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Why a Great German Grape Is Big in the U.S. Again; A Small Margin for Error

U.S. WINE IMPORTS FROM which of these countries increased almost 30% by volume last year?

- a. France,
- b. Germany,
- c. Australia, or
- d. Italy.

Surprise: The answer is Germany. France rose a bit, after two years of declines, according to figures from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Australia was up more than 10%, but still didn't outstrip No. 1 Italy, whose imports rose almost 9%.

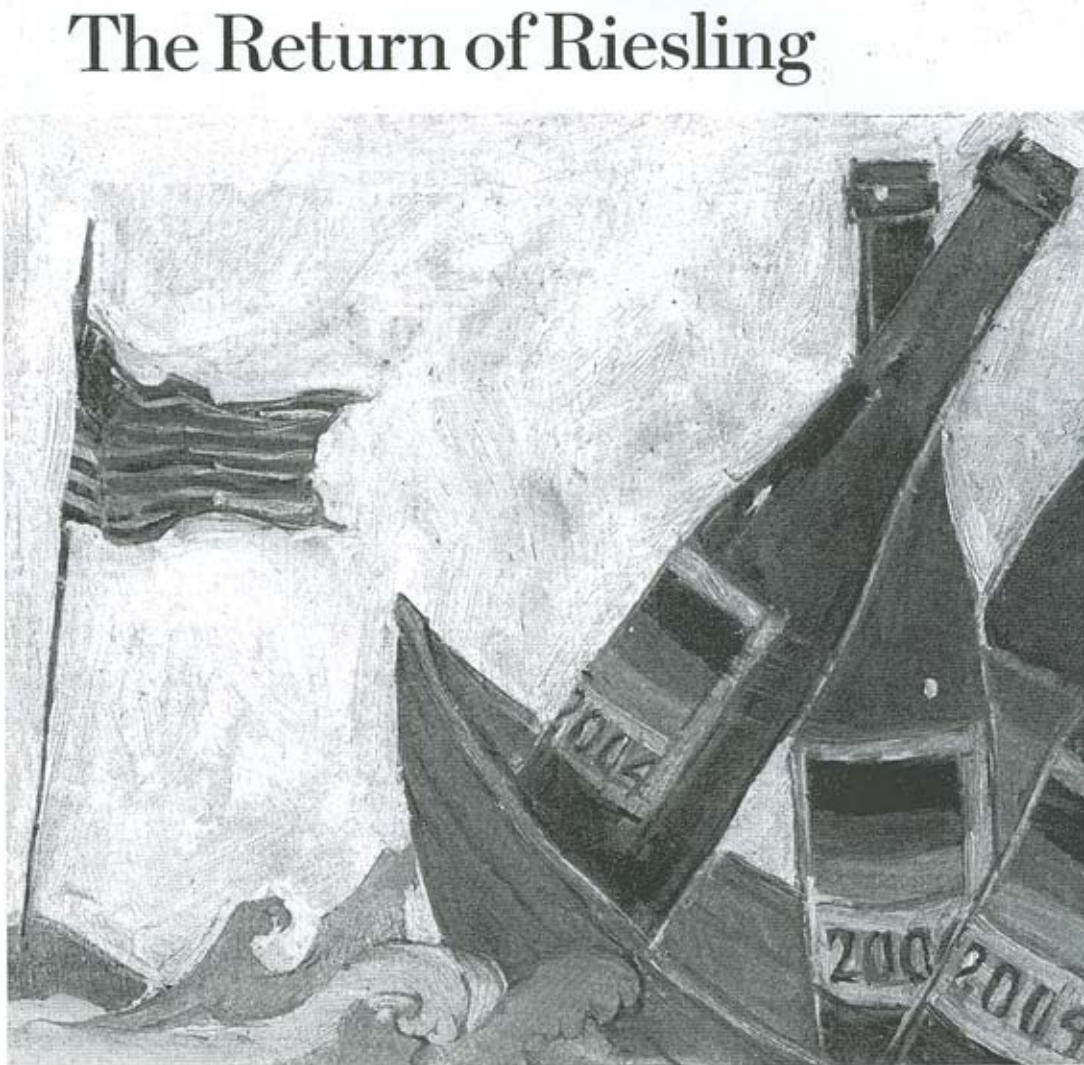
The jump in German wine imports has been a long time coming. Imports dropped by half between 1989 and 1994 and then flatlined until 2000, when they began to creep up. Given the history, last year's boost was extraordinary, though the total amount of German wine imported into the U.S. is still relatively small: around 2.7 million cases, about a tenth of Italy's.

Americans have been lukewarm toward German wines for years because

Riesling's flaws show easily, which is why some fail—and why it's so thrilling when they're just right.

they associate them—and Germany's great grape, Riesling—with the sweet, simple wines of their youth (the wines that probably accounted for a great deal of the imports back then). But there has always been a gulf between regular wine drinkers, who shun German wines, and wine merchants and wine writers, like us, who never tire of beating the drum for these wines, which we find highly drinkable, beautifully made and great with all kinds of food.

Finally, it seems like someone is listening. Asked if he has been selling more German wine in the past year, Bob Gorman, partner at the Wine Warehouse in Tallahassee, Fla., answered with two words: "Big time." He added: "Initially this took a patient hand-sell to bring the person over and say, you *want* this bottle." Now, it's much easier. "You know how the pendulum is and how trendy we are," he told us. "We are always looking to be on the cutting edge. People are looking for new things."



Sales of German wine have doubled in the past year at the Vintage Wine Shoppe in Birmingham, Ala. "We have worked hard to make that happen," says owner Patti Davidson. She has brought in German winemakers for tastings, for instance. "You've got to let people taste to appreciate wines, especially ones that they're afraid of," she says. She also says that, with America's growing interest in wine, "the White Zinfandel people are trying new things and Riesling is the first place they go." She says they first try one of the increasingly available American Rieslings, perhaps from Washington, and then make the jump to German. "Washington is the bridge to Germany," she adds.

In Zionsville, Ind., Doug Pendleton of the Grapevine Cottage agrees about the growing interest, partly because wine merchants' hard work in the German aisle is paying off. "On Saturdays, the number of people who come into the doors of a wine store with a menu in hand is daunting, and when the word 'spicy' comes out, that is where they're led," he says.

Paul Provost, general manager of Table & Vine in Northampton, Mass., says interest in German wines is rising for a simple reason: price. "In part, the price point of German Riesling has remained pretty constant while the rest of the

world has been going up," he told us. "So it looks more and more like the value it has been for three decades."

German vintners also are finally making simpler, more attractive labels, and some are using informal screwcaps. And Sherwood Deutsch, owner of Century Liquors in Rochester, N.Y., offers another explanation: The wines are better. He says a new generation of German winemakers has raised the bar, which has also helped to wake up some long-time winemakers who had gotten complacent. "Wine techniques got better elsewhere and the Germans fell behind," he says. "They're coming back now."

Ripeness Ratings

So what did this mean for us? A large tasting, of course. We bought the first 50 Riesling Kabinett wines we saw from recent vintages, mostly 2004. Germany's better wines are rated on a scale of ripeness that starts with Kabinett and goes up to Spätlese, Auslese and beyond. Kabinett is usually the driest, though "trocken" (dry) is always a good word to look for. As we've written, Spätlese trocken wines—very ripe but dry wines—are a wonder, but they are hard to find in the U.S.

This is the point in columns about German wine where the writers explain how

The Dow Jones German Riesling Index

IN A TASTING OF GERMAN KABINETT RIESLINGS from recent vintages, generally 2004, these were our favorites. While there are some well-known names among producers, it's impossible to know which wines you will see. German Rieslings age beautifully—especially the sweeter ones, which can get better for decades. The wines below are generally light and dry and are good with a wide variety of food, from Wiener schnitzel to onion tarts. They are often low in alcohol, around 8%.

VINEYARD/VINTAGE	PRICE	RATING	TASTERS' COMMENTS
Dr. Loosen Bernkasteler Lay 2004 (Mosel-Saar-Ruwer)	\$21.00*	Very Good	Best of tasting. Bright, with bracing fruit and spiky lemon flavors. Fresh and vibrant, with a long, orange-blossom finish. Interesting sweet-tart tastes. Nicely focused and light as a whisper. (We also liked Loosen's Ürziger Würzgarten 2004.)
von Hövel Scharzhofberg 2004 (Mosel-Saar-Ruwer)	\$13.99	Good/ Very Good	Best value. Refreshing, with laid-back tastes of citrus and earth and very nice acids. Good with light foods.
Joh. Jos. Prüm Graacher Himmelreich 2004 (Mosel-Saar-Ruwer)	\$24.95	Very Good	Exceptionally crisp and clean, with minerals, lemon and some prickly pear. Light and airy. Lovely.
Fritz Haag Braun- eberger Juffer 2004 (Mosel-Saar-Ruwer)	\$23.00*	Good/ Very Good	Lively and very, very easy to drink. Ephemeral, charming and fun. Suddenly, your glass is empty.
Jullusspital 'Trocken' 2003 (Würzburg; Franken)	\$11.99	Good/ Very Good	Franken Riesling, often in a traditional flask, is rare but worth buying if you see it. This is more full-bodied, earthier and notably drier than others, with flavors that demand somewhat heavy food.
Selbach-Oster 2004 (Mosel-Saar-Ruwer)	\$19.00	Good/ Very Good	Excellent flavors of minerals and ripe grapes, with plenty of grapefruit and some layers. Clean, friendly and easy.
Weegmüller Haardt Bürgergarten 2004 (Pfalz)	\$16.99	Good/ Very Good	Intense flavors, with some weight and all sorts of citrus: pineapple, orange, lemons and more. True tastes and not at all sweet.
Willi Schaefer Graacher Himmelreich 2004 (Mosel-Saar-Ruwer)	\$21.99	Good/ Very Good	Ripe peaches, green apples and lemons, with a lot of life. Not quite as pure as some, with more weight and mouthfeel.

NOTE: Wines are rated on a scale that ranges: Yech, OK, Good, Very Good, Delicious, and Delicious! These are the prices we paid at wine stores in Alabama, California, Illinois and New Jersey. *We paid \$17.99 for Dr. Loosen and \$20.99 for Fritz Haag, but these prices appear to be more representative. Prices vary widely.

tickle the soul as well as the tongue. The problem is that they are so clean and close to the edge that flaws show easily, which is both why some fail and also why it's so thrilling when they're just right. Once again in our tasting, some of the great names rose to the top (see the index). But this much, as usual, was clear: Anyone who is not regularly trying fine German wine is missing out on one of the wine world's most extraordinary tastes.

So if we were going to offer some sort of general advice to someone about getting a tasty, reasonably priced German wine, what would we say? First, keep in mind that good wine merchants are often passionate about German Rieslings and can't wait for someone to ask about them, so this is a good time to speak up

(that's how we had our own eureka moment with German wine 30 years ago). Riesling and Kabinett are good words to look for. Plan to spend more than \$15; sure there are some good ones under that price, but we found a definite quality divide in our tasting above and below that point. And here's a radical idea: Buy two. Not only will this double your chances of having a truly eye-opening experience, but tasting the difference between two German wines will prove how subtle yet distinctive these wines can be.

Thank you to everyone who wrote to us about your experiences on Open That Bottle Night 7. Our follow-up column will appear shortly, but there is still time to drop us a note at wine@wsj.com.

