



Rieslings of the world delight

By Jancis Robinson

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London's louche Groucho Club in Soho is known for many things but does not have a natural affinity with the pristine white wines of Austria. It has nevertheless been the setting for two seminal blind tastings of the country's wine. I reported on the first one, in which Austria's native Grüner Veltliner grape trounced some of the finest Chardonnays, on these pages two years ago.

But the Austrian Wine Marketing Board was keen to prove its prowess with its dry Rieslings too, and so organised another tasting in which the Austrians put up 18 of their finest examples in various age groups against the competition. It was left to me and Bavaria-based fine wine merchant Jan Paulson of *Rare-wine.com* to decide what that competition might be.

And it was because Paulson is by day a London-trained Swedish dentist, who joined the Groucho in memory of his student days in Soho, that the Austrian tastings have been held there. Paulson has no formal connection with Austrian wine - indeed most of the wines he sells are French classics - but he has been an interested observer of the revitalisation of Austrian wine in the past 20 years.

Many of the tasters were the same in both Grüner Veltliner and Riesling taste-offs, but the Riesling event saw a particularly high proportion of (notably punctual) youthful sommeliers, including an Australian and a Frenchwoman. The other tasters last week were either wine merchants or wine writers. The scoring was overseen by David Hunter of the Wine & Spirit Education Trust, who worked for many years with German wines.

I was determined that the Austrian candidates would be set against the finest dry Rieslings I could think of.

We were to taste the 36 wines in six flights of six; three flights ranging over the vintages 2001-2003, two flights of wines made 1995-1997 and one flight of 1990s, a great vintage in most of Europe. But it can be difficult to source top quality Australian Riesling with any age on it, as I found. The last flight was therefore bereft of representatives from Down Under and one of our middle-aged flights had to do without Petaluma Riesling 1997, which arrived only after the tasting.

Australia apart, obvious places to look for top-quality dry Riesling are relatively few and far between. New Zealand is making more, better and drier Riesling with every year but has yet to establish a copper-bottomed reputation for this variety.

South Africa seems out of love with Riesling, even though Klein Constantia and Buitenverwachting have shown they can make fine examples in cool Constantia. Chile is just starting to get serious with Rieslings from the far south. Navarro of Mendocino would have the greatest claim to submit a dry Riesling from California and, as I wrote here last April, there are more and more creditable versions from Washington and Oregon, but I could not easily think of an American world champion dry Riesling.

Within Europe I have tasted dry(ish) Rieslings made in virtually every country, but they generally lack finesse, the potential to age magnificently that is one of Riesling's hallmarks, the ability to expresse*terroir*, which is another, and can easily tend to coarseness and bitterness.

To find truly great, satin-smooth, dry Riesling, it was necessary to go to Alsace and Germany itself, although even in Germany, home of Riesling, dry wines have only recently become (hugely) fashionable once more. It was relatively easy to pick out a couple of potentially great dry German Rieslings, from Gunderloch and Koehler-Ruprecht, made in 1990, whereas in this decade the choice is becoming overwhelming.

Many of the most successful German wines in this tasting were older wines labelled *Auslese trocken*, meaning they were dry wines made from exceptionally ripe grapes, but this is a category fast being replaced by the new Grosses Gewächs designation within Germany.

There were no wines from as far north as the Mosel in this collection - the Mosel is generally better suited to making fruitier, more delicate Rieslings - but there were two from the Nahe (including one of my favourites of the tasting) and three from the Rheingau, as well as the Gunderloch from the Rheinhessen and three from the Pfalz.

Alsace, just over the Rhine from the southern Pfalz, has been making fine dry Riesling for decades so I decided to concentrate on the top wines of the most established names in this varied French region: Faller, Hugel, Trimbach and Zind Humbrecht, who between them supplied six wines.

Faller's was my favourite but was a mere middle ranker with most other tasters. In fact, I was generally much keener on Alsace Rieslings than the group as a whole, which put every Alsace other than Trimbach's Clos Ste Hune 1990 in the lower half of the ranking.

What the group liked best was, much to the relief of the head of the Austrian Wine Marketing Board, Austrian Riesling. One Wachau Riesling in particular, Prager/Bodenstein's Weissenkirchner Achleiten 1990 Smaragd was the group's clear favourite, and eight of the group's top 14 wines were from Austria - although since half the wines tasted were Austrian, this is not quite such a walk-over as Austria enjoyed in the Grüner Veltliner tasting.

The other non-Austrian group favourites were, in declining order, that miraculous Clos Ste Hune 1990 from Trimbach in Alsace in second place; in third place Rudesheimer Berg Schlossberg 1997 from George Breuer (who died suddenly in his early 50s this summer); Christmann's seriously exciting and nervy 2002 in equal fourth place; and wines from Gunderloch, Emrich Schönleber and Johannes Leitz.

Although I gave it 18 points out of 20, I found the Prager/Bodenstein winning wine just a little too full and developed for my, obviously warped, taste. In truth, the marks for this stunning selection of one of the most refreshing wine styles were all very close (much closer than those for the Chardonnays had been). My marks varied from 15 for a rather old 1997 from Austria's Schloss Gobelsburg to 19.5 for the Faller 1997. The group average mark varied from 15.79 for another slightly tired Austrian 1997 from Mittelbach to 18.71 for the Prager/ Bodenstein 1990.

Overall, to my surprise, I marked the Alsace wines highest, with an average score of 18 points out of 20 over its six wines. Germany's generally racy nine examples came next, averaging 17.67, while my personal average scores were 17.33 for both Australia's distinctively lime-flavoured three wines and for Austria's 18 satisfyingly plump examples, but there was just a whisker in it. A whisker of the finest white wine grape in the world, wherever it is grown.

For tasting notes and scores, see the purple pages of www.jancisrobinson.com