

# riesling to believe

Germany's whiz kid vintner looks for the sweet spot in our hometown wines. | by Teri Citterman

**M**athias Kramer buried his nose in the bowl of the wineglass. He breathed in the 2005 Covey Run Riesling from the Columbia Valley, his eyes narrowing. "Cold fermentation," he pronounced. Rieslings ferment in a temperature-controlled environment, and Kramer explained that when the temperature is kept low, yeast produces aromas similar to a confection called an Ice Bonbon. "Americans don't know this flavor," said the German native. "It's a blue candy with a flavor produced by yeast, and I always find it in a cold fermentation."

Memories of childhood sweets aside, Kramer's winemaking expertise stems from a formal education in beverage technology and viticulture—and a passion for tasting and analyzing. The 27-year-old might be Germany's hottest young winemaker; he's currently shaping new wines at Moselland eG Winzergenossenschaft in Bernkastel-Kues, Mosel, and fronting a heavy rock band called Final Edge. But it's riesling, not riffs, that brings him to Seattle. Kramer has come to promote his own Clean Slate Riesling, a wine that holds "the whole Mosel in one glass." It marries the peachy and exotic fruit and chalk found in the upper region, spicy notes from middle Mosel, and the minerality found in the lower part of the area.

Kramer took some time out to taste and analyze Washington rieslings with us. Although the winemaker can claim that his home turf is the unquestioned epicenter of rieslings, the largest producer of the crisp summertime favorite is right here in our own backyard. Last year, Chateau Ste. Michelle produced 600,000 cases of riesling and is poised to produce more than 650,000 cases this year, surpassing the wine-producing behemoth Columbia Crest. Meanwhile Randall Graham, owner of the California winery Bonny Doon Vineyards, broke ground near Red Mountain in Eastern Washington this February and plans to produce 300,000 cases annually, which would make the winery the largest in the U.S. dedicated solely to producing riesling wines.

As he poured the first sample, Kramer stopped abruptly. "These glasses



## ANYTHING GOES

**T**he surge in riesling's Stateside popularity is a direct result of the wine's approachable flavor and excellent adaptability. "You can't pair, for example, white fish with red wine without damaging the flavor," Kramer says. "Rieslings, on the other hand, go well with white fish or red meat, spicy Asian fare, game, and most definitely sushi. It's hard to find another grape varietal with so much flexibility." Here are five to drink with almost anything.

**2005 Chateau Ste. Michelle Eroica Riesling**  
Strong and fruity, a ripe fruit basket of green apple, pear, peach, and a little honeysuckle. **\$24**

**2005 Poet's Leap, Longshadows Vintners, Columbia Valley** Off-dry with spicy aromatics: fresh melon, honey, ripe apricot, and a hint of citrus. **\$20**

**2005 Seven Hills Riesling** Shows abundant ripe apple and floral notes, with undercurrents of mineral; a light sweetness with a clean, crisp finish. **\$11**

**2005 Claar Cellars Johannisberg Riesling, White Bluffs, Columbia Valley**  
The ripe peach nose echoes in the mouth with apricot, grapefruit, and mineral flavors. **\$10**

**2005 Columbia Winery Cellarmaster's Riesling**  
Sweet peach, honey, and lemon zest with aromas of apple pie, white peach, kumquat, and petrol. **\$9**



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aren't clean; you can smell the dust," he said, lifting the glass to his nose and inhaling a deep, long breath. He poured a bit of wine in the glass and swirled it in a swift, efficient, cleansing movement. Kramer won't be easy to please.

The whiz kid of reisling found Chateau Ste. Michelle Riesling Columbia Valley 2005—the top-selling riesling in the U.S.—to have a somewhat flat nose and thin initial taste, but allowed that it's an easy-to-drink, harmless wine that meets the normal standard of a riesling: a generous minerality, then fruit. He loved Eroica Riesling Columbia Valley 2005, an award-winning joint effort between Chateau Ste. Michelle and, well, Germany's Dr. Ernie Loosen. But it can't just be home-team

**MATHIAS KRAMER SAID CHATEAU STE. MICHELLE'S TOP-SELLING RIESLING CONVEYS A GENEROUS MINERALITY, THEN FRUIT.**

pride that elicits the praise; Kramer admits a fierce admiration for Dr. Loosen and credits him with putting German riesling back on the map, but says the acidity of this particular bottling is a bit too high. "The residual sugar is really involved and belongs in the wine. The flavor was on the mineral, sharper side," he said.

Kiona Riesling Red Mountain 2004 gives off mature flavors of smoked bacon, banana liquor, lime, and nuttiness, and Kramer found it to have good ripeness and a balanced acidity that filled the palate all at once. He characterized the nose on the Hogue Riesling Columbia Valley 2005 as fresh and open, less like that of a riesling and more like a sauvignon blanc. Kramer would rework it to have a half-percent lower alcohol content. "It's important to play with the residual sugar to really aim for the sweet spot," he said. "I'd suggest reducing the acidity and alcohol level—but that's not such an easy feat."

Satisfied with our visiting expert's opinions on our rieslings, I couldn't help but wonder about his thoughts on Seattle's famed music scene. "They're not on the sunny side of life," he said. After a 10-to-12-hour day in the vineyard, the last thing he wants to hear is a song about other people's problems. Considering our region's wine growth, maybe local bands will start singing about sparkling fruit and the good life out in the vineyards. ✨