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WINES OF THE TIMES

An Irresistible Austrian Riesling Beckons



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

By ERIC ASIMOV

Published: May 9, 2011

LET me immediately declare my bias: I love Austrian rieslings. I say that knowing I’m speaking very generally, but don’t we always about wine?

Recipe

Smoked Trout Frittatas (May 11, 2011)

Tasting Report

The wine panel tasted 20 Austrian rieslings from recent vintages.

* 1. Graf Hardegg

Niederösterreich

What's This?

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Riesling vom Schloss 2008

*** 1/2

\$19

Tangy, energetic and plain delicious, with ripe fruit and stony mineral flavors.

I’ve been wondering about the distinction between general notions and particular bottles in the wake of the wine panel’s recent tasting of 20 Austrian rieslings from recent vintages. Florence Fabricant and I were joined for the tasting by Raj Vaidya, the head sommelier at Daniel, and Laura Maniec, the founder of Corkbuzz Wine Studio, a wine education and events space.

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Tasting Coordinator: Bernard Kirsch
Best Value

While we found many wines that we liked, we also felt confused by how hard that was to do. Despite how I feel about Austrian rieslings, I was disappointed after the tasting, a feeling shared by my colleagues. Too many wines lacked the definition, focus and precision that characterize not only good Austrian rieslings but rieslings in general. They lacked energy and what I could think of only as completeness; that is, the myriad qualities that, together, make a balanced, complete wine but that stand out mostly when they are lacking.

I was nonplussed, as well. How could I like the category so much but find so many of the wines lacking? The answers came later as we learned the details of the variables in the blind tasting. Six different regions were represented, but the differences between regions were less important than the fact that the tasting was roughly divided between the 2009 and 2008 vintages, with two from 2007 thrown in for good measure.

Many in the [Austrian wine](#) trade regarded the 2009 vintage as difficult yet superb. The weather was a combination of extremes — very warm, very cool, very rainy, very dry — that gave some winemakers trouble but that in the end resulted in opulent, full-bodied rieslings with plenty of tropical fruit. By contrast, the cooler 2008 vintage was not considered to be as good for rieslings, while 2007 was thought to be in the middle between 2008 and 2009.

Paradoxically, we much preferred the 'o8s over the 'o9s. Of the 10 wines from 2008 in our tasting, six of them made

our Top 10, along with one from 2007 and three from 2009. What's more, our Top 4 included three from 2008 and the one from 2007. The three 2009s that did make our Top 10 all came from superb producers who were skilled enough to transcend the issues faced by some of the others. Then again, possibly we have different standards from those of the trade.

To put it another way, the disappointment we felt about wines lacking acidity, definition and balance applied largely to the 2009s in our tasting. If you like big, ripe rieslings that display power and rich fruit, than perhaps the 'o9s are for you, but if your definition of Austrian rieslings aligns with mine, then most likely you will prefer the 'o8s.

A version of this review appeared in print on May 11, 2011, on page D2 of the New York edition with the headline: An Irresistible Austrian Beckons.

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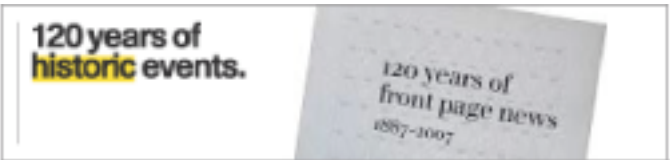


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WINES OF THE TIMES

An Irresistible Austrian Riesling Beckons

Published: May 9, 2011

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Our favorite was the 2008 Graf Hardegg vom Schloss, the only wine in the tasting designated Niederösterreich. It's a vague, generic appellation that applies to the wine because its region, Weinviertel, officially permits only grüner veltliner among white wines. Well. This unsanctioned wine was exactly the sort of exciting, inspiring, refreshing, mineral-laden wine that comes to mind when I think of Austrian rieslings. It was also, at \$19, our best value.

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* 1. Graf Hardegg Niederösterreich

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Right behind it were three wines, including the structured, complex 2007 smaragd from Kartäuserhof in the Wachau, Austria's most prestigious white wine region, and the gentle, well-balanced 2008 federspiel from F. X. Pichler, also from the Wachau. Incidentally, don't let the avalanche of German wine terminology drive you off, complex as it may sound. Smaragd and federspiel are merely ripeness designations, used only in the Wachau, with smaragd representing exceptionally ripe grapes, and federspiel representing classically ripe grapes.

Our No. 4 wine is surprisingly from Wien, or Vienna, the only great metropolis in the world to have its own appellation. Yes, Vienna is a historic grape-growing region, with almost 2,000 acres of vines within its city limits. The 2008 Jutta Ambrositsch offered a deliciously powerful minerality along with flavors of flowers and herbs.

As for the three from 2009 in our Top 10, they come from Nikolaihof, Nigl and Bründlmayer, three of Austria's top producers, and while they all appropriately reflected their vintage, they were each nonetheless complete, balanced wines, unlike some of the '09s that we rejected.

The Nikolaihof vom Stein federspiel from the Wachau was rich and fleshy, juicy and complex, while the Nigl Privat Senftenberger Pellingen, from the Kremstal, was ripe and perfumed with flavors of tropical fruit. The Bründlmayer Steinmassel, from the Kamptal, was not quite up to the other two '09s, with its odd combination of brininess and almost candied flavors.

Looking back on the tasting, I was relieved to find that our disappointment was not just because of overly high expectations, as Laura had initially suggested. It wasn't only a matter of vintages — we preferred the '08s but didn't love all of them. And it wasn't about location — some good wines came from overlooked regions, and poor ones came from exalted regions. In the end, the most crucial consideration was the producer.

Riesling vom Schloss 2008

*** 1/2

\$19

Tangy, energetic and plain delicious, with ripe fruit and stony mineral flavors.

Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Importer: Monika Caha Selections/Frederick Wildman & Sons, New York

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Tasting Coordinator: Bernard Kirsch
Best Value

Graf Hardegg Niederösterreich, \$19, *** 1/2

Riesling vom Schloss 2008
Tangy, energetic and plain delicious, with ripe fruit and stony mineral flavors. (Monika Caha Selections/Frederick Wildman & Sons, New York)

Kartäuserhof Wachau Riesling, \$40, ***
Achleiten Smaragd 2007
Taut and refreshing with good structure and complex flavors of minerals and flowers. (Metrowine, Stamford, Conn.)

F.X. Pichler Wachau Riesling, \$42, ***
Federspiel Urgestein Terrassen 2008
Well balanced with pleasing flavors of citrus and herbs and a gentle minerality. (Weygandt-Metzler, Unionville, Pa.)

Jutta Ambrositsch Wien Riesling, \$35, ***
Nussberg Ried Preussen 2008
Mineral, mineral, mineral, along with flavors of flowers and herbs. (Darcy & Huber Selections, Mount Vernon, N.Y.)

Nikolaihof Wachau Riesling, \$29, ** 1/2
Vom Stein Federspiel 2009
Rich and fleshy, juicy and complex, with a nutlike quality. (Terry Theise Estate Selections/Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

Emmerich Knoll Wachau Riesling, \$65, ** 1/2
Smaragd Kellerberg Durnsteiner 2008
Lively and energetic, with bright citrus, herbal, earth and melon flavors. (deGrazia Imports, Winston-Salem, N.C.)

Nigl Kremstal Riesling, \$45, ** 1/2
Privat Senftenberger Pellingen 2009
Ripe and perfumed with tangy, lingering flavors of tropical fruit and herbs. (Terry Theise Estate Selections/Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

Bründlmayer Kamptal Riesling, \$29, **
Steinmassel 2009
Creamy and earthy, with an unusual combination of briny and candied flavors. (Terry Theise Estate Selections/Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

Sepp Moser Kremstal Riesling, \$26, **
Von den Terrassen 2008
Direct and straightforward with fresh, tangy mineral flavors. (Martin Scott Wines, Lake Success, N.Y.)

Josef Schmid Kremstal Riesling, \$26, **
Reserve Sunogein 2008
Fresh and light-bodied, with floral and apple flavors. (Vias Imports, New York)

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