



TODAY'S LIFESTYLE



It was love at first sip for German wine connoisseur

[By Maria C. Hunt]

Rudi Wiest is a man who knows what he likes. The list includes jazz, especially by composer-arranger Maria Schneider, cooking at home from classic cookbooks and avant-garde French art.

His wine of choice is a nice, dry German riesling. If you hazard a qualified statement that riesling is one of the best white wine grapes in the world, Wiest (pronounced VEEST) will interject to proclaim it the best white wine grape ever.

The world may love chardonnay, but to this Carlsbad, Calif., resident's palate, that "California oak water" doesn't approach the excitement, the sublime marriage of fruitiness and electric acidity that is found in riesling.

"There is a refinement and elegance and raciness to these wines. There's a lot of vibrancy on the palate, and they really dance," Wiest, 71, said.

"Chardonnay is a whore. It will do anything, any place," he said, referring to the fact that chardonnay grows in every wine region of the world. "Creaminess and vanilla ... doesn't excite me very much."

After he was entranced by the taste of a 1953 Karthausenhof Riesling, Wiest's passion led him to seek out small and fine German wines and sell them in the U.S. This was in the late 1970s, a time when Americans only knew German wines sold as Liebfraumilch.

Terry Theise, the other big proponent of German wine in the U.S. since 1985, said that Wiest pioneered visiting family-owned wineries, tasting their wines and only selling the good ones.

"Rudi was the first person to put a portfolio together that had any meaning," said Theise, from his office in Silver Spring, Md. "They have very good wines in their portfolio."

Master Sommelier Paul Roberts, wine director at Per Se and The French Laundry, said Wiest, and later Theise, played a pivotal role in getting Americans to appreciate German-made riesling, scheurebe and pinot noir.

"Rudi is without a doubt one of the leaders in bringing great German wine and specifically riesling to the United States," Roberts said. "Those two guys are single-handedly responsible for this riesling renaissance."

Roberts featured one of Wiest's finds - a 1989 Bert Simon Riesling Auslese - on the wine lists at both Per Se and The French Laundry. It sold out at \$24 a glass.

Wiest is proud that some of the best restaurants in Las Vegas, Hawaii, Los Angeles, and New York City pour wines from Rudi Wiest Selections, the company he founded that now is based in San Marcos, Calif. But ask him about restaurants in his home county, and he starts to sound a bit like Rodney Dangerfield.

"In this town, it's kind of tough," said Wiest, who has lived in Carlsbad since 1978. "I think it's still kind of a California chardonnay and cab (kind of place). They're less open to European wines."

But as a new generation of sommeliers in San Diego County studies the great wines

of the world, things are starting to change. Sommeliers at restaurants such as Jack's La Jolla, George's at the Cove, Arterra and Addison and wine shops, including Tastes in Encinitas and North County Wine Co. in San Marcos, are featuring German wines.

Allie Mitchell, the Southern California sales representative for Rudi Wiest Selections, said she was shocked when a buyer asked her for German pinot noir.

"I said, 'I can't believe I'm having this discussion in San Diego,'" Mitchell said. "That's a San Francisco wine question."

CHANGE OF PLANS

A native of Germany, Wiest moved with his parents to New York City when he was 16. Wiest said he had no plans to enter the wine business; his first love was hanging out in jazz clubs.

He served in the U.S. Air Force, meeting his future wife, Erna, on one of his weekends home. His parents were hosting her stay in the U.S.; a year later, the couple married. Being a dutiful son, Wiest pursued a degree in engineering as his father suggested. He settled in San Diego after graduation and worked at AT&T.

During a transfer to San Francisco, Wiest met co-workers and others who liked good food and wine. He started tasting wine with people who had gems like 1945 Chateau Lafitte Rothschild in their cellars.



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"I used to drive up to L.A. to look for mis-marked bottles because I didn't have the money to pay full price," Wiest said.

Looking for a way to build a cellar on an engineer's salary, Wiest started selling wine for a couple of distributors, taking his commission in wine. He began a collection that would form the basis for his 10,000-bottle cellar, which includes three of the first bottles of a rare German dessert wine from 1921.

He was selling French wines until a 1975 dinner where the host pulled out that 1953 Karthausierhof riesling to serve with foie gras. It sounded like a bad pairing until Wiest tasted it.

"I was absolutely stunned," he said "It was 23 years old, and it was an amazing wine. That was the wine that got me hooked."

He then started promoting German wines. Wiest still relives his first big sale, in 1977, when the Hollywood deli Greenblatt's ordered \$19,000 worth of German wine in 20 minutes.

The company - now run by: his son, Brent Wiest; Brent's wife, Ann; and national sales manager Thomas Haehn - has a portfolio of names like Wegeler, Joh. Jos. Prum, Fritz Haag, and Gunderloch.

Between 2001 and 2004, the company's catalog included more than 300 wines rated over 90 points by the Wine Spectator. In baseball, it would be like having a lineup of players including Hank Aaron, Babe Ruth, Ted Williams, and Barry Bonds. In April, a prestigious association of German winemakers, the VDP, awarded Rudi Wiest the Silver Medal of Honor in Germany for his lifetime efforts.

A big part of gaining acceptance for German wines was changing the look of the labels. Wiest insisted that the producers do away

with all-German labels and the old script fonts that were hard to read.

On a recent visit to California, Gunderloch winemaker Fritz Hasselbach said the sales of their estate riesling jumped after they followed Wiest's advice.

Hasselbach says that once people learn to read a German wine label, they know a lot. "It's a little bit complicated, but on the other hand, it gives you the most information on what is in the bottle, compared to a French Burgundy wine label," Hasselbach said.

FOOD FRIENDLY

The amount of German wine Americans drink is growing steadily as more people seek out food-friendly, lower-alcohol wines. But the demand is still small compared with the taste for wines from Italy, Australia, and France. German wine represented 3.7% of the imported wine Americans drank in 2005, the most recent year for which figures are available, according to M. Shanken Communications' Impact 2006. In 2006, German wine imports were valued at \$126 million, according to the German Wine Information Bureau.

Jesse Rodriguez, the sommelier at Addison at the Grand Del Mar in Del Mar, Calif., said that riesling is the wine professional's juice of choice.

"As it relates to food, it's one of the best wines you can use," he said. "These wines have just a piercing amount of acidity, they're fleshy, and they have this great peach, apricot, and stone fruit."

Rieslings pair with many foods, including seafood, pork, game meats, spicy Asian dishes, and cheeses. A dry kabinett riesling works well with langoustine in a Thai red curry, while spatlese, dessert-style riesling, is great with semi-soft or blue cheese accompanied by peaches, Marcona almonds and honeycomb, Rodriguez said.

Compared with the world's other great wines, riesling is strikingly affordable. Rodriguez's list includes the Monchhof Estate Riesling for \$6 a glass and a wine he describes as the holy grail of riesling - a 2005 Fritz Haag Riesling Spatlese from the famous Brauneberger Juffer Sonnenuhr vineyard - for \$16 a glass.

Diners sometimes worry that riesling is sweet, but Rodriguez said once they taste what a great match it is for their dinner, they're happy.

Jim Allyn, who owns North County Wine Co. in San Marcos, said customers are starting to understand that riesling, because of its balance of sugar and acid, is very age-worthy. He sees people buying wines like his 2005 Joh. Jos. Prum Riesling Spatlese for \$35 with plans to age it.

"This wine has a really good finish that lingers and lingers, and you could cellar it for 30 years until it tastes like syrup and honey," Allyn said. "A lot of collectors and sommeliers, half their cellars are riesling."

On a recent afternoon, Wiest led a tasting of notable German wines for a group of wine brokers and retail shop owners. He talked the group through 19 wines, adding commentary such as explaining that the village name Eitelsbach means iron, and those wines have a steely note to them.

As the tasting ended, Mitchell, the sales rep, brought out a Riedel decanter filled with a mystery wine that Wiest challenged the group to identify. It was a deep golden color and slightly cloudy, like apple cider. It smelled and tasted of butterscotch, honey and caramel corn.

Birds could be heard chirping as everyone fell silent, breathing in the aroma, tasting and thinking.



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It was a 1976 Zilliken BA (Trockenbeerenauslese) dessert wine, a rare elixir that, like the man who imported it, has just improved with time.

READING THE LABELS

Riesling is about the balance of acidity and sweetness. One of these six descriptive words can be used on the labels of high-quality German riesling to indicate how ripe the grapes were at harvest. Knowing the grapes' ripeness gives consumers an idea how rich the wine will feel on the palate.

The first three listed can denote wines that are dry, medium dry or full-on fruity and sweet. The driest of these have the word "trocken" on the label; wines with a slight hint of sweetness will say "halbtrocken" (half-dry). If you don't see either of those words, it signifies a sweet wine. The last three are always dessert wines.

- **Kabinett (pronounced cabinet):** Wines with this word on the label are made from just-ripe grapes. These are crisp wines with a light-weight body like skim milk.
- **Spatlese (schpayt-lay-zuh):** This term means late-harvest, so the grapes are left on the vine until even more ripe. These wines have more weight to them, similar to 2% milk.
- **Auslese (ows-lay-zuh):** These wines made from clusters of very ripe grapes have a weight like whole milk.
- **Beerenauslese (beer-en-ows-lay-zuh):** These are rich, honeyed dessert wines made from very ripe grapes picked one at a time. The grapes have been affected by a beneficial fungus called botrytis (bo-TRY-tis) that leaves them shriveled and sweet.
- **Eiswein (eiss-vine):** Ice wine in English, these are grapes that got caught in a storm and froze on the vine, which concentrates the flavors.
- **Trockenbeerenauslese (trocken-beer-en-ows-lay-zuh):** Called TBAs for short, these are the most precious and expensive German dessert wines, made from super dry grapes affected by the botrytis fungus. Their high level of sugar and acid means these wines can be aged for decades.

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