

## Stuart Pigott *The Riesling Story: Best White Wine on Earth*

Stewart, Tabori & Chang  
\$25 / £15.99

REVIEWED BY  
ANNE KREBIEHL MW

One can just about imagine the conversations Stuart Pigott must have had with his publishers: “Oh, no! Not another book on the much-vaunted but never quite realized ‘Riesling renaissance.’” Then again, he was dealing with New York City-based food and drink specialist Stewart, Tabori & Chang. Pigott’s paean to Riesling is doing nothing less than picking up on a hot hipster movement that seems to have been born in that very metropolis. “Hipster? Riesling? Metropolis?” I hear you ask, but if you have been fortunate enough to be on the receiving end of shared YouTube Riesling-themed video clips over the past two years, you will understand the trend that Pigott has plugged into. For millennial and Generation Z city-dwellers, the cohorts that grew up without any heavy Riesling baggage, Riesling, of course, has all the necessary attributes of urban hipness: absent enough from the obvious mainstream and yet solidly present once you know where to look; still considered “naff” by those who are simply not on-trend; sufficiently original and packaged differently to stand apart in sleek flutes; sufficiently exotic with a whole new set of niche vocab with which to impress fellow hipsters; an illustrious history for those who care to know; suited to cult geekdom by virtue of details like gold capsules, single-site names often sporting fetching umlauts, and incredible back catalogs of mature vintages; of evident quality but comparatively affordable; and complex and varied enough to warrant hours of intense uncorking sessions among insiders. Quite apart from that, it is also absolutely delicious.

It is with this audience in mind that the book was written: The tone is as refreshing and uncompromising as a



## The hipster's guide to Riesling



This article from *The World of Fine Wine* may not be sold, altered in any way, or circulated without this statement. Every issue of *The World of Fine Wine* features coverage of the world's finest wines in their historical and cultural context, along with news, reviews, interviews, and comprehensive international auction results. For further information and to subscribe to *The World of Fine Wine*, please visit [www.worldoffinewine.com](http://www.worldoffinewine.com) or call +44 1795 414 681

chilled glass of Nahe Kabinett. It is this, crucially, that sets the book apart from all the other heavy-going tomes that went before. It is a fast-paced read, even for those of us who are only moderately hip. The statements are bold: “If you remove prejudices, then Riesling often tastes better than other white wines. [...] Unlike so many other wines, and so much else in our globalized world, Riesling hasn’t been bastardized by corporate bean-counters and marketing departments.” There also are some home truths: “Reaching first base means grasping fundamentals, and you’d be amazed how many wine professionals haven’t yet made it to first base but are still convinced that they’ve hit a home run.” But this is not a bitter or angry book—on the contrary, Pigott states early on, “The fact is that Riesling tastes like nothing else on Earth, and its praises haven’t been sung often or loud enough, hence the need for this book.” We quickly see that this is a true labor of love, a culmination almost, of Pigott’s own life in wine, entangled with and pervaded as it is by this most Germanic of grapes. English by birth, Pigott has spent most of his adult life in Germany where he is a well-known wine critic, journalist, author, and TV personality. After championing German wine since the 1980s, when this was still an odd thing to do, he has almost exclusively published in German—in fact, I own a secondhand copy of what was probably his last English-language book published in 1988, *Life Beyond Liebfrämilch*. The present book represents a return to his mother tongue and presumably also his move to New York after many years in Berlin. Pigott is thus more familiar with German wine culture than most Germans, and certainly than most non-Germans. It is fair to say that he has played a crucial part in the reappraisal of German wine within Germany, witnessing the country’s remarkable quality revolution over the past 20 years and the rediscovery of authentic, unadulterated Riesling on its home soil. His experience and involvement makes him authoritative and convincing—and certainly opinionated. Like any true Riesling lover—or “acidhound” as the International Riesling Foundation termed its adherents a few years ago—Pigott is only partisan when it comes to variety, not origin. The narrative, styled

as an exploration of “Planet Riesling” in a series of “Riesling Adventures,” thus starts in the East Village, in the New York wine bar Terroir belonging to Paul Grieco, author of the foreword, where this new global wave of Riesling appreciation had its zero hour on June 21, 2008, with the first “Summer of Riesling.”

Pigott does not set off without first profiling his favorite grape—a “joyful extrovert with hidden depths [...] with the steeliness of a secret agent or the in-your-face glamor of a vamp”—and briefly recounting its history. Who knew that during that first period of aching hipness in Riesling’s life, a Chinese-grown Riesling from the Shandong province won a gold medal at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco in 1915? Or that, at the time, “California Riesling was invariably one of the most expensive still wines on the menus of West Coast restaurants”? While Pigott acknowledges the Teutonic origin of the grape, he is at pains to emphasize its global nature.

Where he excels is in his explanations of what acidity, pH values, residual sugar, TDN (1,1,6-trimethyl-1,2-dihydronaphthalene—the so-called “petrol” scent), botrytis, minerality, and aging really are. Aimed at wine novices and pros alike, Pigott’s tone manages to clarify and inform without dumbing down. In doing so, he also says a few sensible things about sulfur dioxide and is perceptive about our attitudes: “In the West, many of us are schizophrenic about sweetness, consuming significant amounts of added sugar in all manner of foods and beverages but strictly rejecting the natural sweetness of many wines, including some Rieslings.” He also bluntly states that “all cash cows taste the same: bland and sweet.” Once he has tackled all the customary misconceptions about Riesling head-on, he sets off on the first “adventure” and traces the initially tentative fortunes of Riesling in New York’s Finger Lakes, where the variety was pioneered in the late 1950s by Dr Konstantin Frank: “At first,” says Pigott, “the lack of acclaim was deafening.” At whistle-stop pace, Pigott then takes the reader around various producers along the American east and mid-west: touching on Ohio, New Jersey, Ontario, and Michigan. The second adventure touches down on the American west

coast, the third in Australasia, the fourth in Austria, before homing in on Germany and Alsace with adventure number five, “Rhine and Its Tributaries.” Pigott finally acknowledges Riesling’s “Lone Rangers” in Eastern Europe, Chile, Argentina, and South Africa in the sixth adventure. While the introductions to these chapters are masterful, peppered with insights and relevant and often surprising facts, complete with historic context and stats, listing the producers per region with a few comments might have been more helpful to the reader than packaging everything in prose. Winery name, vineyard names plus brief profile plus tasting note, followed by another winery, tasting note and profile comes across as confusing and repetitive without a map or a selection of the discussed Rieslings to hand. Pigott is nothing if not thorough, and he wants to mention as many producers as possible. This is ambitious and admirable as an aim but difficult in its present format.

Nonetheless, how much Pigott loves Riesling becomes clear in these chapters. While he is enthusiastic, even fervent in his praise, he never succumbs to sentimentality, is never uncritical. Because of his genuinely lived and deep familiarity with Germany and her winemakers and vineyards, the far more fleshed-out German chapter represents one of the best and most comprehensive guides to German wine and wine culture, hidden away in a book about a world Riesling movement. He concludes with global lists of his Top Ten value Rieslings, then his Top 20 Rieslings in a range of styles, plus a list of what he terms “blade runners,” or extreme Rieslings. There are also brief, often personal, vignettes of “Riesling cities” like Vienna, Sydney, and Berlin.

Finishing the book leaves one thirsty and with itchy feet. Jam-packed with information and extremely well researched, it’s a dazzlingly encompassing guide to Riesling and so much more: a no-nonsense, irreverent but heartfelt love letter, a manifesto, the chronicle of a contemporary movement, and an impassioned call to arms to all acidhounds (of whom this reviewer is one). What makes me smile is that no matter how clean-cut, hipsterish, and bold Pigott tries to be and often is, faced with some luscious Riesling liquids, he cannot help but grow as lyrical as the rest of us.