



Riesling rediscovered bold, bright, and dry

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BOOK REVIEW

Riesling rediscovered bold, bright, and dry, by John Winthrop Haeger, Oakland, University of California Press, 2016, 384 pp., \$39.95 (hardback), ISBN: 978-0520275454

In 2014, Stuart Pigott's *Best white wine on earth: The riesling story* (Pigott, 2014) took us on an exuberant, if somewhat haphazard, global tour of what he called 'Planet Riesling.' My review (Hulkower, 2014) concluded: 'While this volume is the best contemporary account of the state of Riesling I know of, it is not without some distractions.' Because Pigott is a journalist and not a scholar, objectivity and thoroughness were not his main goals. Those, including me, who like a little rigor with their riesling will be more than satisfied and perhaps overwhelmed by Haeger's latest tome.

Haeger is billed as 'a sinologist, historian, and academic administrator who has written about wine since 1985.' He authored two books on pinot noir, further evidencing his impeccable taste in wine. While acknowledging Pigott's and others' contributions, he delineates three goals for his most recent effort: distinguish riesling from other white varieties, reexamine the history of that grape, and provide a detailed discussion of 'what must happen, both in the vineyard and in the cellar, to produce very good Riesling with little or no perceptible sugar' (p. 3). He achieves all three.

In contrast to Pigott who covers the spectrum of riesling from dry through sweet in both hemispheres, Haeger concentrates on dry riesling produced above the equator. Part I comprises eight chapters that make up a little over a third of the book. Topics include the definition of dry; balance in riesling; 'A history of Riesling, reviewed and amended; styles; the making of dry riesling; clones; and riesling habitats in Western Europe and North America. Part II presents 56 European and 33 North American sites that are producing noteworthy examples of dry riesling. Individual producers who vinify riesling from these sites are also introduced. A collection of maps is a welcome feature that I regularly turned to when reading through this part.

Part I is the more reader-friendly, authoritatively presenting an overview of key topics but saving detailed discussions of specific growers and producers for the second part. Riesling is a variety 'grown on every wine-producing continent' (p. 9). With the possible exception of chenin blanc, 'Riesling's many styles differ primarily in their levels of sweetness ... [t]he differences in residual sweetness ... [span] a mind-boggling two orders of magnitude' (p. 11). Compared to other whites, riesling's aromatics require using the largest portion of the lexicon of wine descriptors ranging from cool climate and tropical fruits, flowers, spices, condiments, stone, and 'the controversial ... petrochemical note ... variously described as petrol, diesel or kerosene' (p. 24). The source of this oddity is 1,16-trimethyl-1,2-dihydronaphthalene or TDN. Haeger's discussion of this chemical in Part I and references to it in Part II gave me the most complete explanation I have read.

The third chapter, 'A history of Riesling, reviewed and amended,' addresses Haeger's second goal. The first mention of the grape was in 1435, though the reliability of this date has been questioned. One of its parents, gouais blanc, was identified in 1998 via DNA fingerprinting but the other remains elusive. This, of course, causes Haeger's historian sensibilities to kick in, resulting in an eight-page discussion of documentary evidence to draw the 'Big picture.' Not surprisingly, more questions such as why riesling was selected over other varieties 'for

planting in Rüsselsheim and Trier in the 15th century' (p. 41) remain unanswered. Nevertheless, one can marvel at this illustration of how a wine historian's mind works.

Mercifully in the first part, Haeger breaks up the narrative contained in dense, two-column pages with over a dozen boxes detailing special topics. The first addresses 'How is "dry" defined?' The description of dry riesling is complicated by the fact that the perception of sweetness is influenced not only by the amount of sugar remaining after fermentation but also by acidity which counterbalances it and alcohol which reinforces its perception. 'Within certain thresholds, more acid makes the same amount of sugar taste less sweet.' (p. 13). For the most part, Haeger adopts the European Commission definition: a wine is dry if it has no more than 4 g/L of sugar (0.4%) or no more than 9 g/L of sugar (0.9%) if it does not exceed the acidity by more than 2 g/L.

I particularly enjoyed Box 6A 'Tasting clones in Oregon.' It is a wine-wonk's tour through six clones of riesling planted by Harry Petersen-Nedry of Chehalem in the Wind Ridge Vineyard in the Ribbon Ridge American Viticultural Area. Haeger includes tasting notes from December 2014 of samples of each clone harvested and vinified separately in 2013. Only one of the clones 'made a "complete" wine on its own' (p. 76).

Among the other boxes is one that wrestles with the notion of balance and several that go into the arcana of vineyard names and appellations. One is dedicated to Chateau Ste. Michelle in Washington State, the largest producer of riesling on earth.

The single criterion for inclusion of particular vineyards and wineries in Part II is the existence of 'parameters of [the] site that are expressed in finished wine and especially those that bear on success with Riesling made dry' (p. 3). Here we learn about venerable vineyards and wineries as well as ones barely established. This part covers five regions: the Rhine Basin including Alsace and Germany Regions; Danube: Lower Austria; Adige Basin: Alto Adige; Eastern North America, and Western North America, including Okanagan and Similkameen; Washington and Oregon; and California's Coastal Valleys. In each section, a site's location, age, orientation, size, soil, plantings, history, and ownership are given followed by information about one or more producers who make dry riesling from grapes grown there. For example, in the Alsace subsection of the Rhine Basin, we learn about the Rosacker and Clos Ste-Hune sites. Three producers using fruit from these sites, Vins D'Alsace Mader, Domaine Mittnacht Frères, and Domaine F. E. Trimbach, are then profiled. Usually at the end of a site's write up, Haeger includes tasting notes of several vintages made from it by a noted producer.

Because the writing style in Part II shifts from technically ponderous to thirst-inducing across contiguous paragraphs, the book is challenging to read in anything other than small doses. Consider the juxtaposition of '... he ... replanted ... with tighter spacing (1.7 by 0.6 meters), using *massale* selections of scion material grafted to 3309 rootstock' (p. 198) with 'The 2008 was bright, very elegant, and lovely with strong minerality, high-toned citrus, and terrific freshness of flavor' (p. 199). Haeger's obsession with admittedly admirable academic precision can lead to some amusing if mind-numbing descriptions: 'Thus three selections from Rauenthal vineyards ... are known as Rauenthal 69, 95, and 98 or as Rauenthal 69 Gm, 95 Gm, and 98 Gm ...' (p. 73). Such instances abound. For those of us who are not viticulturists, they exemplify the term 'boredons' (The Onion, 2008), sub-minutiae devoid of useful information, and broaden the appropriateness of the word 'dry' in the title.

Another concern is the time sensitivity of the information included, especially about relatively new producers who have not yet fully established themselves. Certainly in the New World, the wine industry has very few examples of family businesses going back more than a generation or two. More typical are producers who rely on talent who are more mobile and may stay only a few years before moving on. Two sites in Oregon profiled in Part II provide contrasting examples. Elk Cove Estate Vineyard, one of the original pioneers in the

Northern Willamette Valley, is now under the guidance of the second generation which is completely involved in growing and production. Lemelson Vineyard, which debuted in 1999, has brought in a new winemaking staff since the departure of Anthony King, who is mentioned in the book.

Nevertheless, despite these issues, this systematic and meticulous volume, in so many ways an impressive work of scholarship, belongs on the shelves of anyone with either a professional or consumer interest in wine. Viticulturists and winemakers interested in comparing notes with other riesling growers and producers can start here. Wine writers will find it an incomparable reference. Wine tourists will learn of new as well as well-established vineyards and wineries specializing in dry riesling to visit in Europe and North America. The 15 page, 2 column index facilitates navigating the complex text.

Despite the unsurpassed depth of his book, Haeger acknowledges it is not complete:

With regret, I have confined coverage to the Northern Hemisphere ... This decision, compelled by considerations of time, distance, and expense, has made it possible to finish this book within five years of its beginning but, alas, not to finish the story ... (p. 3)

I hope that the response to this extraordinary work affords Haeger the resources to complete his tale. For those who cannot wait, Pigott's book can fill the gap nicely in the interim.

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