

## AUSTRIAN RIESLING

### Faces & Facets of a Global Classic

**Le Bernardin Privé, New York – October 21, 2015**

#### Report on a multi-flight tasting & a discussion of “dry”

The event was staged by the Austrian Wine Marketing board, and they brought together a particularly interesting panel moderated by their Director, Willi Klinger. The other panelists, each of whom had selected one of the flights, were Paul Grieco, restaurateur and inveterate Riesling devotee; John Winthrop Haeger, the well-spoken author of the new *Riesling Rediscovered*; Anne Krebiehl, a German MW based in London; and Peter Moser of the famous Austrian wine family. The audience happened to include many notable journalists and critics who are considered Riesling authorities. I have attended countless tastings over the years in many countries, and this one stood out on both a conceptual and organizational level.

It can be euphoric to taste a range of top-notch Riesling, and this particular experience did not disappoint. With the personalities in the room – on the dais and in the audience – it was bound to be a deeply satisfying experience for a committed Riesling fan in terms of the hedonic aspects as well as the likely intellectual stimulation. The wines were presented in six flights, one of which featured three international and one Austrian Riesling served blind. What I can say is that Austria made its case convincingly (if it needed to): Both young and more mature examples showed brilliantly. Even after tasting 25 wines with as much concentration as I could manage, I felt invigorated and ready to start over. That proves the pleasure these wines delivered *and* the exhilaration fine Riesling tends to impart, leaving the taster refreshed and stimulated.

During the event, I asked Anne Krebiehl to address the subject of pH, the one parameter left off the technical data provided in the excellent tasting book. This was in fact more of a rhetorical question (unbeknownst to others) as I have spent some time looking into what some might call a highly esoteric detail. I did not have the chance to follow up on the reply, and related comments from the

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audience, or I would have made some of the points that follow as to the role of pH in the taste profile of Riesling.

On the surface, we are more comfortable with alcohol, sugar and acidity and view pH as something for oenologists and chemists. Not so, I would argue, and I am hardly alone. Stuart Pigott, author of *Planet Riesling*, has a fascinating and entertaining “global acid test” on his website that revolves around the pH of different drinks and edibles. He writes: “The only number which gives a good idea of how tart or soft a wine tastes is the pH.” This may make the point even more forcefully than would many scientists, but it is clear that focusing only on acidity and residual sugar is simply a matter of convention. True, if we think of pH as a mind-bending computation – the negative logarithm of the hydrogen ion concentration – it is only natural for most people to steer well clear of these two intimidating letters. When thought of in purely practical terms, on the other hand, pH is easily understood as the “strength” of the acidity; as such, it is a critical rather than superfluous element. This pertains above all, but not exclusively, to wines containing measurable sugars beyond a threshold of 2 g/l. It might be helpful to think of it this way: If wine were a knife, pH would be a measure of the sharpness of the blade.

The International Riesling Foundation (IRF), which was mentioned in passing during the tasting, has developed a scale to display on labels to address the dominant question from wine drinkers in the U.S. (if not some other countries): Is this Riesling dry or sweet? Their scale utilizes four simplified terms: dry, medium dry, medium sweet and sweet. To determine where a given wine falls along the horizontal scale, they take into account residual sugar, total acidity – and pH. The IRF methodology has arbitrary aspects, yet the scale fulfills a real need. It may not be perfect, but it is better, for the uninitiated, than the absence of guidance. (The fact that the final determination is left up to the individual winery rather than an objective authority is a loophole, but this is a separate discussion that would take us away from the main point.)

For the purposes of our conversation, we might restate the oft-heard question from wine drinkers by asking: How dry is dry? This now becomes a more nuanced inquiry which should interest professionals and informed Riesling observers. The IRF incorporates pH in a plausible if imperfect way to address this query. To understand the potent effect of pH, it is important to realize that the calculation is

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logarithmic: each point lower on the pH scale below 7 (or neutral) is many times more acidic than the reading above.

For the IRF, a Riesling would be judged to be “dry” based on the sugar-acid ratio *in the context of* the pH; the first two parameters are necessary, but could be insufficient. The IRF formula starts with the sugar-to-acid ratio, stating that a “dry” wine would have a difference in value of not more than 1.0. An example would be one with 7.0 grams of sugar and 7.4 of acidity. Then they look at pH, establishing the reference pH for Riesling as 3.1. If the wine cited above has a pH of 3.3, it would taste sweeter and deserve to be classified as “medium dry.” The effect of a pH below 3.1 is significant in the IRF formula with respect to wines with a larger sugar-to-acid differential; for example, a wine with a value as high as 4.0 would fall back into the “dry” category if the pH is 2.8 or less. The pH acts like a governor on a motor with respect to perceived sweetness.

Wines with a low ratio – dry wines, that is – present a separate challenge in that a Riesling with a sugar-acid value of less than 1.0 and a pH of, say, 2.9 is likely to taste not just dry but *extremely* dry to most palates, and possibly *severely* and unpleasantly dry to others. Some scientists (e.g., Ron S. Jackson in *Wine Science*) even say that wines with a pH below 3.1 may taste “sour.” The sort of electric, rapier-like cut Riesling addicts crave is in reality beyond the tolerance of many individuals. This is because, beyond the observations about pH, there is another and far more complex factor: the variations in human sensitivities and sensory thresholds. Indeed, what one person deems “dry” can be called “sweet” by someone else. In my years operating a retail business and answering online questions, I have heard just that from wine drinkers. But that is a topic for another day.

Although it may muddy the waters (or cloud the wine?) and reinforce how matters of taste are incredibly complex, we should not forget that ethanol plays a role as a sweetener in wine. The Austrian Rieslings in this tasting were mostly around 13.5% - possibly high enough to magnify the impression of sucrosity. Nevertheless, a Riesling with 9% alcohol stands a good chance to be a “sweet” wine to varying degrees as opposed to one at 13%, having nothing to do with relative ethanol levels!

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For now, I would argue that, to be complete, the ideal technical summary for Riesling with residual sugar above the standard tasteable level (2 g/l) should be the quartet of alcohol, acidity, sugar and pH. Ignoring any one of these parameters misses a *potentially* significant clue. Not knowing the pH, however, did not diminish the pleasure I received from the Rieslings in this tasting!

In the addendum that accompanies this report, I present the technical analysis, from lowest to highest pH, for a diverse assortment of international Riesling to illustrate the discussion of dryness. Five of the wines have a pH below the IRF base figure of 3.1. All of the wines would be thought of as “dry.” Only the Australian examples have sugars below 4 g/l together with comparatively low alcohol, high acidities *and* very low pH. These two wines surely fall into the *extremely* dry category. The challenge faced by Riesling producers is somewhat analogous to Champagne (although, of course, in that case the sweetness is always an addition). The *champenois* have moved in the direction of an increasing number of zero or near-zero dosage cuvées thanks to enhanced fruit maturities (*merci*, climate change). I wonder, should Riesling producers adopt a variation of the Champagne term, Extra Brut, for their driest wines? “Razor Sharp” would put off consumers; perhaps “Elegantly & Completely Dry” might be more enticing for Anglophone and Asian markets.

### **\*\*THE MOST IMPORTANT PART – THE WINES\*\***

#### **FLIGHT ONE – 2013 VINTAGE**

*The 2013s were, understandably, extremely young and undeveloped. The individuality of Austrian Riesling is immediately apparent. There were several very promising wines with the potential to develop positively in bottle, as the older vintages demonstrate.*

#### **2013 Wachau Smaragd Singerriedel, Hirtzberger \*\*\*(\*)**

*Light gold. Beautiful aromatic expression, very pure and clean. Multidimensional white and yellow fruit accents, rich yet youthful and restrained. Similarly impressive on the palate, with marked fruit expression albeit still in an early phase. There is a precise balance combining faint sweetness and embedded acidity which lingers at the conclusion. 13.5%, RS 8.0, TA 7.8.*

### **2013 Wachau Smaragd Achleiten, Jäger \*\*\*(\*)**

*Pale gold. Very young, high-toned and multifaceted nose offering ripe apple flesh, star fruit and a suggestion of mango. The taste is mostly reserved and dominated by an underlying richness which carries into the finish. Relatively non-expressive and undeveloped. Fine offsetting acid frame defines the finale. 13.5%, RS 3.5, TA 6.6.*

### **2013 Kamptal DAC Reserve Zöbinger Heiligenstein “Alte Reben,” Jurtschitsch \*\*\*(\*+)**

*Light gold. To the nose, the wine is focused, intense and concentrated, with youthful nuances of lemon peel, white fruit and stone. The taste is still undeveloped, hinting at pure aromatic notes, and the subtle aftertaste again confirms the wine’s youthful state, delivering elevated, elegant and defining acidity. 13%, RS 5.5, TA 7.8.*

### **2013 Südsteiermark (Sausal) Edelschuh, Wohmuth \*\*(\*+)**

*Light gold. The aroma is characterized by ripeness and fragrance with a measure of warmth. The palate stands in marked contrast: intense and incisive with racy, etched acidity. There are faint dusty notes in the finish, which is rather short. Lacks flesh and center in relation to its structure, but may show better in time. 13%, RS 3.5, TA 6.9.*

### **FLIGHT TWO – INTERNATIONAL RIESLING 2012 (SERVED BLIND)**

*It was a fascinating and challenging exercise to identify the origins of these four Rieslings. The ones from Kremstal and Alsace bore the clearest signatures. They were also, in my opinion, the best wines of the flight – and totally different from each other.*

### **2012 Finger Lakes Falling Man Vineyard, Keuka Lake Vineyards \*\*\***

*Pale gold. Highly expressive though atypical Riesling aroma offering chamomile, herb, mineral oil and spice. In the mouth, the wine is direct and sharply dry as well as somewhat hollow. Misses flesh and overall harmony. Structurally (but not aromatically), it reminded me of some German Trocken which really need more sugar in relation to acidity/pH to be balanced. There are more complete Finger Lakes Riesling. 12.5%, RS 4.0, TA 8.4.*

### **2012 Kremstal DAC Steinbühel “1ÖTW”, Malat \*\*\*(\*)**

*Light gold. High-toned and complex youthful aroma displaying dried yellow fruit and spice. The wine is rather open and transparent, amplifying in aromatic expression across the palate. Shows impressive finishing intensity and perfumed flair. Well-balanced, bone dry but not severe ending. The lowest sugar of all the wines in the tasting, unless that figure is a mistake. 12.5%, RS 1.0, TA 6.0.*

### **2012 Alsace Grand Cru Schlossberg, Domaine Bott-Geyl \*\*\*(\*+)**

*Gold to the eye. Rich, mature and lifted nose with attractive mango and yellow peach. The wine’s ripeness is evident once more on the palate, confirmed by a smooth texture and ripe, soft acidity. There is a suggestion of sweetness adding positively to the wine’s mouth-feel along with very subtle finishing aromatics. 13.4%, RS 7.7, TA 5.5.*

### **2012 Rheingau Kiedrich Turmberg “1VDP”, Robert Weil \*\*\*(+)**

*Light gold. Aromatically, this Rheingau Riesling lacks vivacity and expression, showing a low-toned, understated ripeness. The wine has a round profile and is a touch metallic at the end. Balanced, but does not sing. Is it this bottle? I last tasted this wine in June 2013 and found it more flattering, although a step down from Weil’s 2012 Gräfenberg. In any case, it was a hard wine to pin down blind except by process of elimination. 13%, RS 7.9, TA 7.9.*

## **FLIGHT THREE – 2011 TO 2007**

*This flight was a fascinating contrast of styles and expressions, moving from young to developing vintages. All five wines were harvested in November according to Anne Krebiehl MW.*

### **2011 Kremstal DAC Reserve Steiner Kögl “1ÖTW”, Salomon Undhof \*\*\*\***

*Light gold. Penetrating, focused aroma with marked intensity and apple fruit. This Riesling has notable weight and texture, carrying on with a long, mouth-coating finish, subtly expressive. There is warmth and generosity with relatively low acidity, revealing faint sweetness at the very end. 14%, RS 6.1, TA 4.9.*

### **2010 Wachau Loibner Loibenberg, Pichler-Krutzler \*\*\*\*(\*)**

*Gold color. Ripe, broad, concentrated nose with spice and poached apple highlights. In the mouth, this Riesling possesses flesh and substance hiding high acidity, which shows only at the conclusion. This outstanding wine offers equilibrium, precision and structure – all attributes of a long life in bottle. The highest acidity of the tasting (and the pH?). 13.5%, RS 6.3, TA 9.4.*

### **2009 Niederösterreich Königsberg, Gruber Röschitz \*\*\*\***

*Gold color. Aromatically, this 2009 has intensity and concentration and is in the early phase of bottle maturation, offering apple, spice and a toasted aspect. The taste is opening and showing beautiful expressiveness and initial maturity. Long and mouth-coating with embedded, well-calibrated acidity. The aftertaste is dominated by a lingering spicy aroma. 13.7%, RS 6.2, TA 7.6.*

### **2008 Kamptal DAC Reserve Zöbinger Heiligenstein “Alte Reben”, Bründlmayer \*\*\*\*(\*)**

*Light gold. Intense, piquant, inflected aromatics with exceptional purity and complexity. On the palate, the wine is simply gorgeous, filling the mouth with a sensual richness. Multidimensional, precisely balanced, long and caressing. This Riesling, harvested November 26 – 27, is extremely impressive in this very early stage of development in bottle. 13.5%, RS 6.0, TA 6.0.*

### **2007 Kamptal “Tradition”, Schloss Gobelsburg \*\*\*\*+**

*Gold color. To the nose, the Kamptal Tradition shows a degree of evolution and is notably creamy and oily in an attractive way, exhibiting spice notes as well. The attack is muted, but the wine builds in aromatic expression, surprising with a multifaceted perfume and precise acidity. There is a very long and seductive finish. Delicious drinking now. 13% (no other statistics provided).*



## **FLIGHT FOUR – 2006 TO 2002**

*These vintages are beginning to exhibit degrees of evolution, taking the taster into a different realm. The wines were of varying quality and maturity.*

### **2006 Kremstal Reserve Kapuzinerberg, Fritsch \*\*\*\***

*Light gold. The attractive, maturing aroma reveals restraint and very subtle baked apple. The wine is opening, with appealing honeyed richness and apple flavors together with delicate spices. Well-balanced with a barely perceptible sweet impression in the aftertaste. 13.3%, RS 7.8, TA 6.5.*

### **2005 Wachau 1000-Eimer-Berg, Sighardt Donabaum \*\*\*\*+**

*Deep gold. Concentrated, layered and controlled aromatics with a note of dried apple. The palate exhibits the benefits of moderate bottle evolution and is open and showing fabulous dimension, filling the mouth. Rich, not sweet. Impressively long, this 2005 retains very fine and elegant framing acidity. 13.5%, RS 4.0, TA 6.9.*

### **2004 Niederösterreich Terrassen Sonnleiten, Pfaffl \*\*\*+**

*Deep gold. A beguiling aroma marked by a fine and subtle fruit perfume. The palate is more mature, somewhat diffuse, and has an understated, evolving finish. 13%, RS 7.9, TA 7.3.*

### **2003 Kremstal Reserve, Müller-Grossmann \*\*\***

*Gold to the eye. Rich, maturing bouquet with a distinctive expression suggesting baked fruit and white mushroom. This 2003 is fat and generous, continuing through to a moderately warm, ample finish with a lingering, smooth, slightly sweet final impression. The acidity is ripe, not pointed (the pH might be a clue). 13.5%, RS 6.9, TA 6.8.*

### **2002 Kamptal Zöbinger Gaisberg, Hirsch \*\*\*(\*)**

*Gold color. High-toned, complex, flashy aromatics. The taste profile is defined by noteworthy tension and precision together with elevated, chiseled acidity. This 2002 is remarkably fresh and youthful for its age. Does the Stelvin closure explain its slow evolution? 13% (no other statistics provided).*



**FLIGHT FIVE – 2001 TO 1997**

*This was a stunning flight. The wines have entered a phase of life in which their finest qualities are fully evident while remaining vital and intense.*

**2001 Kremstal Reserve Kremser Pfaffenberg, Winzer Krems \*\*\*\*\***

*Light yellow gold. Beautiful signs of maturation – but not at all tired – and impressive intensity at this stage. Multifaceted taste profile with tertiary accents and baked apple. There is an extraordinary volume of aroma. A well-integrated acid spine defines the finale. 13.5%, RS 8.5, TA 6.4.*

**2000 Kremstal Tiefenthal, Mantlerhof \*\*\*\*\***

*Light yellow gold. Distinctly evolved yet very intense and concentrated with an oily richness signaling botrytis influence. Fabulous intensity and precision in its taste profile, opening gradually to reveal tremendous substance. Powerful, harmonious and balanced. 13.5%, RS 2.6, TA 5.5.*

**1999 Kremstal Gebling “Select”, Sepp Moser \*\*\*\*\***

*Light yellow gold. Arresting and forthcoming bouquet of spice, apple, and mushroom. Truly beautiful flavors, mouth-filling as well as complex. Endowed with excellent equilibrium. Long, finely nuanced finish. This is an exceptional Riesling, vivid and amazingly youthful. 13.5%, RS 6.9, TA 7.5.*

**1997 Wachau Smaragd Achleiten, Domäne Wachau \*\*\*\*\***

*Light yellow gold. Deep, rich, maturing nose expressing complex oily and tertiary notes along with dried peach. The palate is stunning and indicates ideal maturity, in no way advanced. The finish is extraordinary, with heightened aromatic volume along with a marked acid backbone that makes this 1997 precise and elegant. Very, very long and balanced. 13%, RS 7.6, TA 7.6.*

**FLIGHT SIX – 1999 TO 1990**

*This superb trio speaks of great sites and gifted winemaking. The youthfulness of all the older vintages is once more a prominent feature. The 1999s and 1997s in these two last flights are simply brilliant, and the 1990 was an utterly delicious cherry on the cake.*

**1999 Wachau Smaragd Loibner Loibenberg, F. X. Pichler \*\*\*\*\***

*A youthful light gold. Very fine, remarkably young nose showing restrained complexity and the barest suggestion of evolution. The palate is intricate and precise with a graceful subtlety and a lasting, seductive perfume. Beautifully calibrated and supremely elegant. 13%, RS 5.5, TA 7.0.*

**1997 Wachau Smaragd Steinriegl, Prager \*\*\*\*\***

*Light gold. Very fine, noble nose exhibiting a myriad of inflections including white pepper and apple flesh. There is astounding youthful vitality. In the mouth, this 1997 Steinriegl is precisely constructed and very persistent with fine, complex aromatics. This is an exciting, completely dry wine with notable finesse. 13.2%, RS 2.5, TA 7.7.*

**1990 Wachau Smaragd “Im Weingebirge”, Nikolaihof \*\*\*\*\***

*Yellow gold. The bouquet commands attention with an almost youthful intensity together with sultanas and tertiary notes. In contrast, the palate possesses an understated, gentle mouth-feel and is open and scented. The extended finish is marked by still-fresh acidity and a sense of elegance. A testament to this great year and in its prime at 25 years from vintage. 12.5%, RS 6.8, TA 6.2.*

**Rating system:**

**\* to \*\*\*\*\***

**( ) = potential additional rating after bottle maturation**

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Comments & questions may be addressed to:  
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# Tasting Notes of Roger C. Bohmrich MW

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## ADDENDUM

### A SELECTION OF “DRY” INTERNATIONAL RIESLING – TECHNICAL ANALYSIS

*From lowest to highest pH*

<b>Wine</b>	<b>Alcohol %</b>	<b>Total acidity g/l</b>	<b>pH</b>	<b>Residual sugar g/l</b>
<b>Pikes Riesling “Traditionale” 2015 – Clare Valley, Australia</b>	12	7.9	2.88	3.9
<b>Dr. Konstantin Frank Dry Riesling 2014 – Finger Lakes, New York, USA</b>	12.5	7.0	2.9	8.0
<b>Chateau Ste. Michelle Dry Riesling 2012 – Columbia Valley, Washington, USA</b>	13	7.0	2.93	7.1
<b>Pewsey Vale Riesling 2015 – Eden Valley, Australia</b>	12	6.2	2.99	2.1
<b>50<sup>th</sup> Parallel Estate Riesling 2014, Okanagan Valley, BC, Canada</b>	13	8.6	3.0	7.0
<b>Loimer Riesling Reserve 2012 – Kamptal, Austria</b>	13.5	6.9	3.1	5.7
<b>Hugel Riesling “Jubilee” 2009 – Alsace, France</b>	13.55	7.29	3.13	8.0
<b>Thelema Riesling 2013 – Stellenbosch, South Africa</b>	13.36	7.3	3.18	6.1