas tree at the first exhilarating sip of an icewine. It doesn't take 30 years of tasting wine to appreciate the supreme concentration of fruit and laser-fine focus that are the defining characteristics of any top-notch icewine.

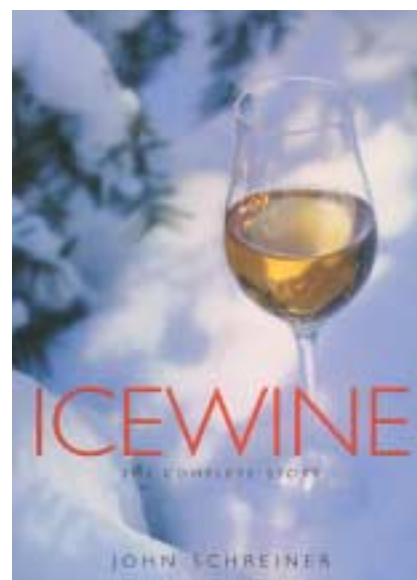
In the United States, you can always tell that something is about to cross the threshold of the collective cultural consciousness when it is reported on in the venerable pages of *The Atlantic Monthly*, one of my favorite publications for many years. In the December 2001 issue, veteran food writer Corby Kummer writes about the rising fame of icewines from Ontario, Canada. In his view, there is a simple reason for this. "Ice wine offers the sweetest, most intense concentration of grape flavor available in a bottle," he says. I certainly won't argue with him.

German Eiswein has been around for centuries, but in most cases it was only produced by luck or accident. It wasn't until the late 1960s that a systematic approach was developed by Dr. Hans Ambrosi at the Staatsweingut in Rheingau. Since Ambrosi's pioneering work with site selection, protective plastic sheeting and vinification techniques, German Eiswein production has become a more reliable process, although still quite dependent upon the whims of weather. In Canada, the cooler climate has allowed winemakers to increase icewine production substantially. While top Eiswein specialists in Europe are thrilled if they get 500 liters in a vintage, Canada's top producer, Inniskillin, bottled 135,000 liters of true icewine in 1998.

Icewine has definitely arrived, and this new book by Canadian wine writer John Schreiner is the first to recount the tale of its centuries-long journey. With a very casual and approachable writing style, Schreiner weaves the history of icewine and its many important proponents, such as Ambrosi, the Mosel's Dirk Richter, Heidi Schröck from Austria, and Canadians Walter Hainle, Karl Kaiser and Donald Ziraldo.

In its scope, Schreiner's ground-breaking book is impressively comprehensive. It opens with a brief history of icewine production, not failing to mention the luke-warm reception that modern icewines received from the wine press in the 1960s and '70s. The sections that follow dive into the specifics of icewine production in the most important geographic areas, starting with Germany and Austria.

The North American section quite rightly focuses on Canada, with a very thor-



ICEWINE: The Complete Story

By John Schreiner

Warwick Publishing 2001

344 pages

US \$20

Order online at:

www.planitvancouver.com

Select "Featured Writers" from the home page.

ough discussion of the modern developments there that have made that country the largest producer of icewine in the world. Lastly comes a catchall section that rounds up less prominent icewine producers from Croatia to New Zealand.

It is obvious that Schreiner made extensive winery visits throughout the icewine-producing world, and each section includes encapsulated descriptions of the main icewine producers in the region. There is no attempt to rate these producers in terms of relative quality. Each is presented simply in light of its experiences in making icewine. Schreiner leaves it to the reader to discover which producers merit genuine consideration from the serious icewine drinker.

This is commendably fair and unbiased, but the result is that it can be somewhat misleading. It's analogous to the German Prädikat system, which implies that Spätlese is of the same quality no matter who produced it. Or, worse, that an Auslese from a bad winemaker must, by definition, be better than a basic QbA from a leading estate. Helmut Dönnhoff, for example, one of our most revered German Eiswein magicians, gets far fewer column inches than Louis Guntrum, a medium-quality producer. Guntrum's Eiswein can be pleasant to drink, but wouldn't stand a chance against the piercing, penetrating, mind-blowing power of Dönnhoff's beauties. It's a minor complaint, however. It only requires that when you read this book you must keep in mind that these descriptions are more indicative of the estate's length of involvement with icewine (or, perhaps, the length of Schreiner's visit to them) than with their fundamental quality.

There is one glaring omission: The Ruwer's von Schubert estate (Maximin Grünhaus) is not mentioned at all. This is not an insignificant oversight. We consider von Schubert to be among the finest Eiswein producers on earth, and Dr. Carl von Schubert has been very active in developing the use of micro-porous plastic sheeting to protect Eiswein grapes from birds, botrytis and bad weather.

In spite of these quibbles, this book remains a valuable history and reference work. When you are done reading it, you will know more about the joys and disappointments of icewine than you could possibly imagine there was to know. And you'll be amazed at just how much excellent icewine is being made these days.

Any discussion of icewine production will inevitably lead to the debate over natural versus cryogenic winemaking. Schreiner deftly threads this theme throughout the book in his many quotes from the winemakers he interviewed. It comes down as a nearly religious article of faith that natural wines are naturally superior for their finesse, elegance and expressive power. (Canada, like the European countries, does not allow the use of cryogenic production.) While artificially frozen grapes can produce a pleasing drink, most winemakers agree that they cannot achieve the greatness of the real thing.

Frankly, it's a little difficult to see why this should be true. If the grapes have the right combination of ripeness, maturity and acidity, what does it matter how they were frozen? The difference seems to be the tension wrought of uncertainty and the preciousness that comes with scarcity. Natural icewines are more interesting and fulfilling at their fundament because of the loving toil and acceptance of probable failure that goes into their creation.



Eiswein grapes hang in one of the vineyards of the Selbach-Oster estate in the Mosel Valley, patiently awaiting a night cold enough (at least -8°C) to freeze them solid.

"TBA and BA are like serious classical music, but Eiswein is like jazz, jumping and dancing on your palate."

— Johannes Selbach,
Weingut Selbach-Oster

Eiswein Harvest – a firsthand account

AS THEY SAY, THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME for the holidays. I've been living in the United States for well over 15 years now, but I still like to go back to my home town on the Mosel at Christmas to share that festive time with family and old friends. There's a lot of catching up to do, so I spend a lot of time in my mother's cozy, compact living room talking late into the evening with her, my sister and the steady stream of visitors who stop by. That's exactly what I was doing this past December 23, when the phone rang.

It was another old friend, Johannes Selbach (of Selbach-Oster), on the line. "Sorry to be calling so late," he said, "but it looks like we're going to get another good freeze tomorrow. You want to help pick some Eiswein grapes?" The wheels in my brain were spinning. In all the years of picking grapes as a youngster growing up in this vine-laden valley, I had never been part of an Eiswein harvest. As a member of the wine trade, it sure seemed like an experience I should have. But another part of my brain was screaming, "Don't do it! It's gonna be c-c-cold!" Then another part of my brain said, "Sure it'll be cold. But you've been cold before, so what. Have you ever picked Eiswein before?" The answer was no, so I said yes.

Immediately I ran up into the attic to see if any of my warm, old work clothes were still lying around. I found some and was relieved to find that they still fit me. Prepared for the cold, I turned in for the evening so I would be able to get up before Johannes came knocking at 5 a.m. In the predawn gloom and cold we gathered together the 20-person picking crew and made our way to the Bernkasteler Badstube vineyard. I was struck by how quiet it was. No cars, no tourists, no sight-seeing boats. Just a snow-covered vineyard, the glare of a few work lights going up and the hushed breathing of my fellow workers.

This was the second round of Eiswein for the Selbach-Oster estate. Like most other producers in the area, they had taken in a good amount of frozen grapes on December 12 and 13. But they didn't have time to get them all, so this one vineyard had been left out, hoping for another deep freeze. That it came on the morning of Christmas Eve was not troubling to anyone. Moselites are quite used to this kind of thing. In fact, Christmas Eiswein is regarded as a sign of good fortune. When we started, the temperature was -12°C and the grapes were frozen solid. This was going to be something extraordinary.

It took only an hour for this experienced crew (and me) to gather in all the grapes. Picking went quickly because all you needed to do was touch the bunches and the grapes would fall into your bucket. Most of the crew then went back home, but I really wanted to see how they were going to get juice out of these rock-hard berries. Back at the winery, the presses had been moved outdoors to keep everything as cold as possible. We filled three presses and about an hour later, a little trickle of juice started. The cellar master was as anxious as the rest of us to measure the must weight. Off the scale of the spectrometer, a bit of quick lab work confirmed a must weight of 230° Oechsle, one of the highest ever on the Mosel!

From the three presses, Selbach got just 100 liters of precious Eiswein juice. This will be a very special wine, indeed, and I am thrilled that I was a part of it. I am so glad I said yes when opportunity (and Johannes) called.



Ewald Moseler is a good friend of ours who works as an importer and champion of German and Austrian wines here in the Pacific Northwest. In fact, it is through him that we have met many of the winemakers we know.

When he told me this Eiswein story, I asked him to let me include it because it fits so well with the *Icewine* book review on the preceding pages.

The Rewards of Cellaring Riesling

IT IS SURPRISING TO ME how firmly entrenched an edict of the conventional wisdom can become in the public mind. For most wine drinkers, the idea of a mature wine conjures up the image of an old red wine, probably a fine old claret, gathering dust in some English aristocrat's damp and moldy cellar. The notion that a white wine could age as long, or longer, receives not one synaptic pulse in the collective brain. Somehow, in spite of many generations of wine writers who have heartily extolled the virtues of well-aged Riesling (and Chenin Blanc), the average wine consumer today has a very simplistic view of the subject. I blame television, where rare wines are always 1929 Château Mouton-Rothschild and Champagne is always Dom Pérignon (although currently losing audience share to Perrier-Jouët's photogenic *Fleur de Champagne* bottle).

We would like to add our voices to the ancient chorus and offer up these arguments, inducements and pleas for better understanding of the mature Riesling issue. We realize that, as readers of *Riesling Report*, you decidedly are *not* among the ranks of "average wine consumers" referred to above. We also acknowledge that you may very well know a lot more about aged Riesling than we do (in which case, we definitely need to get together with you sometime soon). But we felt it was time to address this subject and, thus, we plunge headlong into these tricky waters.

Is mature Riesling really worth the wait?

Wine appreciation is an intrinsically subjective activity, making it nearly impossible for two people to be in complete agreement about a particular wine or even an aspect of wine. But it is possible, I believe, to state certain generalities, even if there remain divergent opinions on the ultimate value of those general statements. To say, for example, that a wine becomes more complex as it ages can, with certain conditions concerning quality and provenance, generally be agreed upon. But a statement like that begs the question by assuming that the complexity a wine gains with age will necessarily bring a deeper, more profound sense of enjoyment to all who taste it. Even among experienced wine tasters, that is decidedly not the case.

Nevertheless, history records that older wines have always been highly prized – and the older, the better. Why should it be any different with Riesling today? "Hardly any other variety has the aging potential of Riesling," says Wilhelm Haag of Weingut Fritz Haag on the Mosel. "What this variety in old age unfolds in aroma, bouquet of fruit, ripeness and elegant acidity, paired with a naturally fruity sweetness, is unique and thrills me every time..." So it's that pure sensual thrill we're after in mature wines?

Well, yes, but let Wilhelm finish: "...because the vintage is reflected in the wine and the unique style of each vintage becomes more concentrated with time." On top of the pure pleasure of drinking mature Riesling comes the intellectual engagement of comparing and contrasting vintage character. Plus, there's a histor-



There is nothing wrong with laying down a wine, even from a so-so vintage, just because it is from someone's birth year (yes, this was mine). It makes a birthday celebration all the more special.

ical element that comes into play. Uncorking an older wine is like opening a time portal to the past. Despite what we saw on Star Trek (more television!), we cannot transport our physical selves into the past, but in our minds we can visit the winemakers and relive the historical events of days gone by. Long-celled wines are the conduit through which this internal travel is possible.

Bernhard Breuer, of Weingut Georg Breuer in the Rheingau, expresses a further dimension to the joys of drinking mature Rieslings. “They become more subtle and more characteristic of their vineyard site,” he says. Vineyard variation, then, is another opportunity for the intellect to work in concert with the olfactory pleasure center. And it’s not just Germans who think this way. “Young Riesling mainly shows the varietal fruit,” says Marc Beyer of the Léon Beyer estate in Alsace, “whereas matured Riesling shows a much more complex nose and taste, bringing out the terroir.”

But man does not live by drink alone. Bernhard Breuer adds yet another reason to drink older Rieslings: “They match easier with good food and have a broader spectrum of aromas and tastes,” he says. Young and fruity Rieslings are wonderful companions to the spicy “fusion” cuisines that are so prominent these days, especially here on the West Coast of the United States. But there is nothing quite like the lovely harmony of a fully mature Riesling Auslese paired with classic European preparations – wild game in particular.

So far, we’ve thrilled the senses, we’ve engaged the mind and we’ve nourished the body. What more can we ask of a well-aged Riesling, short of requesting spiritual counsel? Not a bad idea. Riesling’s ability to guide us to our spiritual center should not be underestimated. Terry These, a well-known U.S. importer and Riesling prophet, says, “What I love most about such wines are their intricacy, length and tenderness. At best they are like an otherworldly elixir. The great ones still have a kind of youthful lift and ripple, below which their damnable complexities unfold with a grandeur as quiet as it is profound. It’s that quiet that takes me past the level of mere appreciation into a kind of mystical awe.”

There are many reasons to be patient and wait for a Riesling to mature naturally in the bottle. If nothing else, they simply taste good, with developed flavors coming to the fore that no young wine can provide. Wine’s ability to age gracefully, even purposefully, makes it unique among the liquids we drink, and its long history as a sacramental beverage has bound it securely to the human heart.

Riesling’s stages of development

Winemakers often speak of their wines as they would speak of their children, and the comparison is apt. Individual wines have distinct personalities, born of vintage, vineyard and style. They grow and develop much like children. Dr. Manfred Prüm, current father figure at Joh. Jos. Prüm, has developed an entire sociological construct relating his wines to human beings. It makes a lot of sense, and goes something like this: As infants, his Mosel Rieslings are bubbly and charming, but without definition. Their distinct features are blunted by “baby fat.” As toddlers, they start to become a bit troublesome and, as they enter their “teen” years, they become downright defiant and totally incomprehensible. Eventually



Fruit from a proven vineyard site, such as the Grand Cru Brand vineyard in Alsace, is one of the key elements in producing an age-worthy Riesling.

they start to really grow up and become handsome, articulate young adults. From there, they grow more gradually and steadily into fully realized adults, filled with contentment and a greater understanding of the world – someone with whom you can have a long, meaningful conversation. A healthy and happy mature Riesling will keep its vigor for many years before the effects of old age begin to tell, and even then the remaining years will be lived out in grace and dignity.

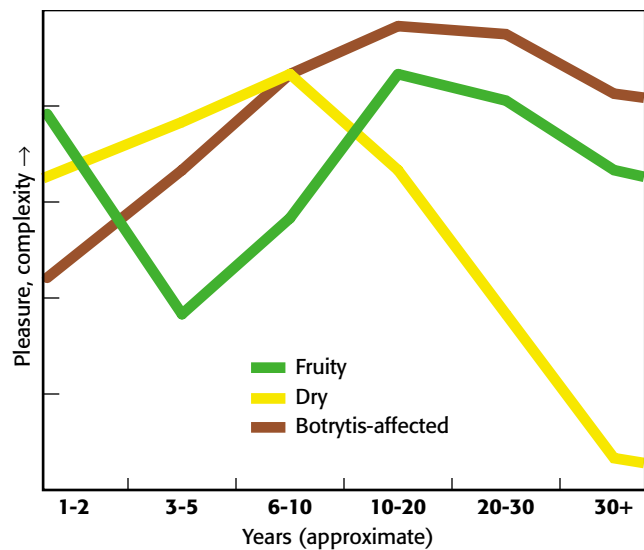
That, at least, is the general (and hoped for) path that his wines will take. How individual wines uniquely weather the journey into old age is just as diverse and mysterious as with humans – each according to his gifts.

But back to the generalities. Newly minted Rieslings have an abundance of primary fruit that makes them particularly attractive to drink in the first year or two after harvest. These are the wines that win people over to the variety in the first place. This young allure is especially pronounced in the *lieblich*, or fruity, style of German Riesling made with residual sweetness to balance the naturally high acidity. The prime examples are the wines of the Mosel, Saar and Ruwer.

After the first year or two, however, these wines typically lose their primary fruit and, much like Burgundy, enter into a “dumb” phase for about five years. You can certainly drink them during these years, but they will be unrewarding, often harshly out of balance, and definitely uninspiring. But, aside from educated guesswork, there’s really no way of knowing exactly when one of these wines will emerge from its mute chrysalis, unfolding its colorful butterfly wings. No way, that is, aside from tasting it occasionally to gauge its progress – kind of like reviewing a child’s report card.

Once they begin to open up again, the slow, steady development of secondary aromas and flavors can go on for decades, depending on the constitution of the wine in question. The palette of available aromas at this stage is quite broad and nuanced, varying considerably from region to region, vineyard to vineyard. German *lieblich* wines tend not to exhibit as much of the notorious “petrol” (an abhorrent term to me, but one with which, unfortunately, we are all familiar) in the nose. Rather, as they get older and older, they take on a unique smell that the Germans call *Firne* (FEER-neh). This is usually translated as “maderized,” but I believe it to be much more than the “good” oxidation that gives Madiera its nutty complexity. *Firne* expresses itself as a delicate and subtle evocation of forest floor after a light rain – an enveloping bouquet of mushroom, wet moss and wet stone. In great wines, it enhances, rather than inhibits, the essence of its origins.

Dry wines from Germany are a different story. Most are being made in a modern style, and it’s too soon to tell how well they will age. As it is now, they have more subdued primary fruit in their youth and seem to show a more steady upward development. Once they reach their peak, however, they tend to drop off more quickly, leaving mostly alcohol and acidity, with no fruit to balance them. Most growers I talked to recommend drinking their dry wines within five to 10 years of harvest. There are exceptions, of course (Breuer and Koehler-Ruprecht come to mind), and I think there will be more in the future as winemakers learn that making dry Riesling is fundamentally different than making *lieblich* wines. It’s more than just picking the same grapes and fermenting them longer.



How Riesling Ages

Please don’t be fooled by the pseudo-scientific look of this graph. This is only a visual approximation of how the three main types of traditional German Riesling will fare over a 30-year time period. Most good-quality wines will follow this general path, but individual wines will take the journey at their own pace, sometimes faster, sometimes much slower.

Botrytis-affected wines are yet another story. Often they are very unpleasant when young, undergoing a slow steady upward development that brings them to a drinkable state after a few years. It takes them much longer to reach their full potential, but after that, they will live for decades. There seems to be a direct correlation between must weight and longevity – the higher the ripeness, the slower they mature and the longer they live (assuming good acid balance).

In Alsace, top-class Rieslings from the best vineyard sites can be appreciated when they are young, but they really need five or six years in the bottle to show their true selves. The strong terroirs of Alsace, discernable in young wines, are much more rewarding, memorable and fully expressed when the wine has had some years to ruminate. The finest wines become ever more layered in depth and complexity, with a corresponding evolution in texture. It can take upwards of 15 years for the petrol aroma to subside and the fruit to return, transformed into secondary aromas of toasted bread, hay and honey.

Rieslings from the New World are also showing some promise of ageability. But here, as with the modern generation of dry Rieslings from Germany and Austria, it is too soon to say just how long they will go. Certainly the best will age beautifully for 10 to 15 years. (Some Austrian winemakers feel that Grüner Veltliner, not Riesling, may prove to be their most long-lived variety.)

A recent tasting of Rieslings from Dr. Frank's Vinifera Wine Cellars in New York's Finger Lakes region showed that examples going as far back as 1962 still had excellent structure and surprising elegance. Australian Rieslings, renowned for their pronounced lime character and firm acidity, definitely need a few years to settle down (we've found that many young Australian Rieslings are much better after being open for a few days), and will easily age well for 10 years or more.

The elements of an age-worthy Riesling

The main factors that influence the ageability of a wine are vintage, vineyard and producer. These are the three elements that you should always consider when buying wine anyway, whether for laying down or for immediate drinking. Vintage plays a huge role in the longevity of a wine. Interestingly enough, some very highly touted vintages (such as 1976 in Germany) are not surviving as well as vintages they overshadowed (such as 1975). Massive ripeness alone does not make a great wine for the ages. It has to be balanced with good acidic structure if it's going to last. A great vineyard site, with excellent exposure for ripeness and mineral-rich soil for structure, provides the best of both. After that, it's up to the winemaker.

It is possible, however, for a lesser vintage to produce a good wine. It's a matter of the other two factors taking up the slack. In 1982, for example, a dismal year by all accounts, Joh. Jos. Prüm made an astonishing Gold Capsule Auslese from the great Wehlener Sonnenuhr vineyard (the 'regular' Auslese is also not bad). At Prüm, an outstanding vineyard and meticulous vineyard work made up for the shortcomings of the weather that year.

It is also possible for a lesser estate, with lesser vineyards, to produce a wine that will age beautifully, at least for the short term. I recently tasted a delicious



Vintage is another important element in the longevity of a wine. While not as highly praised in its youth, the 1975 vintage has, in most cases, outlived the 'legendary' 1976 vintage.

1992 Spätlese, for example, from a tiny, virtually unknown grower on the Mosel. While it lacked the obvious breed and sophistication of J. J. Prüm, it was nonetheless a very pleasing and satisfying wine, primarily because of a silky, softened mineral texture. Fine, ripe acidity had kept it fresh and lively.

The influence of the winemaker cannot be overstated. The best see their role as simply the means by which the fruit of the vine finds its way into the bottle. They do as little as possible, and as naturally as possible. These are usually the wines that have the best chance of aging well. At the Maximin Grünhaus estate, for instance, Dr. Carl von Schubert makes all of his wines – the QbAs included – with the idea that they will age for at least 30 years. “For me, the perfect wine for dinner is a mature Riesling,” he says, “and the cheapest wine for aging is a good QbA Riesling.” Bernd Philippi of Koehler-Ruprecht is another hands-off winemaker whose Rieslings are very long lived. In fact, he doesn’t even release his big, dry Auslesen until he feels they’ve had enough bottle time to start showing well. His 1998 Kallstadter Saumagen Riesling Auslese trocken ‘R’ won’t be released until 2004.

Another good example of winemaker influence can be seen at Reichsrat von Buhl. In the few years he’s been there, winemaker Frank John has had a profound impact on the quality of the wines. This is immediately apparent when comparing a wine from a good recent vintage, like 1998, to a good pre-John vintage, such as 1989. The older wines lack the concentration and finesse of the new style, and show evidence of careless selection at harvest and unclean winemaking.

In terms of things that can be measured empirically, ripeness, level of extract and natural acidity seem to be the most important factors. Without full ripeness, a wine will be thin from the very beginning and will never develop. High extract comes with physiological ripeness and carries the signature of the vineyard. If the character of the vineyard does not survive, the resulting wine will be lifeless and uninteresting. “I am most attracted to older wines in which I can still perceive what made them attractive in their youth,” says David Schildknecht, who writes for the *International Wine Cellar*, as well as *Wine & Spirits*.

Acidity, properly balanced by residual sugar, is what keeps a wine fresh and engaging for many decades. “One thing I like about great mature Riesling,” says long-time Riesling collector (and *Riesling Report* subscriber) Maureen Nelson, “is its ability to convey the complexity wine can achieve as it ages with freshness.” A less glamorous component of the freshness factor is the use of sulfur dioxide, an absolute necessity that the Europeans have no problem with. Winemakers in the United States are more hesitant to use this preservative, and you can see the results in the many lifeless wines that don’t last more than a few years.

External factors also can affect how a wine develops. The single most important of these factors is storage temperature. Optimum storage temperature is around 10–12°C (50–55°F). If wines are kept too warm, their development will be accelerated. Unfortunately, this is a condition found in far too many wholesale warehouses and retail storage rooms, so it’s important to know how a wine has been stored before it comes to you.

Stocking your Riesling cellar

There’s a lot of wine out there and, as you know, most of it is not built to last. But, as noted above, if you stick with good vintages from great vineyards and reliable producers, you can hardly go wrong. Remember, too, that many less-than-legendary wines can age well for mid-term drinking, and can be quite affordable. As



The third critical factor in determining the longevity of a wine is the dedication and talent of the winemaker. When you put yourself in the caring hands of an exacting craftsman, such as Bernhard Breuer, your chances of finding an age-worthy wine are very good.

with an investment portfolio, you want to be diversified, with some wines you can drink young (because they really are delicious when fresh and fruity), some to drink in five to seven years, and others to lay down for the long haul.

Most of all, follow your own palate and don't worry so much about making a mistake. There's no need to get all worked up because some wine magazine says a certain Riesling will only be good to drink from 2001 to 2005. It's not going to expire on January 1, 2006. That is just some wine writer's estimate, and very likely could be wrong. As David Schildknecht (yes, he's a wine writer, too) points out, winemaking techniques and technology have changed so much in recent years that any attempt to predict how a wine will develop is purely speculative.

We can be a little more sure with the long-established estates of Germany, but overall it's a lot of guesswork. Schildknecht has the right attitude. "It doesn't worry me that we don't know how most wines vinified today will age, since there have never before in my wine drinking lifetime been so many successful and delicious young Rieslings as there are now," he says. "Those who (as I do) get excited by seeing how wines change over time will squirrel away a little of darned near every really impressive young Riesling they encounter."

It's never too late to start building your Riesling cellar. Wonderful, age-worthy wines abound and, since fine Rieslings are still a minor curiosity to the majority of the wine-drinking public, they also are good values (except, perhaps, for that Egon Müller TBA on page 14). Plus, you can always give your cellar a kick-start by acquiring mature wines from reputable retailers who understand their value. The best one I know of in the United States is Dee Vine Wines in San Francisco (www.dvw.com). Their list includes a *Schatzkammer* ("treasure chest") section with German wines from every decade of the 20th century.

Unlike a stock portfolio, however, the success of your Riesling cellar isn't going to determine your quality of life in retirement. It will only enhance it, bringing endless pleasure and the joy of discovery. An occasional disappointment will not bring on another Enron collapse. It will only make you appreciate the true gems all the more. Wine drinking is, after all, about pleasure, not profit.

Drink it up

Speaking of pleasure, keep a couple of things in mind when you are ready to open one of your carefully selected, lovingly stored treasures. The first, pointed out by reader Maureen Nelson, is that "older Rieslings require time in the glass to show well." In other words, give it some time to open up, just as you would an old Bordeaux. Riesling likes a slow pace. It is slow to ripen, it often ferments at a nearly glacial pace, it develops slowly in the bottle and it wants time in the glass. This is not the time to be in a hurry. This, of all times, is when you want to linger, to revisit, to ponder and to wonder at the marvel in your glass.

Second and last, don't forget what Bernhard Breuer and Carl von Schubert had to say. Mature Rieslings are wonderful wines for food. With their deeper, fuller texture and nuanced flavors, they come into wonderful accord with traditional continental cuisine. Don't be afraid to try them with meat dishes and rich sauces. Being the nimble Rieslings they are, they also work well with modern cuisines that focus on purity of flavor and fresh local ingredients.

As always, let your palate be your guide. But free your mind of the conventional wisdom and give your palate a chance to develop and grow right along with the Rieslings in your cellar.



Before Germany's 1971 Wine Law, it was not uncommon to see the terms *Cabinet* and *Spätlese* on the same label. The *Cabinet* designation (now "Kabinett") was the equivalent of a "Reserve" bottling for this late harvest (*Spätlese*) Riesling. The term *Naturrein* means "naturally pure," referring to the fact that this wine was made with naturally ripe grapes and no chaptalization.

The Scharzhof Estate of Egon Müller

THE SCHARZHOF IS THE HOUSE IN which Egon Müller and his family reside. It is located just east of the tiny Saar wine village of Wiltingen, on the road to Oberemmel. With their mighty and sophisticated dessert wines from the renowned Scharzhofberg vineyard, the Müller family has made a regular practice of setting auction records. Most recently (as reported in the November/December 2001 issue of *Riesling Report*), the estate set yet another record at last year's "Grosser Ring" auction in Trier with its 1994 Scharzhofberger Riesling Trockenbeerenauslese, which sold for DM7800 (about \$3,700) per bottle. But there's more to this top-class estate than record-breaking rarities. There's a long history and even some 'regular' wines that normal people can afford.

A painting in the foyer of the Scharzhof was created by Röchling, the second husband of Müller's great-grandmother. It depicts the French garrison, which temporarily occupied Saarbrücken during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, over-enjoying some of the local wines. The Müller-Scharzhof estate was founded by Egon's great-great grandfather, who served alternately with both the Prussian and French armies during the Napoleonic Wars of the early 19th century.

The current Egon (the fourth) has a background that includes studies at the Geisenheim school (and subsequently unlearning much of what he learned there in the '70s), and apprenticeships in Bordeaux and at Kloster Eberbach in the Rheingau. He has two brothers, neither of whom is involved with the running of the estate. Egon's father, a highly respected vintner and former cavalryman, passed away in January, 2001.

Egon has recently married and, at the age of 40, produced another little Egon, now 18 months old. Their age difference, he says, "presents both an advantage and a disadvantage. The advantage is that when the little guy is old enough to have his own ideas, he and I won't fight over how things should be run. I've seen several of my colleagues run into difficulties with the situation of generations being close together. My father and I also were 40 years apart, and we never fought." Asked about the downside to the age difference, Egon replied, "The disadvantage is that I'll be working later in life and will be unable to retire early" – and perhaps will be unable to play soccer with Junior as vigorously as he might like.



The Scharzhof, home of the Egon Müller family wine estate, with the legendary Scharzhofberger vineyard rising up on the hillside behind.



Egon Müller I, the first of five generations to take the name Egon.

Egon's wife, Valeska, an excellent hostess and spokesperson for the wines as well, has breathed new life into this once male-dominated structure. Her father is overseeing the redevelopment of a former family property in Slovakia, an 80-square-meter baroque castle along the Danube River, about 200 kilometers east of Vienna. As if tending to the affairs of two Saar estates (Scharzhof and Le Gallais) isn't enough, Egon also has taken on the responsibility of restoring wine production at this picturesque Slovakian estate, with its grand old cellars.

The vineyards in Slovakia are planted with Riesling, Grüner Veltliner and Leanka, a variety that is widely grown throughout Eastern Europe. The 1999 Slovakian Ryzlink Rynsky that I tasted, from grapes grown in loess soils, will be part of the estate's new collection of wines. It was dry and spearminty, with a medium-bodied style that seems modeled after Alsace Riesling. Egon says that the 50- to 60-year-old Grüner Veltliner vines on the property also show promise. The wines will be marketed under the name of Château Béla.

Back home on the Saar

The exacting Egon Müller holds very high standards for his winemaking. Cultured yeasts are not used, and deacidification is not practiced. He does little to discourage the formation of botrytis in his grapes, believing that it adds complexity, even to the drier wines. Together with the estate's seven hectares of vines in the esteemed Scharzhofberg, vineyard holdings in the nearby villages of Kanzem, Wawern, Saarburg, Oberemmel and other Wiltingen sites make up 16 hectares (38 acres) in all. Grapes from these other sites go into the Scharzhof QbA, a wine that provides a lower-cost entrée for the estate.

In addition to the Scharzhof and Scharzhofberger wines, Müller-Scharzhof has a complicated controlling and managing interest in Wiltingen's Le Gallais estate. This second estate is most noted for wines from the superb Wiltinger Braune Kupp vineyard and constitutes 20 to 25 percent of Müller's production on the Saar.

Tasting the wines

During my visit, we tasted the entire range of the 2000 wines except for the Auslese Long Gold Capsule. Asked how he managed to get a good, healthy crop in such a difficult vintage, Egon replied, "Selection, selection, selection." He expects that the 2001 harvest will yield more generously flavored and structured wines than the 2000. "America has become 'Parker-ized' and people are looking for big, obvious wines," he said. I agree with him on this matter, and as I'm not fond of scoring wines with numbers, I'll have to ask you to accept these text-only impressions.

Scharzhof QbA 2000

This 'basic' wine comprised two-thirds of this year's entire Müller-Scharzhof production. A medium-sweet style, though with correspondingly high acidity. Pale, shimmering green-yellow. Delicate aroma of grass and spring flowers. Sweet-tart entry. Light body, medium-high acidity. Flavors of green apples. Tart finish. Still nervous and needs another year to settle down. "When I go the United States lately, it seems I'm always served salads," says Egon. This is, no doubt, a salad wine.



Egon Müller shares a happy moment (and perhaps a sip of Scharzhof Riesling) with his son, Egon V.

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Müller-Scharzhof is a small, family-run estate with huge demand for its wines. Visits are possible, but they are limited and strictly by appointment. No wines are sold at the estate. Please consult your favorite local wine merchant.

Scharzhofberger Kabinett 2000

Straw yellow. Restrained aroma. Light body. Aromas of green apple and Bartlett pear. Slight minerality on finish, which is where the concentration becomes apparent – lasting longer than I expected from the restrained palate. Needs more time in bottle as it's quite closed at the moment. Very clear and healthy despite the problems with rot many growers had in this vintage. Drink with a selection of goat cheeses.

Le Gallais Wiltinger braune Kupp Spätlese 2000

Muted yellow-gold. Rich, earthy, slatey aroma typical of the Wiltinger braune Kupp vineyard. Red apple, apricot. Balanced, earthy entry. Sweet-tart palate. Medium-length finish. This would be wonderful to drink with duck in apricot sauce.

Scharzhofberger Spätlese 2000

Straw gold, star bright. Muted nose of sultanas, pear, spring meadow. Clear entry. Good balance. Light-medium body with moderate concentration. Closed, medium-length finish with a hint of grapiness. Lacks the baroque texture and richness of the magnificent 1999 Spätlese, but will come around in six to eight years. Drink along side lobster with a mustard-cream sauce.

Scharzhofberger Auslese Gold Capsule 2000

This bottle had been open for a week, but still showed quite well. It contains a substantial portion of declassified Beerenauslese fruit. Burnished gold. Lanolin, caramel, pear and rich, earthy aromas. Medium body, good concentration. Apple skin flavor. Disparate sugar/acid balance. Short, tart finish with a blast of botrytis. Drink alone or with a pear tart.

Scharzhofberger Trockenbeerenauslese 2000

“In order to achieve the necessary must weight, we had to leave the grapes on the vines into November, considerably longer than, say, 1999,” said Müller. It shows in the Madeira-like appearance, reddish-brown with a green-gold rim. Dried apricot, caramel, banana, and bread dough aromas. Viscous without being cloying. Good concentration. Plenty of acids bracing the high sugar content. Dried pineapple and a toasty note on the finish. Drink with toasted, salted nuts.

And from the cellar...**Scharzhofberger Kabinett 1997**

Slightly minty nose. Fine, light-medium body. Deep mineral note on palate. Slight maturity on the finish, which is long with finely-tuned high acidity. Pear, coconut and pineapple flavors. A young adult.

Le Gallais Wiltinger braune Kupp Spätlese 1971

A revelation! Tasted blind, I'd guessed it to be from 1990, a not dissimilar vintage. Surprisingly youthful in appearance and palate, though the aromas were strikingly low-toned. Brilliant and intense lime-peach flavors, then slatey, smokey earth takes over. Medium body, resoundingly long and expansive finish.

The wines of Müller-Scharzhof are imported into the U.S. exclusively by Frederick Wildman & Sons of New York.



A wonderful line-up of Egon Müller's Rieslings, tasted at the Scharzhof estate in December, 2001.



David Furer has written for *Wine Enthusiast*, *Santé* and *Barfly* magazines, and taught at the University of Chicago. He is a Certified Wine Educator and a Master Sommelier candidate. He visited the Müller-Scharzhof estate in December, 2001, during an extended stay in the Saar valley, and generously agreed to file this report. David lives in Santa Cruz, California.

Far from the average crowd

Australia's Crawford River Winery

THE FRENETIC ACTIVITY of the past 14 hours has finally let up, and the cement concourse of John Thomson's Crawford River winery is all but quiet now. The Bucher airbag press has turned its last revolution, and a steady trickle of rinsing water flows along a shallow drainage channel.

Darkness has long since descended, and the evening's cool air is ripe with the fragrance of the day's reward – a few modest tonnes of Riesling fruit, each bin hand-picked and processed by Thomson and a small band of itinerant labourers.

Within minutes, the last remaining signs of harvest will be hosed away. The roller door will glide into place, signalling the end of yet another demanding work schedule on the 2,000-hectare pastoral property that has been home to four generations of Thomsons, and the source of one of Australia's most widely acclaimed Riesling wines.

Located at Condah, in the far south-western corner of Victoria, Thomson's vineyard boasts just 11 hectares of vines. Four plots of Riesling totalling four hectares began with an initial planting in 1975, and are the most clearly identifiable by virtue of their dramatically arched canes.

One hundred metres above sea level, and less than 60 kilometres from spectacular coastlines dotted with rugged rock pillars and myriad luckless shipwrecks, the site lies at the edge of an ancient basaltic lava flow, and has a distinctly maritime climate. Grape bunches here experience a leisurely ripening period as the effects of summertime temperatures – occasionally nudging 35° Celsius – are moderated by cooling sea breezes during mid-afternoon and early evening. Crop yields are typically low, rarely more than 10 tonnes per hectare.

Tomorrow, the business of picking and pressing will begin again, to be repeated throughout the coming weeks until the end of May. Any thoughts of a break in the routine are pushed to the remotest parts of Thomson's consciousness. A small crop of Riesling at such a critical stage of development can achieve optimum ripeness within a matter of days. Leaving it to over-ripen – or to be drenched by sudden downpours – only brings compromises in fruit quality.

Time and Mother Nature wait for no-one, says Thomson. "You can't half-do this job. You've got to do it to perfection. Anything less than professional and you get run over. We're not interested in just making a mediocre bottle of Riesling."



Stunningly picturesque rock pillars guard the coast of Victoria in the southeast corner of Australia, where the Crawford River flows.



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

Nor are the clients who take the four-hour journey by road from Melbourne to snap up Thomson's handiwork.

A graduate in viticulture and wine science from Charles Sturt University at Wagga Wagga, Thomson's wines are frequently compared favourably to those from Jeffery Grossett, Howard Park and Petaluma. Australia's best-known wine critic, James Halliday, rates them very highly indeed, and in any given year there is often a place for Crawford River's Riesling wine among Halliday's Top 100. During two consecutive editions of Halliday's best-selling *Australia and New Zealand Wine Companion*, Crawford River Reserve made it right to the top of the tree as his best Riesling wine of the year: the 2000 vintage topping the 2002 edition, with the 1999 doing so in the preceding one. "I wasn't actually going to release our '99 Reserve as a young wine until Halliday came along and gave it 97 points," says Thomson with a mixture of pride and bemusement.

The former sharebroker's enviable skill and consistency – both as grower and winemaker – is underscored by the fact that his property's standard label invariably ranks close to that of the Reserve on Halliday's august wine rankings. Technically, there is little that separates the two wines. Each sees fruit that is picked according to flavour, rather than the simple measurement of grape sugars through a refractometer. "I'm conscious of the scientific side of things," says Thomson, "but one day I'll just walk in the vineyard and say, 'Yes, it tastes right.' That mightn't necessarily mean there's been a significant change in some of the scientific parameters. It just means the fruit tastes like my Riesling ought to taste."

At that stage, lime and floral characteristics will become the hallmarks of each wine that is created. A certain spiciness is also highly prized, together with the steely acidity Thomson says is needed for longevity. With the oldest wine in the Crawford River cellar dating back to 1979, longevity is valued, and often achieved.

Thomson's key goal is to craft a wine that maintains its youthful colour and flavour profile over many years, while steering well clear of the fat, oily styles that he feels are typical of the warmer regions of mainland Australia. In maturity, toast and honey characters are preferred to those of petrol and kerosene.

Priced in Australia at \$39 a bottle, the Reserve wine comes from the property's oldest vines, and gains an advantage from recent trials in whole-bunch pressing. "We've been experimenting with whole-bunch pressing since 1996, when we got a new airbag press, and we've found we get some lovely textures from that," Thomson said. "What we've been doing lately is making small quantities of wine with virtually nothing else but whole-bunch pressed fruit in order to assess the quality parameters.

"The wines are really very interesting. We don't tend to get the sexy fruit at the front of the palate, but the juice flavour and the mouthfeel are so much better than before. Always. On the other hand, the nose is not always better, so I'm still playing around with them a bit."

Ever conscious of the need to maintain his high standards of quality, Thomson is appreciative of risks that can come from separating wines into standard and Reserve product ranges. "What I'm really trying to do is to put the best possible wine into the bottle," he said. "What I'm not trying to do is to put so much of one



Catherine and John Thomson, owners of Crawford River Wines.



wine into a Reserve bottling that it downgrades the quality of the standard \$30 wine. My job here is to try and make sure that I don't tarnish my reputation."

Reflecting their owner's attention to the finest detail, new vine plantings are beginning to appear on the property as part of Crawford River's ongoing program of quality control. Their ultimate destiny will be to enable the replacement of old or infirmed vines that have become economically unsustainable. Better to replace a 40-year-old vine with a 15-year-old vine than with one that has yet to produce its first crop.

As someone who experienced the deep troughs of rural recession during the 1970s, and the piling up of substantial bank overdrafts in the following decade, Thomson is a hard-bitten realist in spite of his aspirations and the considerable acclaim given to his Rieslings. "Right from the beginning, John wanted to make his own wine here," explains wife Catherine Thomson. "The thing that he reiterates again and again is that for all of our years in the wool and beef industry, we have been price-takers. We have had to accept what we can get in the market place. John felt that if he produced his own grapes, made his own wine, and was good enough at it, he was going to be able to be a price-maker." Making wine from what he regards as the most noble of all white grape varieties, Thomson says the job may have its romance, but it must also pay its way.

Harvest at Crawford River is slotted into a tightly-framed schedule of on-farm activity. Late-picked Riesling juice occasionally vies with cabernet sauvignon and merlot for fermentation space in the winery. The subsequent rituals of racking and cold-stabilisation are invariably carried on during the property's lambing season. And with some 22,000 head of sheep – and 700 cattle – all demanding Thomson's undivided attention, there is little room for manoeuvring if weather conditions fluctuate wildly at the tail end of a growing season. "We don't want to be nursing sick vintages through if we can help it," says Thomson.

The property's first wines were made in the shearers' quarters of the woolshed in 1979 and 1980. Mindful of the importance of their new venture, the Thomsons then commissioned a purpose-built winery in 1981, a facility that has continued to grow in size and complexity as Crawford River production has expanded.

Occupying steep hillside slopes first sighted by John's great grandfather way back in 1884, the winery has been complemented by the addition of a new cellar, door sales and tasting room. Visitors here can take in all the action of harvest and subsequent cellar work by accessing an elevated walkway overlooking the winery and red wine barrel store.

Externally, the facility has managed to combine a contemporary appearance with a distinctively Australian outback ambience. Internally, its lighting and paintwork – mostly warm ochres and terracotta in the dying rays of the afternoon sun – all help to emphasise the natural colours of its environs and its bucolic Victorian setting. It is certainly not your average Australian cellar-door facility, by any stretch of the imagination. "Then again, we're not trying to be average," admits a justifiably proud John Thomson.

Amen to that, Riesling lovers.



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

Contact Information

Crawford River Wines

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Condah, Victoria 3303
Tel (+61) 3 5578 2267
Call to confirm details of open hours and wines for sale.

Located 45 kilometres south-west of the Victorian township of Hamilton, and signposted from the Henty Highway at Condah, Crawford River Wines is open most days from 10 a.m. to 4.30 p.m.

Crawford River Tasting Notes

These notes are from James Halliday's *Australia and New Zealand Wine Companion*, 2002 edition

2000 Crawford River Reserve Riesling

"Very light green-yellow; intense lime and herb aromatics lead to a similarly intense yet fine and very long palate, which is beautifully poised and balanced. How John Thomson achieves this with such a high level of alcohol is beyond my comprehension." Best drinking 2004 – 2014. Rating: **97**

2000 Crawford River Riesling

"Less fashionable than the Clare Valley Riesling icons, perhaps, but every bit as consistently outstanding, year in, year out. A fragrant and very pure mix of lime and a dash of passion-fruit fills the bouquet, followed by a palate of piercing delicacy, with apple adding to the mix." Best drinking Now – 2010. Rating: **95**

About Victoria

Victoria lies in the south-eastern corner of Australia, and is a good place to begin a visit to the Land Down Under. It borders the states of New South Wales and South Australia, and is only 12 hours away from Tasmania by ferry across the Bass Strait. Victoria's capital city of Melbourne is just a 12-hour drive from Sydney and barely nine hours from Adelaide.

The smallest state on the Australian mainland, Victoria comprises just three percent of the country's continental landmass. It has a land area roughly the same size as Great Britain or the U.S. state of Minnesota. Rich in cultural diversity, Victoria has the second largest population of any Australian state. Almost 4.5 million people live there, and they account for a quarter of Australia's total population of 19 million people. Most Victorians live in Melbourne, the nation's largest city after Sydney.

In spite of its largely urbanised population, Victoria is a place of great natural beauty. It produces almost a quarter of Australia's total agricultural output, and has more than a third of its area covered by forest. Visitors to the state will find its lifestyle relaxed and easy-going. Temperatures vary widely across Victoria, but most of the state falls within the warm, temperate belt of the southeastern corner of Australia, and is characterised by warm and dry summers and cool to mild, wet, winters. Melbourne's average rainfall is about 660 mm a year.

Daily summer temperatures range from 14°C to 23°C in the coastal areas to 16°C to 31°C inland. In winter, temperatures range from 7°C to 14°C in coastal areas, and 5°C to 16°C inland. Snow settles on the Australian Alps in northeastern Victoria between June and September.

Victoria boasts some of Australia's most picturesque scenery, and has almost 1,800 km of dramatic coastline bordering on Bass Strait, the wild stretch of water that separates the mainland from Tasmania. The breath-takingly beautiful Great Ocean Road – which winds its way along the south-western coast of Victoria for 180 km – is just one of several gateways to Crawford River Wines. No road trip to Australia will be complete without spending some time touring these parts.

For further tourist information, log on to www.visitmelbourne.com.au.



Australia & New Zealand Wine Companion, 2002 Edition

By James Halliday
Harper Collins Publishers
www.harpercollins.com.au



A verdant Victorian vista.