

RAISING RIESLING:

SHOULD STYRIAN GROWERS BET ON THIS VARIETY?

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Summary

Motivation

Although trained to objectively appreciate all wines and sincerely impressed by the quality of Styrian Sauvignon Blancs and Styrian wines in general, as a consumer I have to admit I'm definitely a Riesling person, and I always wondered why Riesling production in Styria is so limited, considering the region seems to be suitable for such a variety and that results obtained are encouraging.

In addition, global warming is redesigning wine geography, and growers are gradually colonising cooler and cooler sites in the attempt to keep on producing more or less the same wines, and if I were asked to pinpoint some places to look for some land suitable for Riesling, Styria would be on my list. But would I be right?

And if so, would it be profitable enough to consider a production? Would consumers easily accept more Styrian Riesling?

Purpose and Scope

This study aims at providing answers to above mentioned questions, and as a guideline for winemakers and growers who might wonder the same.

It has to identify what it takes to grow expressive Riesling, i.e. where are expressive Rieslings grown and which are the characteristics of these regions in terms of climate, soil and winemaking.

Then, it has to understand which are the characteristics of the Styrian environment and consider if they are comparable. This will answer the question of whether Styria would theoretically be a suitable environment for more Riesling.

In order to understand if chances are to see more Styrian Riesling on the market in the future, the Riesling demand and consumers expectations must be considered.

If all answers will be positive, a promising alternative path for Styrian winemakers will be outlined. If not, the weaknesses of the conjecture will be identified, thus allowing interested parties to reconsider the opportunity (or not) in case changes happen in the future.

Methodology and materials

In order to circumscribe the research, major European Riesling regions are only taken into account. This not only allows investigating a limited area, but also focuses the research on regions that are closer to Styria and that more easily and more often compete on the same European Union market.

Of the two main sections of this study, the former identifies the peculiar growing conditions demanded by Riesling, also taking into account those of its major producing regions, the latter investigates growing conditions offered by Styria, and looks for analogies.

Thus, statistics from different weather stations in Styria are examined, considering recent 2023 figures and those of 2015 and 2014, respectively among the best and the hardest vintages in Styria in the last decade or so. Then, geological maps of the area are analysed in search of those kinds of soils where Riesling has been observed to perform best. Altitude and exposition are also considered. Exploitation of the land is checked through pictures available on Google Maps.

Findings are considered in the light of consumers' demand and expectation. The former is inferred by the statistics of Riesling production in the considered countries or regions, the latter is investigated through a personal survey, which must reach the largest and most heterogeneous audience possible.

Summary

Riesling represents less than the 5% of Austrian productions and the large part of it is found in Niederösterreich¹. Styria, however, is a cool climate region², like other Riesling regions in Europe³. Moreover, Styria is already known for successfully growing expressive Sauvignon Blancs and other international white varieties⁴, among which Riesling seems to be the great absentee, although a minimal production already exists.

Peculiarities of Riesling and of its major growing regions' environment are reported. A cool climate is confirmed to be a common factor for expressive Riesling, because of the long and slow ripening period the variety requires⁵, which a favourable exposure and a rocky soil must accompany. Climate and geological features of Styria within the DAC territories are then analysed and sweet spots for Riesling are theorised. It turns out they are small, sparse and few, even taking into account those located between 500 and 800 m.a.s.l., expecting the climate to get warmer in the future.

Conclusions are drawn on the basis of suitable sites found and of the current demand for Riesling. Riesling is a wine variety strongly associated with German speaking countries, and consumers tend to believe Austria is a major producer of this variety⁶. A reputation is already built, but at the present time it doesn't seem to be enough to encourage growers to invest in new Riesling vineyards.

Conclusions

The study helps understand the suitability of Styrian land for growing Riesling and the viability of the idea.

It highlights the similarities between Styria and major Riesling growing regions, but it also reveals they are not currently enough to encourage producers to venture in Riesling production, both because there is little room for profitable new plantings and because demand for European Riesling is currently not increasing.

Further information revealed by the paper is that the average consumer recognises Austria as a major Riesling production country, which means the market is theoretically keen to receive more Austrian Riesling, if demand would increase in the future.

Although on paper there is some room to grow more quality Riesling with an appealing aromatic profile, however, many things would have to evolve positively in the future in order to suggest deliberately increasing Riesling production in Styria.

¹ AWMB, url <https://www.austrianwine.com/our-wine/grape-varieties/white-wine/riesling> (last accessed 9th of June 2024).

² Brook, S., 2020: *The Wines of Austria. 2nd edition*, Cassington, Infinite Ideas, pp. 229-232.

³ Robinson, J., Harding, J., Vouillamoz, J., 2012: *Wine Grapes*, London, Allen Lane, p. 889 and subs.

⁴ Brook, S., 2020: *Ibidem*.

⁵ Robinson, J., Harding, J., 2015: *The Oxford Companion to Wine. 4th edition*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

⁶ Survey personally led in the Spring of 2024.

References

Books:

Brook, S., 2020, *The Wines of Austria. Second edition*, Cassington, Infinite Ideas.

Robinson, J., Harding, J., 2015, *The Oxford Companion to Wine. Fourth edition*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Robinson, J., Harding, J., Vouillamoz, J., 2012, *Wine Grapes*, London, Allen Lane.

Websites:

AWMB, url: <https://www.austrianwine.com/our-wine/grape-varieties/white-wine/riesling>

Other resources:

Survey personally led in the Spring of 2024 (see paper appendix).