

What a Pretty Blue Bottle!

Long before California wine was put in Alsatian bottles of blue glass, we had Blue Nun. Your adolescence wasn't complete until you had the pleasure of drinking Liebfraumilch out of a red plastic cup at a frat party.

Which brings us to Stuart Cellar's white wine of the month, Riesling! Much maligned for the sentiments shared above, in reality Riesling is a very versatile grape. Wines made with Riesling can be cellared for decades.

It is THE grape of Germany. I made its acquaintance when I was an exchange student in Frankenthal, about 20 miles north of Heidelberg near what is known as Die Weinstrasse. My English professor decided it would be a wonderful cultural experience for his American student to spend a week picking grapes "im Herbst" - harvest. So I did!



The winery was Heinz Pfeiffer in Kirchheim and his vineyards were planted with Muller-Thurgau (a Riesling cross) and Riesling.

I was surprised at the relatively small size of the grapes... prior to that, my grape experience included Shasta soda, Kool-aid and Thompson Seedless.

Riesling vines typically have high yields. For this reason they are adored by bulk producers, ultimately leading to abuse of an otherwise awesome varietal.

In Germany, Riesling is king. Families purchase cases of Tafelwein (table wine) from their local vintner - the small cylindrical glasses are a nightly staple. It is part of their lifestyle, as it is for many of us... we just use stemmed glasses.

Riesling is characteristically fruity with crisp, fresh flavors and high acidity which makes for beautiful fruit-forward table wine, but many winemakers have been successful with dry versions. It is the grape used in traditional Eiswein, when grapes are left on the vine well into winter until they are frozen, resulting in very sweet, condensed juice when crushed. The world's finest late harvest wines - many of which are encouraged to develop the noble rot, botrytis - are also made from Riesling.

On rare occasions, I succumb to wine myths, so let's debunk this one: Johannisberg Riesling is not a separate and exalted varietal. Johannisberg is the acclaimed German village known for its stellar Rheingau Riesling wines. Over the last 30 years, most American wine producers have come to respect European nomenclature protocol which allows only wines from this area to be thus labeled. {Many thanks to Phil Baily for the insight!}

As always, it is the terroir the vines grow in, the growing season itself, the commitment of the vineyard manager and the skill of the winemaker that creates an incredible wine.

Also, von der Familie Stuart, lueften die Glases und geniessen alle. Prost!