

# Riesling revealed

Bob Campbell MW gives the low-down on his favourite white wine and reviews his top-10 choice of New Zealand rieslings

To arrive at my list of top-10 rieslings I reviewed 140 wines. But before I share my top 10 with you (see over the page) I'd like to tell you something about my favourite white wine.

## WHERE DID RIESLING COME FROM?

The first record of riesling dates back to 1435 when Count John IV recorded buying six riesling vines for his vineyard near the Rheingau in Germany.

## WHAT DOES RIESLING TASTE LIKE?

Riesling has particularly pure and expressive flavours, which can indicate whether it is from vines grown in a very cool site (citrus, floral and sometimes mineral) or a warm site (ripe tree-fruit flavours such as peach, nectarine and apricot). The flavours also tell us whether the wine is youthful (bright, fresh fruit) or has been aged



for a few years in bottle (mellow toast and possibly kerosene). If the wine has any honey characters the grapes were probably showing some botrytis infection (botrytis is a beneficial mould capable of concentrating grape sugars and flavours).

## HOW DO I KNOW WHETHER IT WILL BE DRY OR SWEET?

An increasing number of producers are labelling their wines as 'dry' while a few enlightened souls are already adopting the International Riesling Foundation's recommendation to show on the back label whether a wine is dry, medium/dry, medium/sweet or sweet.

Alcohol level can be a guide to sweetness. Natural grape sugars convert to alcohol during fermentation. Making a slightly sweet wine is simply a matter of stopping the wine fermenting just before all the sugar has been converted. A medium/sweet wine will have its fermentation stopped sooner. As a general rule, if the alcohol is above 13 per cent the wine is likely to be dry or fairly dry. If the alcohol is 10-12 per cent, expect the wine to be medium to medium/sweet. Less than 10 per cent alcohol suggests the wine will be medium/sweet to sweet.

## WHY IS MOST NEW ZEALAND RIESLING AT LEAST SLIGHTLY SWEET?

New Zealand's best rieslings are produced from the country's more southerly vineyards where the weather during ripening is cooler, helping to retain the grape's bright fresh flavours and crisp acidity. The inevitable crisp acidity often needs to be balanced by at least a small amount of sweetness (more acidity, more sweetness added). By contrast, Australian riesling tends to be dry because weather conditions are warmer and the grapes have lower acidity levels.

## WHAT IS THE BEST SERVING TEMPERATURE FOR RIESLING?

I like to drink medium riesling at the temperature of my wine cellar, which is 14°C. My wife, Marion, likes it best at fridge temperature, which is about 4°C. Who's right? We both



This graph-in-a-glass shows which countries make riesling and how many hectares are planted with riesling vines.

are. Serve riesling at whatever temperature best suits your taste. As a general rule I serve drier riesling at lower temperatures than sweeter riesling, but others prefer the reverse.

There is much to be gained from messing around with temperature until you achieve perfection. To chill wine fast, I use Rapid Ice sleeves (sleeves that are stored in the freezer and rapidly drop wine temperature when placed on a bottle), and the microwave to raise the temperature.

## HOW LONG DOES RIESLING KEEP?

Riesling is capable of ageing in the bottle for longer than just about any other white wine. Under good storage conditions all the wines in my top-10 list should last for five years from vintage date, with the best ageing for 10 years or more. Ideal storage conditions are cool and constant temperatures (14°C or less is ideal) in the dark with bottles stored on their sides if sealed with a cork (it doesn't matter with screwcaps).

Bottle age changes the wine. Acidity becomes softer and new flavours emerge (such as toast and kerosene), gradually swamping the wine's initial fruitiness.

Main photograph by GETTY IMAGES

In general terms, wines with higher sugar and acidity levels (these usually go hand-in-hand) last longer.

## THE BEST RIESLING GLASSES?

The Austrian glass company, Riedel, has designed a glass especially for riesling; however any moderately sized, crystal, stemmed wine glass will be fine. I find that the glass needs to have a reasonably large bowl to bring out the best in riesling's often haunting perfume. If the glass is too large you may find the wine becomes too warm before you have time to drink it.

## INTERPRETING THE LABELS

Terms that sometimes crop up on riesling labels include:

**Late harvest:** This usually means that the wine is at least slightly sweet - the grapes have been left on the vine for an extra period to gain higher sugars and riper flavours.

**Spatlese:** A German term meaning 'late harvest' (see above).

**Botrytis:** Also 'noble', 'botrytised' and 'botrytis-affected'. The grapes have been shrivelled by the vineyard mould botrytis cinerea. The wine will almost certainly be sweet with a distinctive honeyed flavour.

**Auslese:** A German term meaning selected late harvest - that is, the most botrytis-affected bunches have been selectively picked to intensify the botrytis characteristic.

**Mineral:** A flavour common in riesling and much prized by riesling lovers. Think of the difference between mineral water and distilled water. Mineral water often has a salty mineral tang.

**Kerosene:** A controversial characteristic often found in aged riesling, and more common in Australian wines than New Zealand riesling. Some people love it, others hate it. It's more likely to be found in wines made from ripe grapes that have received high light exposure, perhaps some water stress, and that have been grown in warm soils.

## WHAT FOOD GOES BEST WITH RIESLING?

	Classic matches	Adventurous matches
<b>Dry</b>	Seafood, pasta, veal, pork chops, goat cheese, sushi/sashimi	Cold meats, dim sim, soft-shell crab
<b>Medium/sweet</b>	Fish with a beurre blanc sauce, sashimi, soft-rind cheeses, barbecued chicken, crab cakes	Falafel, most crustaceans, samosas, savoury soufflés
<b>Sweet</b>	Gorgonzola and other blue cheeses, spicy foods	Curries, Cajun shrimp
<b>Very sweet</b>	Fruit tarts, foie gras, crème brûlée, ice cream	Blue cheeses, rice puddings



**TOP-10 NEW ZEALAND RIESLINGS**

- 1 Fromm 2008 Spätlese Riesling, Marlborough, \$27**  
Quite sweet with a low alcohol of only 7%. Powerful wine from the winery that pioneered the style in this country.
- 2 Martinborough Vineyard 2009 Bruno Riesling, Martinborough, \$28**  
First vintage of a new and moderately sweet label. Delicately luscious wine with a drop-dead-gorgeous silky texture and juicy acidity.
- 3 Kusuda 2009 Riesling, Martinborough, \$32**  
First riesling by a Japanese winemaker whose wines show fastidious attention to detail. Medium/dry wine with an ethereal texture and exquisite balance between sweetness and acidity.
- 4 Forrest 2007 John Forrest Collection Riesling, Marlborough, \$50**



**MOUNT RILEY WINE GIVEAWAY**

Mount Riley 2007 Riesling is a lush, off/dry wine with a balance of crisp acidity and slight sweetness, made from a blend of grapes from the Wairau Valley region of Marlborough and Nelson. Good drinking now as an aperitif or with seafood, light meats and spicy food, or keep until 2012. For a chance to win six bottles of Mount Riley 2007 Riesling, see the entry form on page 137.

Off/dry riesling from one of New Zealand's leading riesling makers. Seriously complex and powerful wine with appealing stone-fruit flavours.

- 5 Forrest 2009 The Doctors' Riesling, Marlborough, \$20**  
Low alcohol, moderately sweet wine made in the style of German mosel. The wine builds a wonderful tension between subtle sweetness and fine acidity. Mouthwatering riesling.
- 6 Craggy Range 2009 Te Muna Road Riesling, Martinborough, \$25.95**  
Dry, robust riesling with stone-fruit, rose petal and mineral flavours. Very serious wine that promises to age well.
- 7 Villa Maria 2008 Fletcher Vineyard Riesling, Marlborough, \$25.99**  
Medium/dry with lime zest, mineral, floral and honey flavours. Classy wine with power and presence.
- 8 Seresin 2009 Memento Riesling, Marlborough, \$27.50**  
Medium riesling that shows great purity of flavour, a great balance between acidity and sweetness and a wonderfully pure texture.
- 9 Martinborough Vineyard 2009 Jackson Block Riesling, Martinborough, \$28**  
Crisp, dry riesling with gently refreshing flavours. Great food wine that goes well with a good range of seafood and vegetarian dishes.
- 10 Spy Valley 2007 Envoy Riesling, Marlborough, \$28.90**  
Moderately sweet riesling with enough acidity to give a medium/dry finish. Powerful lime juice, rose petal and slate/mineral characters with good weight and an impressive length.