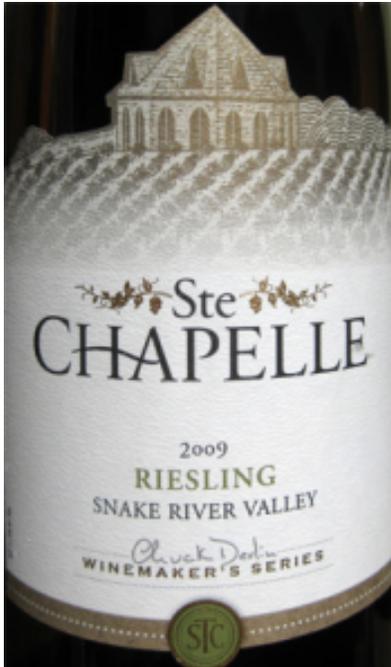


Brave New World on Planet Riesling

AUGUST 13, 2013 By Mike Veseth



No joke: Idaho Riesling

I've been writing about the problems of marketing misunderstood and misunderappreciated wines for the last couple of weeks and before I leave this subject I want to take time to give you a brief report from the Riesling Rendezvous conference hosted by Chateau Ste Michelle and Dr Loosen in Seattle last month. Although the public face of the conference was the sell-out Sunday Grand Tasting on the grounds of the Chateau in Woodinville, the real work took place at the waterfront Bell Harbor Conference Center on Elliott Bay. What did we learn about life on Planet Riesling (as Stuart Pigott calls it)?

Small Worlds and Big

Well, it's a big world after all — that's the first insight. We tasted spectacular wines from many corners of the globe and regions of the U.S. and Canada. But it is a small world, too, as global quality standards have risen due in part, I think, to the international exchange of technical information that Riesling Rendezvous and its partner conferences have promoted. The gap between Old and New Worlds has closed dramatically.

You might have enjoyed the scene at the two formal tastings, where about 300 of us sat in front of 20 glasses each of dry Riesling on the first day and off-dry Riesling on the second. We tasted the wines blind and then, one by one, members of the expert panel commented on the wines and tried to place them in terms of origin — Old World or New? Cooler climate or warmer site? Particular time (vintage) and place?



Sometimes the experts were spot on, but I think the organizers might have selected the line up of wines to make the point that Planet Riesling is changing, so sometimes (more often than not, I believe) they were fooled. Fooled, generally, by unexpected quality from an unexpected source, which is a nice way to be surprised.

Ooohs and Aaahs

There were ooohs and aaahs, for example, when one wine was revealed to be from Elesko Winery in Slovakia. Wow, none of us saw that coming, probably because we didn't have Slovakia on our radar. I remember tasting a few crisp, delicious white wines from this region when I taught in Prague, but beer, not wine, is probably the first thing that comes to mind (despite Austria's obvious presence) when you think Central Europe. Very impressive.

Tim Atkin, who moderated the off-dry tasting (John Winthrop Haeger handled the job for the dry wines) seemed to take special pleasure in revealing that a wine that had been firmly placed in the Mosel region by a panelist was in fact made by Ste Chapelle of Idaho (part of the rapidly rising Precept Wine group). How many cases do you make, Atkin asked Marueen Johnson who represented the winery, probably imagining the sort of hillbilly Idaho wine industry that the old Muppet Movie scene (see below) suggested? Forty thousand cases came the reply. Wow, that's lot, Atkin said obviously surprised (and that's just Riesling — total production tops 100,000 cases for this, the largest winery in Idaho). It's a brave new world on Planet Riesling when fine wines can come from such unexpected corners of the globe.

Two Directions at Once

Further evidence of how the Riesling map is changing was provided by two new Chateau Ste Michelle Riesling wines: Anew Riesling, which seeks to broaden the Riesling base, and Eroica Gold, which aims for a more classic style and promises to deepen interest in this category.

Anew, with its elegant bottle (which reminds me of a graceful off-the-shoulder gown) and subtle flower label seems to enter the market as a wine targeting women, who of course make up the majority of wine drinkers and, for reasons that I'll explain in a future post, a disproportionate part of the Riesling base. Off-dry but not too sweet, it makes a tasty aperitif — a nice way to end of day of work and start the evening. Coming from the creators of the hugely successful 14 Hands wine brand, this is a wine that could convert Pinot Grigio drinkers to Riesling fans.

Eroica Gold is the newest project of the Ste Michelle – Dr. Loosen partnership and it builds upon and expands the very successful Eroica Riesling line. Eroica has a hint of sweetness and can often be purchased for \$20 or less (I've seen it at Costco for about \$15) — very good value for money and often listed as one of America's best Riesling wines.

Eroica Gold is riper, botrytis influenced, and, at \$30+, more expensive. It aims to take American Riesling consumers to the next stage. Hopefully it will both communicate to American consumers what they might find in European wines and also represent the New World effectively to the Old.

Inevitable Seattle Food Porn

The conference ended with a festive reception at the Chihuly Garden, a blown glass fantasy highlighting the work of Northwest art icon Dale Chihuly, which I mention only because it gives me an excuse to include this “food porn” photo of the seafood buffet. Ahi tuna, smoked salmon, oysters, shrimp, and crab. What a treat!

Riesling may be misunderstood and there certainly are problems to be worked out, but on that warm afternoon in Seattle, with Riesling in my glass and smoked salmon on my plate, life on Planet Riesling seemed a pretty sweet place to be.

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