

# The New York Times

---

May 9, 2011

## An Irresistible Austrian Riesling Beckons

By [ERIC ASIMOV](#)

LET me immediately declare my bias: I love Austrian rieslings. I say that knowing I'm speaking very generally, but don't we always about wine?

Of course we do, because we are speaking about ideals, born of experience and nurtured on realized potential. In discussing wine passions, we say, "I love Barolos," or, "I love Napa cabernets." But when we apply critical judgment to particular wines, a clearer picture emerges. We don't love all Napa cabs or all Barolos. In fact, we don't like quite a few of them. The ones we like best meet internal standards that have developed over time.

So when I say I love Austrian rieslings, I suppose it would be more accurate to say I love the idea of Austrian rieslings, an idea that has developed as I've had the opportunity to enjoy many of them. Naturally, you might ask what exactly is my idea of Austrian rieslings.

I'm so glad you asked me that. When I think of Austrian rieslings, I think of dry, structured wines with stony, pure, shimmering mineral flavors that dominate the palate, yet are never heavy or out of balance. I think of green and yellow fruits, and complex flavors etched with laserlike precision. Finally, I think of wines that are phenomenally refreshing, tangy and energetic with textures that feel so good in the mouth that you simply do not want to stop drinking the wines.

I've been wondering about the distinction between general notions and particular bottles in the wake of the wine panel's recent tasting of 20 Austrian rieslings from recent vintages. Florence Fabricant and I were joined for the tasting by Raj Vaidya, the head sommelier at Daniel, and Laura Maniec, the founder of Corkbuzz Wine Studio, a wine education and events space.

While we found many wines that we liked, we also felt confused by how hard that was to do. Despite how I feel about Austrian rieslings, I was disappointed after the tasting, a feeling shared by my colleagues. Too many wines lacked the definition, focus and precision that characterize not only good Austrian rieslings but rieslings in general. They lacked energy and what I could think of only as completeness; that is, the myriad qualities that, together, make a balanced, complete wine but that stand out mostly when they are lacking.

I was nonplussed, as well. How could I like the category so much but find so many of the wines lacking? The answers came later as we learned the details of the variables in the blind tasting. Six different regions were represented, but the differences between regions were less important

than the fact that the tasting was roughly divided between the 2009 and 2008 vintages, with two from 2007 thrown in for good measure.

Many in the [Austrian wine](#) trade regarded the 2009 vintage as difficult yet superb. The weather was a combination of extremes — very warm, very cool, very rainy, very dry — that gave some winemakers trouble but that in the end resulted in opulent, full-bodied rieslings with plenty of tropical fruit. By contrast, the cooler 2008 vintage was not considered to be as good for rieslings, while 2007 was thought to be in the middle between 2008 and 2009.

Paradoxically, we much preferred the '08s over the '09s. Of the 10 wines from 2008 in our tasting, six of them made our Top 10, along with one from 2007 and three from 2009. What's more, our Top 4 included three from 2008 and the one from 2007. The three 2009s that did make our Top 10 all came from superb producers who were skilled enough to transcend the issues faced by some of the others. Then again, possibly we have different standards from those of the trade.

To put it another way, the disappointment we felt about wines lacking acidity, definition and balance applied largely to the 2009s in our tasting. If you like big, ripe rieslings that display power and rich fruit, than perhaps the '09s are for you, but if your definition of Austrian rieslings aligns with mine, then most likely you will prefer the '08s.

Our favorite was the 2008 Graf Hardegg vom Schloss, the only wine in the tasting designated Niederösterreich. It's a vague, generic appellation that applies to the wine because its region, Weinviertel, officially permits only grüner veltliner among white wines. Well. This unsanctioned wine was exactly the sort of exciting, inspiring, refreshing, mineral-laden wine that comes to mind when I think of Austrian rieslings. It was also, at \$19, our best value.

Right behind it were three wines, including the structured, complex 2007 smaragd from Kartäuserhof in the Wachau, Austria's most prestigious white wine region, and the gentle, well-balanced 2008 federspiel from F. X. Pichler, also from the Wachau. Incidentally, don't let the avalanche of [German wine](#) terminology drive you off, complex as it may sound. Smaragd and federspiel are merely ripeness designations, used only in the Wachau, with smaragd representing exceptionally ripe grapes, and federspiel representing classically ripe grapes.

Our No. 4 wine is surprisingly from Wien, or Vienna, the only great metropolis in the world to have its own appellation. Yes, Vienna is a historic grape-growing region, with almost 2,000 acres of vines within its city limits. The 2008 Jutta Ambrositsch offered a deliciously powerful minerality along with flavors of flowers and herbs.

As for the three from 2009 in our Top 10, they come from Nikolaihof, Nigl and Bründlmayer, three of Austria's top producers, and while they all appropriately reflected their vintage, they were each nonetheless complete, balanced wines, unlike some of the '09s that we rejected.

The Nikolaihof vom Stein federspiel from the Wachau was rich and fleshy, juicy and complex, while the Nigl Privat Senftenberger Pellingen, from the Kremstal, was ripe and perfumed with

flavors of tropical fruit. The Bründlmayer Steinmassel, from the Kamptal, was not quite up to the other two '09s, with its odd combination of brininess and almost candied flavors.

Looking back on the tasting, I was relieved to find that our disappointment was not just because of overly high expectations, as Laura had initially suggested. It wasn't only a matter of vintages — we preferred the '08s but didn't love all of them. And it wasn't about location — some good wines came from overlooked regions, and poor ones came from exalted regions. In the end, the most crucial consideration was the producer.

## **Tasting Report**

### **BEST VALUE**

**Graf Hardegg Niederösterreich, \$19, \*\*\* ½**

**Riesling vom Schloss 2008**

**Tangy, energetic and plain delicious, with ripe fruit and stony mineral flavors. (Monika Caha Selections/Frederick Wildman & Sons, New York)**

Kartäuserhof Wachau Riesling, \$40, \*\*\*

Achleiten Smaragd 2007

Taut and refreshing with good structure and complex flavors of minerals and flowers. (Metrowine, Stamford, Conn.)

F.X. Pichler Wachau Riesling, \$42, \*\*\*

Federspiel Urgestein Terrassen 2008

Well balanced with pleasing flavors of citrus and herbs and a gentle minerality. (Weygandt-Metzler, Unionville, Pa.)

Jutta Ambrositsch Wien Riesling, \$35, \*\*\*

Nussberg Ried Preussen 2008

Mineral, mineral, mineral, along with flavors of flowers and herbs. (Darcy & Huber Selections, Mount Vernon, N.Y.)

Nikolaihof Wachau Riesling, \$29, \*\* ½

Vom Stein Federspiel 2009

Rich and fleshy, juicy and complex, with a nutlike quality. (Terry Theise Estate Selections/Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

Emmerich Knoll Wachau Riesling, \$65, \*\* ½

Smaragd Kellerberg Durnsteiner 2008

Lively and energetic, with bright citrus, herbal, earth and melon flavors. (deGrazia Imports, Winston-Salem, N.C.)

Nigl Kremstal Riesling, \$45, \*\* ½

Privat Senftenberger Pellingen 2009

Ripe and perfumed with tangy, lingering flavors of tropical fruit and herbs. (Terry Theise Estate Selections/Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

**Bründlmayer Kamptal Riesling, \$29, \*\***

**Steinmassel 2009**

Creamy and earthy, with an unusual combination of briny and candied flavors. (Terry Theise Estate Selections/Michael Skurnik Wines, Syosset, N.Y.)

**Sepp Moser Kremstal Riesling, \$26, \*\***

**Von den Terrassen 2008**

Direct and straightforward with fresh, tangy mineral flavors. (Martin Scott Wines, Lake Success, N.Y.)

**Josef Schmid Kremstal Riesling, \$26, \*\***

**Reserve Sunoglein 2008**

**Fresh and light-bodied, with floral and apple flavors. (Vias Imports, New York)**