

no means deter interested readers from absorbing the many insights offered in this useful contribution to the wine business literature.

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STUART PIGOTT: *Best White Wine on Earth: The Riesling Story*. Stewart, Tabori & Chang, New York, 2014, 208 pp., ISBN 978-1617691102 (cloth), \$24.95.

Sometimes, I imagine that I can still taste it. The deep, dark-brownish apricot-hued 1959 Steinberger Trockenbeerenauslese with the rich, intensely fruity bouquet burst onto my palate with remarkable flavors, as if I were biting into a perfectly ripe, honeyed apricot. It lingered with a depth of finish that I had never before experienced, as my contemporaneous notes recount. This nectar concluded a tasting of aged clarets that I hosted on May 22, 1977, to celebrate the completion of my doctoral studies. My gourmet group's practice was to serve an Auslese when one was awarded a bachelor's degree and a Beerenauslese after earning a master's degree. During the 1970s, we had tasted several other bottlings from the Steinberg vineyard near Hattenheim, my notes on which are among the most effusive. This is not surprising, since the wines from that vineyard were called "the kings of the Rheingau" by Frank Schoonmaker in his classic *The Wines of Germany*.

My, how the world, or "Planet Riesling," as Stuart Pigott prefers to call it, has changed. In his essential and exuberant paean to the best white wine on earth, he chronicles the past quarter-century's remarkable evolution of "my favorite grape," as he frequently refers to Riesling, without any color distinction. This hymn of praise, however, is not written in iambic pentameter. Instead, it reflects his penchant for gonzo journalism, which "is written without claims of objectivity, often including the reporter as part of the story via a first-person narrative" ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gonzo\\_journalism/](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gonzo_journalism/)). As an homage to Pigott and his influences, Hunter

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S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe, I have adopted the same style for this critique. After all, what is good enough for the author should be good enough for the reviewer.

Pigott is all over the place in the narrative and illustrations. He coins his own terminology. The global network of wine professionals around new Rieslings is “Planet Riesling” (p. 13). He refers to “Blade Runner steeliness” (p. 17), then uses the term to designate a separate category of Rieslings distinct from the more common dry, medium dry, medium sweet, and sweet. Inexplicable and inappropriate selfies appear in a couple of places (pp. 13 and 189). Tales of his personal encounters with many of the most noteworthy producers around the globe comprise most of the text.

It is with respect to this trip around the new world of Riesling that the book is most valuable. After introductory chapters that briefly present the history of the grape and describe the various styles of wines made from it, the tour begins in the wine lakes of the Northeast. I have limited experience with the products of New York’s Finger Lakes (or FLX, as Pigott prefers to call it), a region that I visited only once, so it was nice to learn that Dr. Frank and Hermann Wiemer, while both still significant producers of fine Riesling, weren’t the only ones in town. The discussion of the recent development of the wine industries in Ontario and Michigan made for good reading.

We next head to the West Coast. California, of course, is prominently mentioned, but Oregon merits an insightful discussion. While Pinot reigns supreme, especially in my home region, the Willamette Valley, Riesling has almost as long a history, with the first vines of it planted over 40 years ago. Some of my favorite producers, Chehalem Winery and Brooks Winery, are among those singled out. I have also had remarkable examples made from grapes grown in the Maresh Vineyard in the Dundee Hills American Viticultural Area (AVA) and Hyland Vineyard in the McMinnville AVA, both among the oldest in the area.

While in the West, Washington State’s Château Ste. Michelle, “the world’s biggest producer of Riesling and the most consistent of those producing Riesling on this grand scale” (p. 76), is an obvious stop. Canada’s Okanagan Valley in British Columbia is home to a handful of producers whose individual approaches led Pigott to observe that “Okanagan Riesling really can’t be reduced to a simple formula” (p. 82).

I have marveled at Grosset Polish Hill Rieslings from the Clare Valley in South Australia the couple of times that I have had them. This winery is one of several that Pigott takes us to in Oz, as he likes to call it. So busy was I sampling just about every other varietal, I don’t recall tasting any Rieslings during my extensive tour of New Zealand wineries in 2004. As I learned in the book, the distinguished efforts of a handful of winemakers are eclipsed by the attention lavished on Sauvignon Blanc.

Austria merits its own chapter, with extensive discussions of the areas around the Danube. In the land better known for Grüner Veltliner, Riesling “has gone from being a specialty to one of the most important white grapes for quality wine in Austria during the last generation” (p. 116). The wines tend to be fuller-bodied, with a higher alcohol content than many wines from Germany.

We finally arrive in the land of the Rhine and its tributaries, the home of the Riesling grape. The chapter begins with a statement that made me aware of my age: “Riesling, and particularly German Riesling, has long suffered from the image of being old-fashioned” (p. 129) and invariably sweet. During the same period I savored the Steinbergers, I consumed many crisp Kabinetts, intriguing Spätlesen, glorious Auslesen, and, on the rarest occasions, luscious Beerenauslesen from some of the finest producers, several of whom I visited on a trip to Germany in 1978. Along with Burgundies and clarets, these superb German Rieslings set the hook, as it were, and committed me to a lifelong love of wine. They may be seen as old-fashioned, but to me they were revelations.

After a quick history that explains some of the basis for that reputation, Pigott turns his attention to what has been happening lately not only among many of the outstanding winemakers I came to appreciate but also among the new breed known as Jungwinzer, “a word that now doesn’t only mean young winemakers but also implies talent, creativity, and coolness” (p. 130). Alsatian Rieslings, in my experience among the driest and most versatile on the table, are covered in the same chapter as the Germans because the region is on the French Rhine.

The penultimate chapter covers Riesling Lone Rangers, in countries where the grape is grown but has not gained prominence. Efforts in Eastern Europe, Italy, South America, and South Africa are lightly touched upon.

“The Stuart Pigott Riesling Global 100” concludes the exposition. While Steinberger is nowhere to be found, there is an oblique reference to it in a discussion of Kloster Eberbach, the monastery where the wines are made (p. 134), and several of my old and new friends make his list. For those he highlights that are not familiar to me, having this calibration suggests new things to try.

Wine economists should be amused by the 1949 wine list from Houston’s Shamrock Hotel listing higher prices for Rhine and Moselle wines than for most clarets. Sidebars throughout the text offer “Crazy Riesling Stats” galore.

Although this volume is the best contemporary account of the state of Riesling that I know of, it is not without some distractions. There are several instances of poor editing, including typos and spelling errors. I also wish that the book had a glossary and more extensive indexing to facilitate searching for terms. Instead of maps of prominent Riesling growing areas and pictures of labels (beyond those on p. 148), there is an inordinate number of photos of winemakers and others in the trade. Most of the pictures of vineyards are a welcome break from the densely worded two-column pages, but I find some, like the one spanning pages 182 and 183, uninspiring.

These defects aside, I know of no other writer who is more qualified to extol the virtues of this most important varietal. Pigott summarizes his case for his favorite grape: “the entire point of Riesling is the wines’ diversity, and as long as they are well made, this diversity is enriching” (p. 162). The book provides ample evidence of this point and thus merits consideration by oenophiles of every degree of experience.

Whereas Pigott makes his preference crystal clear, I am still occasionally conflicted as to which is the greater grape, Riesling or Pinot Noir. A brief conversation at the 2014 Passport to Pinot with Wynne Peterson-Nedry of Chehalem, a noted producer of marvelous wines from both, may eventually sway me in Pigott's direction. If we use the desert island test, she pointed out, Riesling would be more appropriate to accompany what we are likely to eat. Hmmm. A compelling argument, but I think I'll continue to study the question.

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MIKE VESETH: *Extreme Wine: Searching the World for the Best, the Worst, the Outrageously Cheap, the Insanely Overpriced and the Undiscovered*. Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2013, 233 pp., ISBN: 978-1-4422-1922-9, \$24.95 (cloth).

It is a very catchy title that makes you anticipate fabulous revelations, great secrets, and the solution to all the problems that may arise from bibulousness. If this is not quite the case, it is perhaps less the fault of the author than of the episodic nature of the subject matter. As the title promises, much of this volume deals with "extreme" wines or "extreme" aspects of wine, and it is not a priori clear what the best organizing principle might be for an approach like this. In any event, the discussion contains many interesting and some amusing factoids—I use the term to indicate that many of the assertions in the book rest on hearsay rather than on statistical evidence and that the provenance of the alleged facts is sometimes uncertain. But the author clearly intended to write not a scholarly book but one that would inform and, at the same time, entertain, which it does quite well.

The book reads a little bit like the author's blog on wine (available at <http://wineeconomist.com>): it is chock- full of facts, some well-known and some not at all, occasionally amusing, but somewhat disorganized, and for a reader who is well versed in the tasting and the lore of wine, it is like a bunch of extra shakers of various spices to add to your meal so that you enjoy it more. It is interesting that the author insists, more than once in the book, that he does not make a habit of rating or recommending wines; this admirable self-restraint might well be practiced by other wine experts. So what is the ultimate aim of the book? This question is best answered in the author's own words:

A lot of *The wine economist's* are searching for the wine world's outer limits: "What is the best wine?" They ask. The best wine value? The best wine brand? The best wine magazine? ... Implicit in these queries, I think, is a certain anxiety. There are lots of wines out there and consumers are worried that they are choosing poorly, paying too much, or getting advice from biased or incompetent wine gurus. (pp. 11–12)