

International Riesling Symposium 2022

Long-lasting Rieslings through the prism of potential marketing opportunities and the necessary viticultural and vinicultural conditions.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Esteemed Colleagues!

As an introduction to my thinking, I'd like to start with what is undoubtedly a provocative question. We've come together here at Kloster Eberbach for the International Riesling Symposium, to pay homage to the grape variety Riesling and the many wines produced from it. And one of the reasons we've gathered here is because we all share the opinion that Riesling is not only a fantastic grape variety, but perhaps even the finest in the world.

But — does it make sense at this point in time to pay homage to a grape variety?

I don't recall any of the speakers from past editions of this event raising that question, but I think it's crucially important that we do. After all, if you look at current trends and developments in the fine wine sector, it quickly becomes clear that the people making decisions on wine distribution in the entry-level segment are the ones focused on varietal-based marketing. The concept of single-varietal marketing is thus something more appropriate for wine novices than wine aficionados and pros.

In Austria, an effort was initiated 20 years ago to create an appellation system. And in recent years, a series of *Schutzgemeinschaften*, or local heritage preservation societies, have been constituted in Germany's winegrowing regions as well. One of the key features and objectives of an appellation system is to define origin to the greatest degree possible, so that grape variety plays a subordinate role.

The establishment and development of appellations are a significant step for a winegrowing nation, and go together with an entire series of changes to our conceptual understanding of wine and its marketing. So far, so good. Yet one cannot forget that for more than two generations, the entire industry used the grape variety as the key element in its marketing. Appellations by contrast inherently dictate that priority be placed on origin as the most important element in the marketing of wine. In this system, grape varieties play a somewhat subordinate role. And that in turn requires a paradigm shift. My experiences, which span the past 20 years of this process in Austria, dictate that after 50 years of variety-based marketing, most vintners and marketers (including retailers and sommeliers) find it extremely hard to make the leap. The establishment of appellations is thus not just a legislative process, but above all else an effort to change how people perceive reality.

So wouldn't it be more in keeping in the times to focus not on variety, but rather questions of origin and its meaning? Does homage to Riesling as a grape variety even touch on the core of the fascination, and on the greatness of wine in general?

Having now raised these doubts, I'd like to move on to a closer look at the phenomenon of our 'fascination with Riesling' from various vantage points, and then address questions of viticulture, viniculture, and marketing. So — what is it that makes our hearts beat faster?

The question of IDENTITY

We should acknowledge up front that 'Riesling,' in the context of German viticulture, means **identity**. This may well touch upon one of the many differences between Austria and Germany, namely that for us in Austria, Riesling doesn't represent any sense of national identity (a role famously held by us by Grüner Veltliner). Which is not to say that the variety bears no importance for us in Austria. Many years ago, I was invited to join in on a small Riesling symposium with Ernie Loosen and Jeffery Grosset at the Institute of the Masters of Wine, and in preparing for that event, I came upon that old canard between Germany and Austria about the true origins of Riesling. It should be duly noted at this point that the question is, in fact, completely irrelevant. In Germany it is not a matter for debate, since the people of this nation presume that the birth of the variety involves Germany in one way or another. And yet the question isn't quite as self-evident as you might think. Remember, Sylvaner (the Austrian grapevine) originally came from Austria, even if nowadays its prime importance is found in Franken, even as it has vanished from the Austrian landscape. Why couldn't Riesling be the same? And — you might be able to guess what's coming next — there is in fact a theory that Riesling originated in Austria, passing from the Danube region on to Germany.

I then passed along this theory at the aforementioned Riesling Symposium, further underscoring it with a few not-so-scientific theories and arguments. Ernie was freshly returned from America for the symposium and was completely jet-lagged. I think he dozed off a bit during my presentation, yet somehow he managed to catch a bit of my theory in his half-waking state, and you all can imagine how he reacted to it...

For us in Austria, Riesling is a grape variety that — partially due to the way our vineyards are structured — is indispensable. Few other varieties are capable of handling the dry terraces of the Danube region; and beyond this, I as a winegrower maintain that vineyards — in a sort of historical process — in some ways search for the variety that they want to represent them. The transformation from field blend to monovarietal planting occurred in Austria primarily after the Second World War. Here are photos from Austria in the 1930s, and you can see how field blends and single-stake training were still dominant. After the War, the vineyards were successively converted to the '*Hochkultur*' training style on the one hand and monovarietal planting on the other. Our tasting library provides a clear timeline of this transition, as it contains bottles from the 40s, 50s, and 60s in monovarietal versions of most varieties found in field blends. In the 70s, a selection process began, whereby over the next 25 years the various varieties disappeared, leaving only Grüner Veltliner and Riesling behind (among the whites). This in turn corresponds to our vineyard structures, since Riesling feels at home on dry, minerally terraced vineyards, while Grüner Veltliner thrives on loess or clay-based soils with a good water supply. Grüner Veltliner and Riesling are complementary varieties, after all — what the one doesn't like, the other does. Respecting this fact is, in my opinion, the obligation of every winegrower, although with strong irrigation it is naturally possible to outmaneuver nature.

But in terms of the identity of Riesling as a variety, I have the impression that the majority of the population in Germany are proud of Riesling, even if it only takes up a fifth of the land under vine,

and, according to the numbers, many 'normal' consumers don't even really enjoy drinking it. Something that at least in part can be attributed to the fact that wines made from the Riesling grape tend to be challenging and better suited for wine aficionados than novices.

For that reason, I think that beyond Germany, where Riesling is more identity than simple variety, its significance as a great wine can be found among dedicated wine lovers and experts than classic consumers.

Riesling and its CELLARABILITY

Another acknowledged characteristic of this beloved variety is its cellarability. By this I mean that wines based on the Riesling grape more or less tend to demonstrate tremendous attractiveness as they mature — meaning here: even after 10 or more years. This situation must at least in part be attributed to the genetics of the variety, since certain aromatic compounds are inherently genetically determined. It must also be noted that this attractiveness requires significant consideration and experience before it is perceived as attractive by consumers. Those famous petrol tones are only of limited appeal to normal consumers.

My direct experience with the 'cellarability' of Riesling relates to our tasting library at Weingut Schloss Gobelsburg. The Cistercian monks bottled wine at Schloss Gobelsburg back in the 19th century. Henry Vizetelly, writing in his book 'Wines of the World', mentions approvingly a wine from the monastery, and an oil painting in our office documents this wine in the form of a monk filling bottles.

The oldest bottles go back 'only' to the 1940s. Due to the effects of two world wars, our precious reserves of wines from the 19th and early 20th centuries are gone forever. I mention this even if it has little bearing on these considerations and merely serves my own vain self-regard.

As already mentioned, in the period after the Second World War, the vineyards of Austria were converted from field blends to monovarietal cultivation. The aforementioned vinothèque offers us the opportunity to observe a broad spectrum of grape varieties in terms of their maturation. One fundamental truth applies, namely: wines from any variety can be aged. Which is not the same as saying that all of them will still offer us — and by that I mean the illustrious circle of wine fans and connoisseurs — vinous joy after ten, twenty, thirty or fifty years.

I'll forgo the details just now, but let's say that after 25 years of experience in tasting this collection, it is primarily the wines based on Grüner Veltliner and Riesling that demonstrate the greatest potential for maturation and drinking enjoyment.

Let us intentionally skip past analytical data and questions of acidity, sugar, extract, PH and the like, since the question of 'why' isn't so crucial for this discussion. But both in Austria and Germany — and Alsace shouldn't be forgotten here either — there is an intersubjective unity among experts that wines made from the Riesling grape are 'cellarable' — and not only should those opinions be respected, we should start by accepting it as true and established.

Which CHANCES and OPPORTUNITIES does this open up?

The topic and the question behind these considerations allow for an investigation of the **chances** for marketing Riesling. If, based on the aforementioned considerations, we accept that wines from the Riesling grapes are 'long lasting,' meaning wines that stand apart based on their aging potential, then we can see that additional aspects and opportunities for marketing arise.

The consequences, and the chances arising therefrom, would be that wines from the Riesling fruit do not fundamentally need to be sold immediately, but rather through their ripening potential can be expected to get better and more valuable with time — insofar as one is prepared to invest time and capital into such wines. This logically creates the potential for value-adding services by both producers and retailers. That's the theory, anyways.

In practice it's not quite so simple, as there are also a certain set of requirements that must be satisfied before a wine can truly improve with age, and thus fulfill the conditions for any such supplemental marketing. As we all know, not every wine created from the Riesling grape is made to last. Anyone who has explored wine at a more intense level knows that truths in wine are not simple, but rather follow complex structures.

At this point, however, we need to address an ever-present truism. It's ridiculous but true that there is a correlation between the finest parcels of vineyards and Riesling plantings, which leads to the question as to whether the wines are so cellarable because they're from the Riesling grape, or because they hail from the very best parts of the vineyard? Even in Germany, you don't use wines from poor or mediocre sites to establish the greatness of the wine, but rather almost always wines from the nation's best and most majestic sites.

Does this 'chance' that we're talking about apply to wines made from Riesling grapes whose properties are shaped by soil, climate, etc, or is it for a country's best vineyards, based on Riesling?

This is more than just a purely theoretical exercise. In my eyes it is in fact a very important question for any vintner among us, with far-reaching consequences. Either answer is theoretically possible, of course, and reflect the true experiences and practices of vintners.

In the first case — i.e. wines made from Riesling grapes whose characteristics are shaped by soil, climate, and people — the question at hand is: what exactly is the nature of RIESLING itself, given that its characteristics are then channeled in one direction or the other. This line of thought poses the question based on the *possibilities* inherent to this grape variety. It is the basis for the Prädikat quality system, which answers the question of how a Riesling Kabinett from Ried Heiligenstein tastes, and/or which expression a Riesling Spätlese from Ried Heiligenstein has. The focus of the attention is always the grape variety. The label then looks like this:

Riesling

Spätlese

Ried Heiligenstein

The other way of thinking — meaning: the vineyard, reflected through a specific variety — in turn positions the vineyard at the center of a context featuring historical and cultural development. The constant is the personality of the vineyard, and the question arises as to its typicality in the historical/cultural context. Varieties change over time. Well into the Second World War, our

vineyards were shaped by field blends whose composition varied based on the soil structure and climatic conditions. Typicity in a vineyard is thus more or less an intersubjective ideal among vintners, with the precondition that they dedicate themselves communally to the topic. As a result, there is just one typical expression of a vineyard, not multiple. This concept forms the prerequisite for an appellation system, which is ultimately the point of these musings. Working under such a concept, a label would look thusly:

Ried HEILIGENSTEIN

KAMPTAL

Riesling

VINEYARD – CELLAR - CULTURE

If we're focused on the question of which vineyards and cellar work are necessary to establish 'cellerable' and 'outstanding' Riesling wines, then I am going to intentionally skip over questions such as how are the soils to be processed, whether organic or non-organic is necessary, which maceration times are required, or whether the wines need to rest on the lees, etc. These matters are simply beyond the scope of this investigation.

Recently I took part in a TV interview on the topic 'Can the vineyard be tasted in the wine,' during which I was asked if you can taste the terroir in the wine. And if we're honest — what else could I say? OF COURSE YOU CAN TASTE THE TERROIR IN WINE!!!!

That answer isn't false, of course, but can we truly in good conscience, in this form, suggest that the minerals of the soil are somehow reproduced in the wine? Do we not we have a responsibility to champion the idea that wine is more than just terroir?

The factor which, in my opinion, we most frequently neglect in terms of communicating wines — yet which is also one of the most important foundations of any questions related to vineyard and cellar work — is the culture that provides the context for the wine. We talk about grape varieties and their properties, which form the genetic framework for a wine. We talk about the environmental factor — about the soil, the geology, the climate, all of which influence the genetic properties in one direction or the other. We talk about our vineyard work and about cultivation and about invasive mites and organic fertilizer and canopy work and grape thinning. We talk about our cellar and wine preparation, whether we mature the wine in steel or oak, whether we leave the wine for a longer or shorter period on the fine lees, whether we practice whole cluster pressing or maceration, whether we use much or little sulfur.

But are we talking about the cultural subconscious in wine? What is the state of our own internal discussions within the winegrowing community about our experiences? Do we hold tastings with each other, and how often, and what effect does this have on us? About regional and pan-regional differences in the conceptual and practical approaches to wine and its genesis? How do things look regarding our responsibility to the community? What influence do all these factors have on our decisions in the vineyard and cellar work? Which cultural differences in these factors influence the stylistic expression in the various growing regions? Even if we ignore the fact that we know piteously

few facts on these aspects, they are also poorly suited for our communication and sales. Nevertheless, in my opinion these are important factors for the expression and perception of wine.

Responsibility — ego trip versus communal thought

After over 25 years in a position of responsibility at Weingut Schloss Gobelsburg and after 15 years as the chairman of the Österreichische Traditionsweingüter association, I see a very clear challenge for those in my generation, something that will continue to have an impact well into the next generation. We live in a time in which we all presume that we will have, and want to have, maximum freedom for ourselves. I think that this is justified to a certain extent. But there are areas of our world where this absolute freedom also has boundaries, namely in those places where our own behavior affects the wider community. I've already talked somewhat about the development of the appellations in Austria and Germany. In Austria we've been occupied with this topic for almost twenty years now. Germany is only now beginning with this discussion, and I'm not sure whether most of the participants are really aware of certain facts. Specifically, I'm addressing the collective claim to an appellation. Origin is a communal asset, and in the moment where I begin using my origin in the marketing of wine, then I have a responsibility to the collective and the community.

For the inter-professional committees and heritage preservation associations, the task is much more a matter of determining what is typical for an appellation and under which conditions vintners can use the communal name of an appellation.

One thing should be stated very clearly and directly — origin and appellation are not ego trips! And that is oriented very intentionally at those who intentionally use the language of origin for provocative wines and argue that these are in fact 'better' wines of origin. After twenty years spent wrangling with this topic, I have a very low opinion of such arguments, since they tend to do more damage than good to the interests of the community.

Good work with origin is communal work, and a search for the typical expression of origin. I'd like to pose a question to the vintners attending today: Haven't you ever thought at one point or another — even if you didn't voice it — but at least thought that you are a better winegrower, and of course can better judge questions of origin and terroir better than everybody else (in the village, in the region)? This "self-righteous gaze toward others," as the psychologists might call it, is a natural tendency in humans to want to perceive ourselves as something better than all others. It is a tendency of our current age to view oneself as something — if not better, then at least different — from the community. This leads to a conscious desire to differentiate oneself from all others.

In this vein, the writer Max Frisch circulated a questionnaire back in the late 60s exploring the popular understanding of democracy. Among the questions: If you were in charge, would you order people to behave based on your current understanding of things, even where the majority is opposed to it? Yes or no?

I know an entire series of vintners among us who believe that their view of the style of a Ried, of a place, or a region is the only one that is right, and everyone else is simply wrong.

All of these cultural phenomena and contemporary developments play a role in the question of the meaning of Riesling and its expression.

What is GRAND WINE?

But now we're returning to the question of what makes Riesling as a grape variety so grand. For the sake of thoroughness, I'd naturally also like to raise the question at this point as to whether every Riesling-based bottle of Ried HEILIGENSTEIN truly meets our vision of grandness. Of course not — because alongside craftsmanship, the right tools, and the dedication to quality, a certain transcendence is also needed to turn a standard HEILIGENSTEIN into a 'grand' HEILIGENSTEIN. It's the component that turns craftsmanship into artistry — a feel or the talent, whatever you want to call it. In any case, it's the one component that cannot be learned, but rather which leaves us sitting astonished at the glass of 'grand wine' before us.

Which is why feel and talent are not the same as 'doing nothing.' I'm referring here to the concept of 'non-intervention.' There's never been a good wine that came from 'doing nothing.' Naturally we can't improve something in the cellar that wasn't there in the vineyard, and the concept of 'non-intervention' served for many years as a nice metaphor, but at this point it's taken on the air of something trite and forced. I think that it's time to return to a 'New Objectivity,' if you'll permit the art reference.

OPPORTUNITY and IMPLEMENTATION

How can we as winegrowers now work with these properties of 'cellarability' and 'ageing potential' in Riesling-based wines? At Schloss Gobelsburg, I've observed for at least a decade now that the demand for mature wines — meaning wines that have aged at least 6 to 8 years — far exceeds our supply. For this reason we decided to make changes so that going forward we can offer a larger share of our wines, including matured ones, to our customers and other interested parties.

The core consideration was the fact that practically speaking neither retailers nor restaurants have the opportunity to store wine over an extended period. If we are of the opinion that the wines from the Danube region contain the potential for this maturation and that there is a market for mature wines, then it is necessary for us to lay the groundwork to store more wine for an extended period in the future.

Since the late 90s, I've been fascinated with the history of winemaking. As part of my research into the monastery's inventory journals, I determined that my predecessors didn't just keep stores of the current vintages in the cellars, but in fact always had wines from vintages 10, 15, or even 20 years earlier in the cellars. This inspired me in 2009 to begin putting a portion of barreled wine aside each vintage to build up a reserve inventory. At this point, the estate's reserves now encompass roughly 100,000 l in large barrels. For space reasons, six years ago we began thinking about expanding our cellars. That work has now been completed and was used to make our new cloister cellar.

This expanded cellar space provides us room both for the added barrels as well as additional storage to allow for bottle maturation, up to approx. 600,000 filled bottles in wire boxes.

The question immediately rises: so what's better, maturation in the bottle or maturation in the barrel? To be honest, I can't answer with any certainty on this point because I don't have a sufficient base of empirical data yet. Historical practice fundamentally favors storage in the barrel. But changes to the framework conditions mean that longer maturation in the bottle may be advantageous.

Morning Dawns — FUTURE of Riesling

As winegrowers, we live in a complex universe that combines artisanal skill with empathetic ability. Any hermeneutic attempt at clarification of the essence of a grape variety must fit in with the reality of the opportunities and expressions of its being. Soil, geology, water supply, and interactions between all components demand a comprehensive understanding. Care, attentiveness, and good timing come together with a cultural understanding built on the empirical wisdom of generations. An ethical understanding of how to work with the technical and other treatment methods is presumed, and brings us in our discussions and truth-seeking processes to the boundaries of the possible. As complex as this all now sounds, in practice processed are in most cases controlled by the unconscious, passed from generation to generation.

In 2021, Schloss Gobelsburg celebrated 850 years of documented winegrowing history — 850 years that stand as a symbol of comprehensive cultural knowledge in all matters related to wine. And approx. 150 years of work with the Riesling grape. This statement naturally raises questions. What was there before Riesling? Was the world a poorer place without Riesling? Will there be a time after it? Will we still be celebrating Riesling in 150 years? After 2,000 years of vine development, has Riesling reached the end of its evolution? Over and out?

I take a measured view toward tomorrow. We are all convinced that this grape variety is a grand one, otherwise we wouldn't have come together for this symposium to talk and discuss yesterday, today, and tomorrow. But I don't want to rule out that we won't in the future discover and develop other grape varieties equally grand as Riesling, potentially overcoming today's problems at the same time, in ways that fit the time better than anything we know to date. Perhaps it's even our obligation to keep watch. 850 years of history, leaves one eager to ponder a time where we would need no herbicides while still remaining organic — a state that today's organic wineries can only dream of.

The topic of new grape varieties is one that the operative circle of winegrowers still only addresses quite grudgingly at present. There are some exceptions, estates that have begun exploring the possibilities of fungal-resistant grape varieties in recent years. But the topic is one more shaped by frustration, as the results to date have tended toward the humble, with the fungal-resistant grapes not exactly making us race to discard traditional grapes; and I see no clear signs that this will be changing soon.

We should nevertheless not be discouraged, since both Germany and Austria have research institutions exploring a variety of interesting crossings worth taking a closer look at. My experience is that few winemakers are currently exploring such things at present — Dr. Regner, who leads the vine breeding department at Klosterneuburg, told me that in recent years, on average only five vintners have taken the time to explore his vineyards and crossings. Five vintners!!! Both the OIV and other institutions have begun addressing the issue, but among winegrowers, awareness of changes to the overall strategy simply haven't dawned yet.

Yet science cannot continue to improve things where there is no input from practical use. This means that varieties are developed and registered that simply don't meet present needs. For this reason, I wish to appeal to you to begin considering these issues and to visit the experimental vineyards, especially at harvest when the grapes are ripe, or at least once the early ripening grape varieties have matured, since this is the ideal time to assess the character of a grape.

THESIS

Riesling is a fascinating grape variety. Its historical and contemporary successes help this variety enjoy a strong identification factor among many winegrowers. Yet the success of the grape variety is also bound by the fact that its best champions come from the best vineyards of the finest countries of origin, meaning their success is not just a success for the grape variety, but really first and foremost one of the best vineyards. Another factor relates to the fact that the best wines (from the best vineyards) are highly attractive for their ability to mature. In terms of sales and marketing, this can play a role in the strategic marketing, since opportunities also arise through it for marketing.

But we should be aware that Riesling as a grape variety also potentially has an expiry date. Climate change and environmental protections could lead to a situation where our vineyards and their expression could potentially be captured by a new grape variety.

But who knows — perhaps we'll opt for the path of genetic modifications to grape varieties, adjusting the vines in their genetic structure to correspond to our needs.

But we can expect a fair amount of water of the Danube and Rhein to pass under the bridge before that point... not to mention Riesling down our gullets. Thank you for listening.