



Balancing act

From bone dry to succulently sweet, New Zealand's renowned rieslings make a big impression



FOUR WAYS ... Craggy Range in New Zealand offers a wide selection of riesling styles

The better New Zealand rieslings are exhilarating wines, but I fret a little for them. Will they face the same public confusion as the wines of Alsace? It's the sugar – sometimes a little, sometimes a lot – that people find so confusing. But the sugar is also what makes the wines so refreshingly unpredictable and generally delicious.

It comes down to acidity. As most of the wine-growing areas of New Zealand are quite cool, the acid levels can be formidable. Add to this a grape with naturally high acidity, such as riesling, and you end up with exceedingly racy wines that demand a little sugar for balance.

The thing that's most delightful (and dangerous) about NZ's rieslings is their unpredictability. Some are bone dry, others are as delicately crunchy and sweet as a mouthful of granny smith apple, while a third group is lusciously rich and saccharine.

It's a theme that some producers play upon, making a range of wines of varying sweetness. Felton Road regularly releases a dry riesling and another in a more Germanic style (low alcohol, bright acid and gently sweet). Fromm produces an expansive range of incredibly delicate, pure rieslings, again with a dry version, and then following the German theme with a spatlese, auslese, and the occasional beerenauslese and trockenbeerenauslese.

If you are familiar with German wines and their nomenclature, the Germanic labelling is a useful guide as to how rich and sweet the wines will be. Without it, you need to be familiar with each wine.

Craggy Range makes rieslings from Martinborough, Marlborough and Waipara under four labels, each finding its own balance of alcohol, acid and sugar. Craggy Range's wines are superbly crafted, and its Glasnevin Gravels Vineyard Riesling – almost as light, delicate and gently sweet as German kabinet – is the star. It's one of the Waipara (Canterbury) rieslings that have convinced me it's a superior riesling producing region.

Pegasus Bay consistently produces stunning riesling; the best in NZ from the handful I've tasted over the years. Piercing, pure, fragrant and impeccably balanced,

it's a masterful wine, release after release, and a perfect example of the Waipara style.

Daniel Schuster's eponymous winery produces wines that are idiosyncratic and his riesling is no exception. It pushes the boundaries of finesse and delicacy. The 2006 is a mere 9.5 per cent alcohol with piercing acidity and just enough sweetness to balance. It is, perhaps, the most stark example of my message about these off-dry rieslings and how refreshingly delicious they can be.

Muddy Water, a Waipara brand, has recently released three rieslings of differing styles. Its 2007 Dry Riesling is only "almost dry" in Australian terms (6.2g of sugar per litre), but any drier and the wine would seem hard and coarse, with the acid out of kilter. As it is, it's a beautifully balanced wine with great vivacity and cut.

The 2007 James Hardwick Riesling is a fine example of the more Germanic-Kiwi style that's semi-sweet and delicate, although compared to wines such as the Daniel Schuster, its 12.9 per cent alcohol is quite hefty.

Finally, there's the 2006 Unplugged Riesling, which is given complexity by botrytis but still isn't overly sweet. Instead it balances like a perfectly ripe piece of fruit; medium bodied at best, fine rather than sugary or rich, and seductive enough to attempt a bottle on your own.

The plethora of NZ riesling styles might be confusing, but their disparity is what makes them so enticing and interesting. So, if you have a sugar phobia, get over it and discover the complexities of these wines for yourself.

TOP DROP

TIN SHED MELTING POT SHIRAZ 2005
At 15 per cent, the alcohol is hefty but barely noticeable under a swag of plush, rich fruit. The tannins are soft and velvety, the oak unnoticeable, and the whole package is decadent and polished. This is a serious Barossa red at a bargain price. \$22 at Stewart Wine Co Hamilton, 1st Choice Keperra, and Vintage Cellars Chapel Hill.



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