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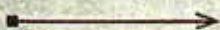
TREND REPORT

Namai Bishop reports on the rising popularity of **Riesling** wine as it is paired with dishes from some notable international chefs, at the **RHEINGAU GOURMET & WEIN FESTIVAL**, one of the longest-running international gourmet festivals.

Germany is known for its precision, reliability and sturdy steadfastness - but rarely its fashionability. But the Riesling wine, with its origins in the very heartland of Germany's Rheingau region, is helping to change all that. With a recent surge in international sales and with the variety increasingly the wine-pairing of choice on chef's tasting menus, it seems the fashion for Riesling is growing.

The wine-tide is turning and international wine traders, sommeliers and chefs are all sitting up and increasingly taking note of the noble Riesling. Certainly in the United States this trend is most palpable. Thanks to the popularity of US movie "Sideways" that radicalised the market for Pinot Noir, it also propelled Riesling (Pinot's counterpart that it is so often grown alongside) to international stardom. Across the globe, top sommeliers are adopting an almost zealous crusade to champion this variety. All this attention is helping change its previously dour reputation. Long misconstrued as exclusively a densely sweet wine (in fact, the majority of all German Riesling is of the dry 'troken' or semi-dry varietals) this wine is now being recognised for its elegance and versatility.

The Riesling pioneers, Schloss Johannisberg's winery is the very cradle of the Riesling grape and boasts a remarkable heritage of wine making. Ever since 1720, when almost 300,000 vines were planted in the vineyards of the old Benedictine abbey, it has been the authority on producing some of the most prized examples of the varietal. As well as upholding a long viticultural tradition, the winery is also a pioneer, introducing new practice standards and vinification techniques. Whilst the estate was the very first to grow the Riesling, now it often produces ten varieties in a single year, with some being aged in wooden barrels, from trees in their own forests. It is precisely this natural landscape, and the winery's unique geographical location and geological make-up, (it is set over three magnificent quartzite hills just uphill from the Taunus massif) that contributes to the very basis of its taste profile. Schloss Johannisberg is largely considered a monument to the diversity of Riesling wine, thanks to the unique combination of acidity and extract that lend it an array of tastes: from spicy herbs, citrus fruits to tantalising sweetness, with just a hint of pleasing bitterness for complexity, yet always with an elegant, structural and mineral finesse.







Chefs are recognising that the broad range of Riesling varieties makes it one of the most versatile and multifaceted partners, suitable for a broad range of flavour matches. From bone-dry to unctuous fruitiness, Riesling is becoming more prevalent on wine-pairing menus right through, from start to finish. The multiplicity of the grape manages to enhance a whole gamut of flavours: foie gras marries beautifully with the yellow fruit-led notes of the sweeter varieties and is increasingly overtaking the more predictable Sauternes as the suggested pairing partner, but what is more exciting is its appearance in the realm of savoury dishes, where Riesling's characteristic steely balance of acidity and sugar gives it the character to stand up confidently to a whole range of partners. In its dry 'trocken' form, the wine typically displays floral aromas and a distinct minerality. Indeed, as a 'terroir-expressive' wine – meaning it transmits more poignantly the flavours of its origins – the mineral characteristics of the rocky soil it is grown on give it its slate and quartz flavour notes. As such, dry varieties pair well with an array of savoury flavours, from the zinc-y freshness of scallop, the algae flavours of seaweed and fish and the irony-richness of various cuts of meats. In addition, due to its remarkably low alcohol content, it makes for remarkably easy drinking as a food accompaniment, whilst still managing to deliver a spectrum of complex flavours and elegant aromas.

The extraordinary boom in Riesling sales to Asia, and in particular China, gives a clue to an interesting quality of the wine, that is largely due to its method of production – unlike say Chardonnay, Riesling does not undergo malolactic fermentation. This helps it develop a sharp "thirst quenching" quality (a technique that is also employed by producers of many Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Grigio wines) and helps it marry well to the commonly high salt-content foods, typical of Asian cuisine. What is more, its trademark balance of sharp acidity and sugars gives it the mettle to stand up to the stronger flavours and spices of Asian food, particularly Chinese, Cantonese, Vietnamese and Thai foods.

It is no surprise therefore to see an eclectic mix of Chefs from all continents embracing Riesling wines. I was present at the recent Rheingau Gourmet & Wein Festival, an annual event now in its 19th year, that



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meat producer Ralf Bos. The hearty, robust flavours fit well with the cool February climes and the rustic countryside environment. To match, a fine international wine pairing with the 2006 Châteauneuf du Pape from family-owned Château Mont-Redon. These wines were introduced by forth generation vintner Jérôme Abeille himself, representing the estate that has grown vines for well over 2,000 years. Abeille regaled diners with anecdotes like how during fermentation the red wine skins are punched down to extract more colour and tannins – just as their ancestors did with feet! Himself lending colour to the evening, he explained how the 13 grapes varieties in the Châteauneuf-du-Pape are grown on the famously stoney soil on the left bank of the southern Rhône valley, imbuing them with their prized mineral subtlety. For a yet more elegant finish, grapes are sorted manually on the vine and arduously de-stemmed so that only the tannins in the skin are used, before being aged in barrel for rounded toasty notes. The dinner perfectly showcased the fine pairing of local talent and internationally respected brands present.

World-class Antinori was also presenting their wines at the festival. The house's much-loved fine Italian labels were featured at a dedicated wine tasting, included Umbrian 2012 Cevaro della Sala, the 2008 Barolo Bussia DOCG and Super-Tuscan Tenuta Tignanello 2011 Solaia. Other examples of excellent Italian wines included the robust 2012 Bricco Dell'Uccellone Barbera d'Asti DOCG from BRAIDA Piedmont, poured and personally presented by vintner Norbert Reinisch during one of the elaborate nightly Gala dinners, some that were perfectly finished with a sampling of Premium digestif wines from Nonina.

The event also featured a star-studded roster of international visiting chefs, each preparing their own Gala dinner menu. From USA came **David Kinch** of two Michelin starred Manresa who holds a string of accolades, including a spot on the World's 50 Best Restaurants, winner of the Best Chef in America award for the Pacific region from the James Beard Foundation and GQ's Chef of the Year. Using many of the offerings from Manresa's own garden, the emphasis for Kinch is on honest, natural foods of the sunny state; light to the palate yet complex in technique. Japanese influences are notable in his dishes, certainly as in the broth he presented as his starter, evocatively named "Winter Tidal Pool", featuring enoki mushrooms and seaweed. When we spoke to him he lamented the fact that in his own restaurant the dish would be served in deep, Japanese style ceramic bowls that provide increased heat retention and a layering of the ingredients for depth and cross section of flavour bites. His overall menu was a sheer delight but the point highlights some of the challenges of presenting dishes in an environment outside of a chef's own kitchen and without their tried and tested equipment and presentation plates.

Onno Kokmeijer, however, drove his equipment directly from his two Michelin starred restaurant Ciel Bleu in Amsterdam. For his main course, he presented thrice-cooked pigeon, slowly roasted, cooked in a salt case and then allowed to rest for another 20 minutes. Such techniques are a challenge to get right for the 60 or so covers at his own restaurant, let alone catering simultaneously to over 100+ avid gourmands



sees a host of international chefs flock to the birthplace of Germany's Riesling wine. The festival provides the perfect opportunity for industry high rollers and avid consumers to sample the very finest wines and to see innovative and dazzling food pairings, with wines both from the region as well as internationally.

Stretching over an epic fortnight, the festival format is a series of workshops, lunches and nightly gala dinners, each prepared by top rated national and international guest chefs. Chefs' signature tasting menus are paired with a sample range of matching local and international wines.

Events centre almost exclusively at the Gourmet-Mecca hotel that is Kronenschlösschen, in the very heart of the Rheingau. Here, owner-manager Hans Ullrich enjoys a hard earned reputation for carefully curating a remarkable line-up of chefs and vintners from around the world, all hand selected for their skill and craftsmanship. This labour of love is no staged food festival, but a genuine celebration of talent in the food and wine-growing industry. What makes this festival, now stretching to its second decade, all the more compelling is that it is the chefs and vintners who personally present their dishes and wines diners.

Kronenschlösschen resident Michelin-starred chef **Sebastian Lühr** works with the festival's partners to showcase their products. At one of the ingredients-sponsored lunches, Lühr fashioned dishes around the Caviar House & Prunier delicacies, including the finest plump pearls of creamy Beluga, Caviar "St. James" and "Paris" paired with a series of Tattinger Champagnes including the delicate bubbles of Les Folies de la Marquetterie Brut, the fruity Prestiger Rosé and the queen of the Cuvées (only wine from the first press) the 100% Chardonnay Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blanc 2005. After a series of 50g caviar portions, served directly from the distinctively colourful Prunier tins onto the back of diners' hands (the sensuality only heightens the pleasure, or so it is said!) Lühr's main course using the equally supreme ingredient Turbot, continued the theme with frothy "Champagnekraut" and an ample topping of caviar.

At another event, Lühr used more locally sourced ingredients such as, surprisingly, a Wagyu beef variety, from the famed German

present and Kokmeijer praised his team – including **Arjan Speelman**, the restaurant's Chef de cuisine, or his "sparring partner" as Kokmeijer cockily referred to him. With Chef Speelman clearly the creative force and Kokmeijer the structuralist, the results were a perfect balance of classic flavour pairings but presented with flair.

Kokmeijer describes his own food as 'international', a reflection perhaps of the hotels' emphasis on world cuisine (extraordinarily, the Okura Hotel Amsterdam's four restaurants boast four Michelin stars between them) as well as the global expansion of the hotel. As Kokmeijer told me: "Netherlands doesn't actually have its own food identity - it simply doesn't exist. What we do is international cuisine, based on classic French techniques and classic flavour combinations but in a novel way and combining internationally sourced ingredients like yuzu, garam masala [used in his pigeon's salt crust at the festival dinner] Arabian spice mix za'atar and Virunga cocoa from the Congo. It's a new and exciting reflection of the international world we live in."

Kokmeijer's signature dishes at his Gala dinner demonstrated just that spin on the classics: a cylinder of king crab was topped with the French classic "beurre blanc" – though in his version the sauce was frozen and topped with the restaurant's own bespoke rage of farmed Caviar from China, again showcasing perfectly his emphasis on contemporary style and world ingredients.

As for the Riesling wine pairings, the amber-hued 2007 Hattenheimer Pfaffenberg Riesling Beerenauslese Domänenweingut Schloss Schönborn had a syrupy sweetness that paired perfectly with the soft plump apricot cubes dotting his second dish of foie gras, encased in a shimmering chocolate dome.

Another notable international chef at the festival, also a Dutchman, was **Richard Ekkebus**, culinary director of two Michelin starred Amber restaurant at The Landmark Mandarin Oriental Hong Kong. As well as maintaining a top spot at the recent Asia's 50 Best Restaurants awards held in Singapore in March 2015, (Amber was awarded 6th, making it the highest ranked restaurant in Hong Kong) he scooped the coveted Chef's Choice accolade, awarded by his peers for his craftsmanship and remarkable leadership,



Onno Kokmeijer



Sven Elverfeld



Richard Ekkebus

overseeing a 52-strong team. Ekkebus whipped up a storm at the Saturday night extravaganza with a menu that fully displays his talents as a force to be reckoned with across the continent.

Not to be outshone by the international contingent, the German chefs who represented Deutschland at the festival triumphantly waved their culinary tricolour flag. A hat trick of top three star Michelin chefs included **Kevin Fehling**, the celebrity status chef who's work has been described as 'refined-avant-garde', **Klaus Erfort** from Saarbrücken's Gastehaus restaurant and **Christian Bau** of Victor's gourmet restaurant in Schloss Berg.

Fellow German **Sven Elverfeld** from AQUA in Wolfsberg cooked up a storm at the festival with his trademark visually and technically stunning dishes. His training as a pastry chef was evident in plates that were strong on aesthetics. Renowned for experimenting with ingredients, textures and multiple processes, he used emulsions spread like a honey paste on the plate, blending ingredients with oils to make them pliable and experimenting with ingredients' consistency – techniques which have earned him three Michelin stars and the respect of many international chefs. When I spoke to him I asked what he hoped to get out of the Rheingau Gourmet Festival. He responded with characteristic enthusiasm that it is at festivals like this, and the Cayman Cookout that he has recently attended, that he has the platform to exchange ideas with fellow chefs, exploring food trends and innovations worldwide. Given that his restaurant AQUA is deep in the heartland of German national industry, it is clearly invaluable to get the more global perspective that such festivals provide.

International gatherings such as the Rheingau Gourmet & Wein Festival are successfully bringing together chefs from across the globe, to inspire and exchange ideas. Increasing representation by prominent wine houses at such events further highlights the strengthening collaboration between these two industries. What made this gathering particularly notable was the juxtaposition of the ancient and contemporary: set in an ancient land with a long heritage of viticulture, this distinguished festival, now in its 19th year, continues to herald and champion the very latest trends