

RIESLING IS ALIVE AND WELL – AS DAN TRAUCKI FOUND OUT AT THE 18TH CANBERRA INTERNATIONAL RIESLING CHALLENGE.

The Canberra International Riesling Challenge was originally set up by Canberra winemaker Ken Helm AM and colleagues to benchmark their riesling against those from other parts of Australia. Through hard work and generous sponsorship, it has blossomed into the largest international riesling judging in the world. There are bigger riesling competitions, certainly in Germany and possibly in some of the other top Riesling producing countries, but they are all focused predominantly, if not entirely, on their local produce. The Challenge is focused on the variety right across the world. Ken said, “This is not just another wine show, it is an event to promote riesling from the vineyard through to the consumer.”

In most years the Challenge attracts entries from seven or eight out of the nine biggest riesling producers: Germany, Austria, France, USA, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Hungary, with only Argentina being absent these days due to economic woes. This year’s event attracted 519 entries from 225 wineries from across these countries.

The Challenge has a number of aims, including to improve the quality of wines made from riesling, which is why masterclasses are conducted prior to the awards presentation on the Friday. These are technical masterclasses aimed at increasing the understanding of the variety. There is also a masterclass showcasing one specific Riesling region each year, with speakers from that region presenting their region’s wines. This showcase was started in 2015, with a look

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at the Clare Valley. In 2016, the Riedel Riesling Masterclass was themed ‘41 Degrees and Further South’, which described the regional climates and wines from New Zealand (with five wines from the regions of Wellington, Nelson, Marlborough, Canterbury and Central Otago) and Tasmania (with seven wines). The focus of this year’s masterclass was on styles and development of German riesling with a separate session that focused on the characteristics of Canberra riesling.

Steffen Schindler, marketing director of the German Wine Institute, presented an overview of the German wine industry including the 13 regions. He talked about the increase in riesling plantings due to demand, and noted that the 2017 vintage, like across much of Europe, was very low in volume; he predicted an increase in wine prices. He said that Germany (23,000 hectares) is the world’s biggest producer of riesling, followed by the USA (4,300 hectares) and Australia (about 4,100 hectares). The revelation in Steffen’s talk was that he predicted that with global warming, Germany within 50 years could be growing vines across most of the country

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(even around Berlin), and that they should be able to grow most varieties including reds such as shiraz and cabernet.

The Canberra Regional Masterclass was presented by Ken Helm and Chris Carpenter of Lark Hill Wines. The topic was, 'What makes Canberra a premium riesling producing region.' They presented the history of the Canberra District, its sub regions based on altitude and soils, and a tasting of wines from across the subregions showing their terroir and aging abilities.

Grapегrowing began in the Canberra District back in the 1830s, when Yass was the administrative centre for the southern regions of the colonies including Melbourne and Adelaide. The region began to blossom in the 1970s when three ex-CSIRO scientists (Kirk, Riek and Helm) planted vines in the district, which now has 29 wineries and just over 500 hectares of vines; 22 of those wineries produce riesling.

The climate was noted as being 'cool climate' with effective heat degree days varying across the region, from 1,200 to 1,500, having dry, warm to hot summers with an evening 'sea breeze' resulting in cool nights and a warm, dry harvest period. The biggest constraint to the region's development is lack of water for further vineyard development.

Riesling styles produced in the district are mainly dry and half-dry, with some botrytis and the occasional sparkling. Success at wine shows, wine reviews and demand from restaurants in Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne and even London means that demand is now outstripping production. Helm Riesling will be served at The Ledbury in London this Christmas!

The Challenge also aims to promote Canberra to the world as a place of winemaking excellence. Ken Helm said: "Imparting knowledge about riesling is the essence of the event. Our aim is to be the world centre for communicating riesling knowledge." He was pleased that for the second time in the Challenge's history, a Canberra winery (Gallagher) won the top honour - the first being Ravensworth in 2012. "This win helps us achieve one of our core objectives, which is to raise the profile and visibility of Canberra as a wine region and a

tourist destination," Ken said.

Everything about the Challenge is informative, educational and international. This year's judges hailed from NZ, the USA, Germany, South Australia, NSW and Tasmania. James Service, current chair of the CIRC, says the Challenge has always prided itself on its ability to attract first-class judges. "Having three international judges again this year is indicative of our success in positioning the Challenge as a leader in the industry," he said.

The day after the presentations - on the Saturday - the organisers conducted a tasting at Canberra's Albert Hall where consumers were able, for a small fee, to taste riesling wines from around the world and across an array of styles, from bone-dry through to uber sweet. In recent times the main interest has been on the off-dry style, which has been gaining significant popularity in Europe.

Because riesling is one of the most flexible white grapes on the planet, making a wide range of wine styles from searingly dry through to incredibly sweet ice wines, it has always been a challenge to work out how dry or sweet a riesling is, from just looking at the bottle sitting on a shelf. That is becoming easier to do as more and more riesling producers around the world start applying the International Riesling dryness scale to their back labels. The scale, created by the International Riesling Foundation in the USA (copyrighted but free to use) is simply graduated from bone-dry to uber sweet on a little panel on the back label.

Long-persisting rumours of the demise of the regal riesling are grossly exaggerated. In fact riesling is quietly powering along, never having fallen out of favour with true lovers of fine white wine. It has graduated from trying to be all things to all people, to being the sophisticated, erudite 'King of White Wines' appreciated by a growing number of wine lovers.

See the full results here: www.rieslingchallenge.com ♦

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