



# BALANCING act

**Never mind consumers, the wine trade is still hung up on the sweet/dry divide when it comes to German Riesling, to the discredit of more nuanced offerings, writes Anne Krebiehl MW**

**DRY GERMAN** Riesling is carving out a growing niche in the UK market, especially in the mid- and upper price bands. New packaging, ultra-clean flavours and not least the inherent quality of a noble grape have wrought the change. Yet the discussion seems to be stuck: mention Germany and talk invariably turns to sweetness when what really matters is balance.

Challenging stereotypes is always hard

but in this instance it is particularly tricky. There are several reasons: the message that Germany now produces more dry than sweet wine only penetrates slowly\*. Communication is difficult: even if strides have been made with new, straightforward labels – particularly with the VDP's Grosse Gewächse which finally gives the market one single category for dry, high quality wines from classified single sites – the way German wine is

taught, due to its painful labelling laws, does more to confuse than clarify. This confusion does the “dry” message no favours. Perhaps resulting from this very confusion there still is, both in Germany and the UK, an obsession with analytic data, even for *trocken* wines. Here lies the crux of the matter: even many professionals lack the most basic understanding of how residual sugar and acidity interact.

**THE RIESLING DIFFERENCE**

The biggest, most enduring mistake is to look only at the residual sugar (RS) of Riesling without considering acidity. It is in this very respect, however, that Riesling is different from other wines. Notwithstanding harvest date, this variety almost always has far more acidity than other white grapes – and this goes for Riesling from both cooler and warmer regions of Germany as well as from the rest of the world. As a comparison, most white wines have a titratable acidity (TA) of between 4-6g/l. Riesling customarily has TAs of between 6-10g/l, in cooler years, cooler regions or when the juice in grapes was concentrated by freezing or botrytis infection this can be even higher. Chenin Blanc from cooler regions show similar acidity, as do some Sauvignon Blancs. Due to early harvest and sometimes climate, base wines for sparkling wine are similar in acidity profile too, as are English wines due to the marginality of their climate. But the high acidity of these

**'You mention the word sugar to customers and they immediately have a perception of sweetness'**

wines is often balanced by RS and, in the case of sparkling wines, by dosage and the additional body from lees ageing.

Alcohol and texture also balance acidity, but acid-sugar interaction is complex. We taste them both, but they have masking effects on each other – not to the same degree, though. The composition of the acids in wine varies too, even though we are dealing mostly with tartaric and malic acids. RS in Riesling occurs mostly as fructose, simply because yeasts prefer to metabolise glucose, leaving literally “residual” fructose. When exploring perceived sweetness-sourness interactions, Zamora, Goldner and Galmarini found in a 2006 paper published in the *Journal of Sensory Studies*

that “the suppressive effect of tartaric acid on fructose sweetness is stronger than the suppressive effect of fructose on tartaric acid sourness.” It must also be noted that in very small quantities, sugar does not act as a sweetener but rather as a flavour enhancer of fruit – a fact also evident in side-by-side comparisons of dosed/non-dosed Champagnes. This explains why Riesling can take a certain amount of RS and still taste and finish completely dry.

Crucially, it also explains why looking at RS without considering TA is simply wrong. Context is everything: “Sugar is a substance you can measure, but sweetness is a human sensation – they are just not entirely related,” says Clark Smith, oenology wizard and author of *Postmodern Winemaking*.

So, short of lecturing everyone, including professionals, on acid/sugar interaction, might it not be better to just communicate that these Rieslings are dry?

**GETTING THE MESSAGE**

When it comes to consumers, Kate

Dowdeswell, senior national account manager at ABS Wine Agencies, thinks so: “You mention the word sugar to customers and they immediately have a perception of sweetness. It’s the same with wood: they say they don’t like oaked wines but pour them white Burgundy fermented in new oak and they love it. When talking to consumers one should simply

describe the wines as dry – without worrying if there is RS or not,” she says unequivocally, and notes increasing demand for dry German Rieslings. Sebastian Thomas of German specialist importer Howard Ripley, has seen a great uptake of dry German Rieslings. “It’s a sector we didn’t really deal with at all ten years ago, now it’s a significant part of our business, especially in restaurants,” he reports. “Grosses Gewächse have found a lot of interest amongst our private customers.”

**Feature findings**

- ▶ Dry German Riesling is performing well in the UK, but is overshadowed by outdated discussions on sweetness when the focus should be on balance.
- ▶ The biggest mistake, and one which even the vast majority of wine professionals make, is to look only at the residual sugar (RS) of Riesling without considering acidity – the latter having a unique impact on this variety.
- ▶ Research into the relationship between sugar and acid on taste is revealing surprising conclusions.
- ▶ The over-reliance on residual sugar readings on labels of German Riesling is encouraging consumers to taste with their heads before drinking the wine.
- ▶ Preconceptions in the trade also indicate a lack of understanding.

**ANALYSIS OVERLOAD**

But he is frustrated with Germany’s insistence on stating RS/TA data: “In which other country do people talk about analytic values? Have you ever heard a Burgundian talk about RS or acidity in wines? Consumers, and I lump them together with the average sales person, are just confused by analytic values.” On the other hand, Steffen Christmann, chairman of the VDP but also a winemaker of fine dry Rieslings in the Pfalz, says that the UK and, to a far smaller degree the US and Asia, are the only markets that constantly harp on about RS. “In all other markets the fact that these wines are dry is taken for granted,” he asserts.

All agree, however, with winemaker Katharina Prüm of the famous Joh. Jos.

Prüm estate, that analytic data is mostly “misleading”, not only among consumers but also within the trade. It is for this reason that they and estates like Markus Molitor – both incidentally in the Mosel where higher RS levels are more common – categorically do not publish analytic data. Prüm is clear: “Sadly only a minority understand that a Mosel Riesling can finish dry with 30g/l of RS. If you provide people with analytic data they judge with their head.” She also emphasises that “taste impression cannot be depicted by analytic data. Even wines with the same analytic data taste different.” She agrees that there is a German tendency to overvalue data and thinks that “sugar is over-interpreted.”

Dowdeswell observes that even for dry Riesling, “most of our growers are very

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reluctant to publish residual sugars and acidities because people don’t necessarily read them in context and make assumptions. I wish even the trade were less hung-up on figures and more focussed on how they perceive the wine and if it is in balance.”

#### **A GROSS MISUNDERSTANDING**

Jim Tresize, US-based co-founder of the International Riesling Foundation, who developed a “Riesling Taste Profile”, a widely-used scale featured on Riesling bottles at all sweetness levels, says: “I do believe that there is a gross

### **Trade talk: Should German Riesling producers shift the focus of their winemaking and communication away from dry/sweet and instead concentrate on ‘balance’?**



**ALEX RITTLINGER, MARKETING & DOMESTIC SALES DIRECTOR, REH KENDERMANN**

With balance almost as a given, communication should only mention sweetness where the wines are very sweet such as a Mosel Auslese. We believe there should be greater focus on what the wine stands for, whether it be an estate wine like our joint co-operation Riesling with the Staatsweingebiet Oppenheim, our premium “foodie” wine, Kendermann’s Limited Edition Riesling, our terroir series including Roter Hang and Kalkstein Rieslings, or now our new global branded concept for younger consumers, “Über”, a truly cool and contemporary expression of Riesling.



**STEFFEN SCHINDLER, HEAD OF MARKETING, GERMAN WINE INSTITUTE**

Producing Riesling is always a balancing act and it’s something that German winemakers have been doing for centuries. Riesling more than any other grape variety has the lusciousness and elegance of fruit coupled with a lively acidity that helps it age and develop structure. German wine producers have been talking about balance for years and so has the wine trade, but the question is how do you communicate to consumers that a wine with 30g of residual sugar actually tastes drier than expected because it has a high acidity? Does a consumer “get” the concept of balance? Probably not. Do consumers understand “sweet” and “dry”? Probably yes. With this in mind, we will continue to talk about balance and dry style German Riesling to consumers while also creating descriptors that are better able to tell the story and style of the wine using terms such as “elegant”, “fruity”, “mouth-watering”, “refreshing” and “crisp”.



**PATRICK LANGGUTH, INTERNATIONAL MANAGING DIRECTOR, FW LANGGUTH ERBEN**

Riesling stands for German wine because it is by its very nature light, lively and fruity, thanks to Germany’s unique climatic and geological conditions. The FW Langguth Erben winery with its own steep slope vineyards in the Moselle valley has cultivated Riesling wines for eight generations and is nowadays a leading producer in the regions of Rheinhessen and Pfalz as well. All Rieslings in our portfolio, such as our new Blue Nun Riesling, the Erben Riesling Réserve and our Villa W estate Riesling are produced to reflect the best of their individual origin, be it the steep slope slate vineyards of the Moselle valley or rolling hills of the Rhine region. Balance of flavour, acidity and natural sweetness is thereby given the utmost attention by our winemakers. That means we have always concentrated on the “balance” and individual profile of each of our Riesling wines. In terms of our communication we try to work to the expectations of our individual target groups as close as possible. This means that on branded propositions such as Blue Nun Riesling we do not state any prominent taste descriptors to avoid confusion. These wines are sold around the world and, whether dry or sweet, can be perceived very differently depending on where the wine is being enjoyed. So, balance and continuity are very much in the focus of our Riesling winegrowing and winemaking.”



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misunderstanding by a large segment of the trade; they don't understand Riesling. Even though the Taste Profile to a great extent is aimed at consumers, it also is extremely valuable for the trade because many of the people who work in restaurants frankly are not that knowledgeable about wine."

Christine Parkinson, group head of wine for the Hakkasan Group, rightly states that "Riesling is the most deceptive wine, always having much more acidity and sugar than is apparent." Having observed countless sommeliers across the world, she explains: "Sommeliers almost always state whether a wine is sweet or dry when guests enquire about Riesling. They realise there are drier styles, although they may not appreciate the role acidity plays in creating a dry taste."

However, it is particularly with modern, lighter styles of cooking that dry Riesling can shine. Just a smidgen of RS in a dry wine beautifully accentuates the small, sweet elements so common to contemporary cuisine. Understanding is key. Those who do can pair Rieslings well and don't find it a difficult sell. Jan Konetzki, head sommelier at Restaurant Gordon Ramsay says: "Rieslings with their RS and high acidity are fascinating because they are very dramatic - many people are surprised. It's a little rollercoaster with each sip. The wines are not difficult to sell; they bring something new to the table." But he is adamant that "looking at technical sheets before tasting is wrong. Data cannot tell you what the taste is."

It is safe to say that a certain lack of understanding on the professional side has hindered Riesling. The oft-cited factor that it is a hard sell seems more and more like an excuse on the part of those who don't really know how to talk about it. Once understood, acid/sugar interaction becomes a wonderful way of thinking about Riesling and other high-acidity wines. The best Rieslings, whether dry, off-dry or sweet, display a thrilling tension between those two elements.

### Playing the sweet game

Even in Australia, the traditional stronghold of bone-dry Riesling, winemakers are experimenting with residual sweetness:

- ▶ Chester Osborn of D'Arenberg on his McLarenVale Dry Dam Riesling: "You have Rieslings that have RS but they taste dry. The trick is getting the triangle between sugar, acid and alcohol right so it tastes pretty much dry, is not too acidic and the alcohol is in balance - it all comes together."
- ▶ Mac Forbes, of the eponymous Yarra Valley winery: "I think often the Oz approach is outcome-focused and certain winery procedures are considered the only way to make Riesling (like whole bunch pressing, fining phenolics out at multiple stages of wine making and the use of temperature control, stainless steel, yeast and enzymes). In all respects we break with these traditions because the fruit dictates it. and I think it also suffocates vineyard expression. We are not making sweet Rieslings for the sake of sugar, but with our high natural acids and flavoursome and delicious skins (no bitter or hard sunburn characters are found) we find the RS helps balance out the wine."
- ▶ Jeremy Dineen, winemaker at Josef Chromy Wines, Tasmania: "Tasmania can produce very different acidity profiles with delicate flavours that are highly suited to crafting off-dry styles, particularly at lower alcohol levels. RS is really a tool to balance natural acidity. We do not chaptalise or adjust acidity, so RS enables me to pick very early with incredibly delicate flavours and very low pH (2.8 to 2.9), yet still achieve a balanced and harmonious wine. I particularly enjoy the tension of timing the two critical decisions of when to harvest and when to stop the fermentation to achieve that balance. It is a nice combination of precision and intuition."

Perhaps it's also time we focussed more on balance and had more faith in our own perceptions. As Katharina Prüm declares, "wines with personality are like people; they can't be reduced to figures. db

*\* Data from Wines of Germany, based on Riesling produced in the Bundesland Rheinland Pfalz (i.e. Pfalz, Rheinhessen, Mosel, Mittelrhein, Nahe and Ahr, excluding all other wine regions but representing 75% of German Riesling production). In 1985 39.63% were dry or off-dry; in 2013 61.17% were dry or off-dry.*

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