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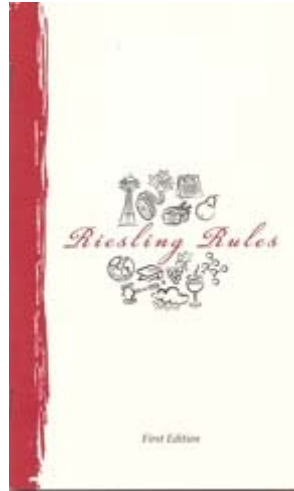
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riesling indeed does rule

Wednesday, October 28, 2009

Nicolas Quillé, winemaker and general manager for Pacific Rim, the (almost) all riesling project headquartered in the Columbia valley, posted up some new stats from Nielsen on his Facebook page.

“Looking over the 13 weeks Nielsen data,” writes Quillé, “riesling is showing the fastest growth among all major varietals. Riesling is ahead of chardonnay, white zinfandel, merlot, cabernet sauvignon, pinot grigio, sauvignon blanc, syrah, zinfandel, pinot noir and sangiovese, growing at 8.2% versus last year. Now riesling is clearly a larger category than zinfandel (believe it or not) and I would not be surprised if within 6 months riesling takes over syrah. Riesling now represents 2.5% of all wine sold in the USA which is about twice what it was 3 years ago. Much deserved growth for a fantastic varietal.”

Even when you take away the completely understandable excess enthusiasm from this producer, who is heavily committed to the varietal, the trend clearly speaks volumes about changing wine tastes in the U.S. The move away from heavily-oaked, malolactically-adjusted white wines toward “naked” or “free” or “unwooded” – in other words, stainless steel fermented – varietals is well established. Why? Because without all the wood and flab, you can actually taste the grape and even the terroir. Once you start to taste the grape, you start to realize that most chardonnay doesn't have much in the way of flavor. There are certainly exceptions – especially from Oregon (featured in an earlier blog post) – but overall, chardonnay is dull as dishwater without the oak. But riesling shines all by itself. Unoaked, unblended, unfettered.

A concurrent trend toward aromatic white wines is also floating the riesling boat. It may have begun with the somewhat puzzling popularity of pinot grigio (Santa Margherita! – what's that about?), but it's moved over into the sauvignon blanc (thank you New Zealand) and riesling camps. Aromas that include something beyond buttered popcorn and wood chips add terrific complexity, hence enjoyment, to wine. Great riesling has those wonderful floral, citrus, honey and mineral aromas in abundance.

Finally, there is the price factor. Two of the best rieslings made in Washington – arguably two of the best rieslings made in America – are Eroica and Poet’s Leap. Both sell for around \$20. Pacific Rim offers several single vineyard (and one biodynamic) bottlings that cost over \$30 – still cheap by great wine standards. Their regular bottlings – sensibly labeled “Dry” and “Sweet” and “Organic” sell for around \$12. What other varietal made in America tops out at such low prices?

As I prepare my annual Paul Gregutt Top 100 Washington Wine list (to be published in about a month) I find many rieslings made the final cut. Among them: Poet’s Leap, Eroica, Whitman Cellars, Pacific Rim, Trust, Nefarious Cellars, Gamache, Snoqualmie, and Airfield Estates. On the other hand, chardonnays were in short supply.

www.rieslingrules.com