



Riesling

July 28, 1998
Mainz, Germany.

"Well, it's a Riesling," sighed Fiona as she scrunched up her nose. A group of us were sitting at a long table in Wolfgang's favorite "Weinstube" at the end of the day. We had just finished dinner at a grilled fish restaurant (it used to be called the "Happy Bosnian," but now that name was inappropriate so it was currently called "Fresh Fish and Grill" even though the menu was the same). Wine in Germany is a difficult proposition; most people here would rather drink beer. However, there is in this part of the country a stubborn minority that drinks wine, and more importantly, drinks almost exclusively German wine, which for the most part means Riesling.

My dislike of the Riesling grape is well-documented, but I decided to check my biases at the door on this weeklong voyage into the heart of the Rhineland and come with an open mind and palate. We spent the first three days of the conference I was attending in the small town of Hattenheim in the Rheingau region. Apart from the science, the highlight of the conference was going to Schloss Johannisberg, the castle/winery from which the grape varietal name "Johannisberg Riesling" originates, and where in 1775 the late harvest or "spätlese" process was invented. We received a two hour tour from a very animated and enjoyable German winemaker who proudly told us the anecdotal story of how they discovered the noble rot (*botrytis*) by accident, and how it helps them make great sweet white wines. The tour included walks around the castle, church (formerly a Benedictine monastery), and finally the caves, which held racks of bottles dating back to 1748 (is that stuff still good?!). The tour ended with a tasting in the caves in a dark corner where apparently people like Bismarck and Churchill have at one time sat. After the tour, we had an excellent dinner at the restaurant in the winery that overlooks the vineyards as they slope southward towards the Rhine. The next day, after the close of the conference, we took a 5 hour cruise back up the Rhine to Mainz (Hattenheim is not that far from Mainz, so we had to take a train down river to a more distant starting point). Yet, despite all of these fine memories, it had become evident that, when it is all said and done, one can only continuously consume so much Riesling before becoming fed up with the grape.

Fiona had reached this point long ago. I met her on the following Monday in Mainz while visiting Wolfgang's Max Planck Institut Kingdom (he has at present 70 people working in his group). She had spent a year there a while back and was also visiting Wolfgang just before she was to start a Lecturer position in the UK. After Mainz, Fiona had headed to Australia (Canberra) for a second postdoc, and had met another woman there, Kaoru, who, as it turns out, was also currently visiting Wolfgang for a bit. Coincidentally, Kaoru had previously spent some time working in Madison, and she remembered meeting me. I vaguely remembered that several years back a visiting scientist from Japan in my group had discovered that another Japanese scientist (evidently Kaoru) was working in the Chemistry department, and that he had introduced her to me. Kaoru was still embarrassed that after the introduction she inquired as to which Professor did I work for in the Department.



Schloss Johannisberg

All of these connections had been made earlier in the day at lunch, so by the time we arrived at the Weinstube we were all good friends and ready to turn our attention to more serious matters like imbibing wine. After their stint in Australia, Fiona and Kaoru both agreed that the Aussie wines were much, much better than the German ones, and that Riesling was just a difficult grape to drink all of the time. Wine made from Riesling was usually too sweet, and after a glass you were ready to move on to something else. Fiona took a stronger stance, and said that she just flat out did not like Riesling at all. Thus the simple declaration of grape type after tasting her wine was sufficient to convey her displeasure with the drink.

Kaoru had similar tastes. She definitely preferred wine to beer, and dry wine to sweet wine. However, this did not stop her from drinking these other beverages. Despite her petite size, she was a prodigious drinker. She finished my second beer at dinner after having consumed glasses of beer and wine herself. Another person at the Weinstube table called Kaoru the "enzyme woman" because she could down any amount of food and alcohol without a problem.

There were a total of about ten people in the group dining at the Weinstube. Most of the Rheingau conference participants had already left for home, and these were just the visitors du jour -- Wolfgang seems to have a constant flux of visitors and friends flowing through his labs.

As for Riesling: Despite Kaoru's well-known abilities to consume alcohol, even she admitted that there were limits when it came to Riesling. We ordered a Rheingau at the Weinstube, and she was clearly disappointed after the first taste. It disappeared from her glass quickly, though.

Searching for alternative grapes in this region, there are a few, but not many. A rosé in Germany is called "weissherbst", which means white autumn (I have no idea why), and is typically made from pinot noir (spätburgunder). Pinot noir is also available as a red wine (rotwein), but it is very different from Burgundian or Californian pinot noir -- a very spicy nose! Another light red wine that I tasted was made from the "tollinger" grape, but apparently it's quite rare.

This is not to say that I did not enjoy the Riesling from this region. I think that it is consistently one of the best, if not THE best, made wines available from this country, and my German hosts confirmed this (of course, they are from Mainz, so I didn't expect them to disagree). I have purchased a bottle of the 1997 Spätlese of Schloss Johannisberger (which, by the way, is named after John the Baptist), and I hope that upon my return we can all try it together and everyone can decide for themselves!

Until then, Santé! (or should I say, Prost!)

Rob