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THE POUR

Eric Asimov

## Rieslings From Germany Scale the Heights

**T**HE sap rises. The swallows return. And without fail each year something in the spring air touches the nerve that causes me to crave riesling.

Could it be the scent of the tulips along Park Avenue? The shedding of the winter woolens? The thwack of ball against bat? All right, all right, I'll lose the seasonal romance. It's the clogging of the sinuses, the car alarms now all too audible through open windows, the promise of sweaty days ahead, whatever. Either way, the first warm days of spring signal the official opening of riesling season.

Many wines have their seasonal associations. I think of Sancerre and sauvignon blanc in the summer, Rhone wines in the fall, Amarone in the winter, and Burgundy and Champagne pretty much any time at all. Yet, just as riesling reigns among wines in conveying a sense of origin, it is also unsurpassed in connoting the sense of rebirth and renewal that we almost physically equate with spring. Among its less mystical attributes, riesling is also one of the most versatile wines to pair with food.

You would think that with all of this going for it, riesling would be one of the most popular, revered wines in the world. Instead, it remains something of an insider's wine, enjoyed passionately by a relatively small number of consumers who seemingly can't decide whether to rejoice in the mainstream neglect, which keeps prices reasonable, or despair in having to forge their own path in an oak, vanilla, fruit cocktail white wine kind of world. (Righteous indignation, you see, is an essential component of riesling love.)

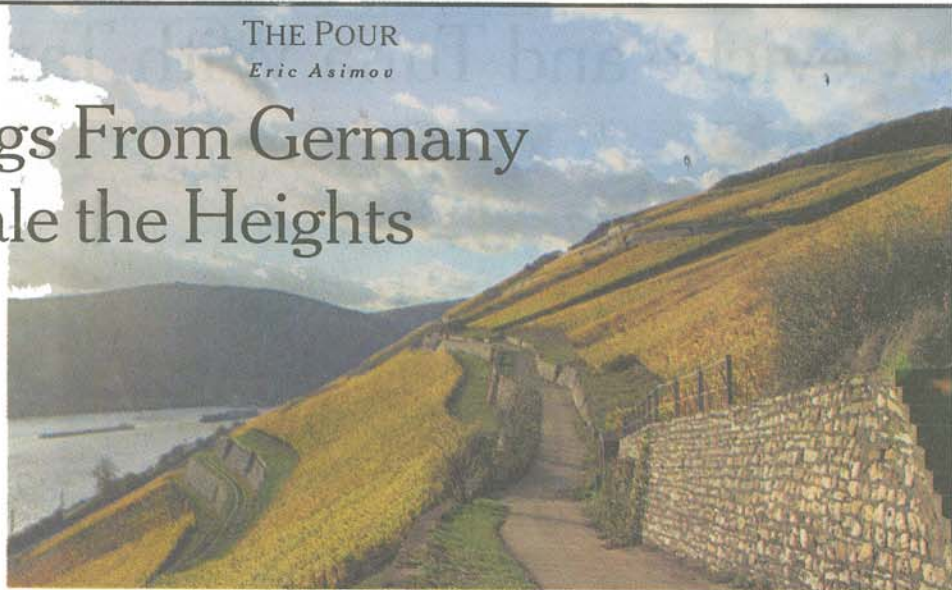
I can point to many occasions over the last 20 years when riesling-loving wine writers asserted that the tide had turned, that riesling was finally about to have its moment. We're still waiting for that wave to arrive.

Hopeful signs abound, nonetheless. Maybe it's just spring talking, but in

### The Pour

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A blog by The Times's wine critic on the pleasure, culture and business of wine, beer and spirits: [nytimes.com/the-pour](http://nytimes.com/the-pour).



**HIGH ABOVE THE RHINE** The Rheingau region produces versatile rieslings that balance sweetness and acidity.

New York, at least, sommeliers like Paul Grieco at Hearst in the East Village and Rebecca Foster at Cookshop in Chelsea are big believers in riesling and effectively convey their enthusiasm through their wine lists. Retail shops are doing a much better job among themselves of featuring riesling. Best of all, more great riesling is being made today than ever before, and it is coming from more places.

Alsace, of course, has a proud riesling heritage, and its wines can be among the most powerful and profound whites in the world. I've grown to love the dry, rich, mineral rieslings of Austria, while the surprisingly good rieslings of Australia may come to be recognized one day as the best Australian whites of all. California has a few riesling pockets, like Navarro in Mendocino County and Smith-Madrone in Napa Valley, though the best American rieslings may come from the Finger Lakes in upstate New York. But for dedication to the riesling grape and for wines of a rare beauty, depth and clarity that can match fragility with intensity, no country can rival Germany.

The drawbacks of German rieslings are all too well known. The labels are indecipherable, the nomenclature is confusing, and the language, for non-German speakers, is difficult to translate. All true, yet ultimately irrelevant. Burgundy is awfully confusing as well, yet because the wines are worth the effort, people eventually figure it out. Believe me, German rieslings are worth the effort, too.

One more thing comes to many people's minds about these wines: they are sweet. Indeed, this is frequently the case, yet again, it often doesn't matter. Why is this? Consid-

er for a moment that although many popular American wines claim to be dry, they are in fact slightly sweet. Believe it or not, these American wines often taste sweeter than many rieslings because the sugar in the German wines, unlike in the American ones, is balanced by high acidity. Paradoxically, these sweet German rieslings taste drier than the so-

### The confusing labels are worth deciphering.

called dry New World cabernets and chardonnays.

Here's a bottle that reflects all that Americans consider nightmarish about German rieslings: It's a 2004 Rudesheimer Magdalenenkreuz spätlese from Josef Leitz, one of the excellent producers that are rejuvenating the reputation of the Rheingau, a small, historic area full of crumbling castles and vineyards that rise up from the Rhine on unbelievably steep slopes.

Forget the mouthful of words. What's important to know is that this wine offers exactly the sort of tension between sweetness and acidity that gives German rieslings their taut precision and focus. It is light and graceful, full of lingering mineral and rich lemon flavors, and even though it has some residual sugar, the wine tastes almost dry because each element is in harmony. It's a difficult balancing act, made to look easy. Oh, and it's just 8 percent alcohol.

While the Leitz tastes dry, some

Rheingau wines are legitimately dry. Robert Weil, another Rheingau producer, makes a wonderful spätlese, but also makes a dry wine (with a label in English that simply reads, "Estate Riesling Dry"). Like most German rieslings, the predominant flavors are of minerals, but the Weil also has a floral component, and the 2004 has a slight fizziness that is characteristic of many young rieslings. Because in dry rieslings all the sugar has been fermented into alcohol, they tend to have a higher level of alcohol than wines in which the fermentation is halted, leaving residual sugar. The Weil is all of 11.5 percent, as against the 14-plus percent typical of most American wines.

Along with the Rheingau, the most famous German wine region is the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer. It is the home of many great producers, like J.J. Prüm, Fritz Haag and Selbach-Oster. But producers in other regions are worth following, too. I've recently enjoyed superb wines from Hexamer, Dönnhoff and Schäfer-Fröhlich in the Nahe and Müller-Catoir in the Pfalz. Most remarkable of all was a riesling from the lowly Mittelrhein, which mostly produces plonk from the Müller-Thurgau grape.

This bottle, a 2004 Bopparder Hamm Ohlenberg spätlese from Weingart, was another of those exquisitely balanced sweet wines that taste dry. But in addition to its lively floral and mineral qualities, this one had intense peach and apricot flavors, and delicacy, too. What more could you want?

Oh, I don't know. Maybe sautéed river trout or scallops? Or Dover sole, or white asparagus, or roasted squab?

I'd even settle for another glass.

