



Riesling market heating up

By Tom Marquardt & Patrick Darr

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When we started writing this column more than a decade ago, rieslings didn't get a lot of attention. Known best in Germany where the exported versions are often vinified sickly sweet, rieslings were once regarded as inferior wines no American producer would attempt to emulate.

How times have changed.

Not only has a new, dry riesling gained a foothold in the U.S. market, but its sales are rapidly making up ground against chardonnay and sauvignon blanc. Riesling is simply hot.

It has been argued that riesling's dramatic change in popularity can be attributed to a new generation of wine enthusiasts who never experienced the variety's dark days. Although the Alsace region of France always made dry riesling, it struggled to develop a market here because of archaic labels and an association with Germany's sweeter wines. (In defense of Germany, much of its riesling is vinified dry but its exports are often sweet).

No matter where it is grown, riesling has an affinity for showing off its soil origin. Grown in slate, for instance, the wine reveals distinct mineral notes. Because of this enviable characteristic, riesling can be incredibly fragrant and intense.

Not fermented or aged in oak barrels, riesling retains the distinctive qualities of the grape variety and its natural acidity. That alone makes it a versatile wine for food. Invariably, we reach for riesling before chardonnay when we have seafood. Its distinctive flavor also stands out when paired against neutral food like turkey, so keep this in mind for the Thanksgiving table.

The grape likes cooler climates. In the United States it has soared in colder states like Washington and New York. The rieslings made in the Finger Lakes region are simply spectacular.

Warmer climates in California have not produced great rieslings, but unsuspecting grape-growing regions, like Australia, have produced some interesting riesling that again speaks for the soil.

Riesling's biggest hurdle remains its broad reach of styles. It can be sweet in Germany, minerally in Alsace, floral in Washington. It can be label Johannisberg Riesling, white riesling or just riesling. Nonetheless, its defenders argue that the range in style is actually an asset.

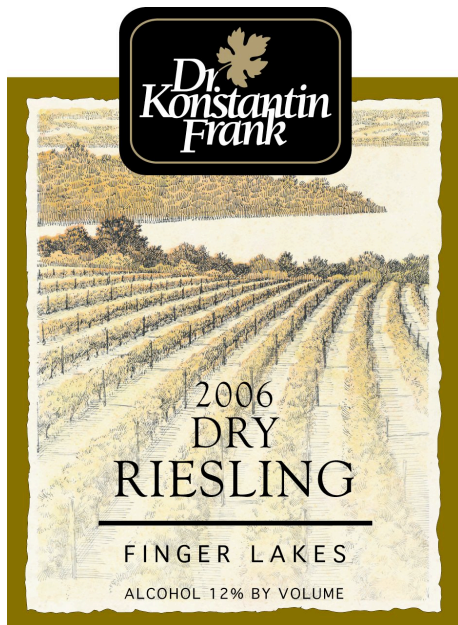
If you like your wines a bit sweet, there are several rieslings here and abroad to suit your palate. Unfortunately, the residual sugar in a wine is rarely printed on the label, so you never know until you taste the wine. Most palates won't pick up the presence of sugar until .5 percent.

Here are a few recommendations of this nation's best rieslings to get you started:

Chateau Ste. Michelle Eroica Riesling 2006 (\$24). One of our all-time favorites, this Washington state riesling is a collaboration of Germany's Dr. Ernst Loosen and Chateau Ste. Michelle winemaker Bob Bertheau. Specially selected vineyards in the cool Yakima Valley provide a racey, mineral style to this exotic riesling. Lots of dimension in this wine dominated by citrus, peach notes, a touch of spice and fresh acidity.

Chateau Ste. Michelle Columbia Valley Dry Riesling 2006 (\$15). Made originally for just the Northwest market, this Washington state wine gained popularity and is now available nationwide. An excellent value for what it offers, this wine sports peach, apricot and orange flavors.

Chateau Ste. Michelle Cold Creek Riesling 2006 (\$18). Tropical fruit and peach flavors with a mineral note dominate this opulent, smoothly textured riesling from one of the nation's top riesling producers.



Dr. Konstantin Frank Dry Riesling 2006 (\$18).

Dr. Frank, a Ukrainian immigrant, is the riesling patriarch of the Finger Lakes region. Peach and tangerine notes with a floral note and just a touch of residual sugar balanced by crisp acidity. Dr. Frank was the first to plant the grape in New York in the 1950s.

Gainey Vineyards Santa Ynez Riesling 2006 (\$15). This cooler region of California is best known for pinot noir, syrah and now riesling. Pineapple, grapefruit flavors with bright acidity.

J. Lohr Monterey County Bay Mist White Riesling 2006 (\$9).

Jerry Lohr has been making riesling for 30 years because he has always enjoyed the variety's approachability. Good for him. The wine is highlighted by peach and apricots with a touch of green apple and a bit of residual sugar for those of you who like off-dry wines.

Pacific Rim Dry Riesling 2006 (\$11). Spun off by Bonny Doon, Pacific Rim specializes in riesling. Nearly 80 percent of the grapes come from Washington; the rest are from the Mosel Valley — quite a blend of divergent grape-growing regions.