

A photograph of a wine bottle with a light-colored label. The label contains the title 'Bone-Dry Rieslings' in a large, elegant script font. Below the title is a subtitle 'Finger Lakes winemakers offer acid trips' in a smaller, sans-serif font. Further down is the author's name 'WRITER LAURA WINTER FALK' in a small, bold, sans-serif font. At the bottom of the label is a paragraph of text about Riesling. The bottle is set against a blurred background of what appears to be a vineyard or orchard.

Bone-Dry Rieslings

Finger Lakes winemakers
offer acid trips

WRITER **LAURA WINTER FALK**

Riesling is one of the most versatile wine grapes in the world. Winemakers can make wines from Riesling that range from those having virtually no sugar to ice wines that can contain up to 32% residual sugar. While this versatility provides an enormous number of options to the winemaker, it also creates the opportunity for significant confusion to the consumer about what to expect when they purchase a bottle of Riesling.

Knowing geography and regional traditions of winemaking can help. The cool-climate region of Mosel, Germany, is famous for its highly aromatic, crisply acidic and low-alcohol Pradikatswein that will always contain various levels of residual sugar. On the other side of the Vosges Mountains is the region of Alsace, France. The mountains' rain-shadow effect creates a climate with lots of sun and little rain, which produces much riper grapes than in neighboring Germany, allowing its winemakers to produce traditionally dry wines with higher alcohol and fuller body. This long-season, dry, sunny climate also exists in the Riesling-producing regions of Clare and Eden Valleys in Australia, where dry, steely Riesling is the featured style.

But things are not that clear cut throughout the rest of the Riesling-growing world. Temperate regions with varied climates like Washington State and New York State produce an array of Rieslings of all different levels of sweetness. So how do purchasers of these wines know what they are getting?

In 2010, the International Riesling Foundation set out to solve this problem by introducing the Riesling Taste Profile, which in a very clear, simple graphic provides a sweetness rating on the bottle that ranges from dry to sweet, to help consumers select wine that they are most likely to enjoy. It has been very successful, bringing consumers closer to their preferred style of wine, but Riesling, with its high acidity, can mask residual sugar in wine, resulting in wines that may be perceived as dry on the palate while still containing up to 10 grams of sugar per liter. In fact, the standard convention used in the scale defines a dry Riesling as containing less than 10 grams of sugar per liter, which while perceptively dry, creates the opportunity for a plethora of styles. This is great for the artistic expression of the winemaker, but still leads a lot of opportunity for confusion for the consumer.



Chris Missick, Villa Bellangelo

As a result, possibly born out of a desire for more clarity, has come the term “bone-dry Riesling.” Rick Rainey, managing partner at Forge Cellars on east Seneca Lake, describes how Forge purposely markets their wines as Bone-Dry Rieslings to provide consumer clarity that what is in the bottle is a truly dry Riesling. All Forge’s Rieslings contain less than four grams per liter of residual sugar.

“Maybe saying ‘bone dry’ is overcompensating,” says Rainey, “but maybe that is what is needed to rid the confusion that is clearly still out there.”

So what can a wine drinker expect from a bone-dry Riesling? First is the obvious: They are getting a wine with very little residual sugar in the glass. Removing residual sugar from such a high-acid grape like Riesling forces the winemaker to use other methods to round out the wine and make it pleasurable. As a result, well-made bone-dry Rieslings will have texture either through the inherent minerality present in the vineyard’s terroir or through winemaking techniques like gross lees aging in neutral barrels, and extended cellaring that will soften harsher acids. The result creates a fuller



Rick Rainey, Forge Wine Cellars



FIVE BONE-DRY RIESLINGS TO TRY:

Forge Cellars 2017 Dry Riesling Classique
.3% residual sugar (RS), \$19

Wagner Vineyards 2017 Riesling Caywood East
.4% RS, \$18

Heron Hill Winery 2015 Reserve
.1% RS, \$19

Dr. Konstantin Frank 2016 Eugenia Dry Riesling
.27% RS, \$29.99

Villa Bellangelo 2015 Dry Riesling
.45% RS, \$18

mouthfeel in the mid-palate along with a laser-sharp precision and purity in the finish that comes from the grape's natural acidity.

Chris Missick, owner and head winemaker at Villa Bellangelo on west Seneca Lake, relies on this sensorial definition rather than a technical definition when creating his bone-dry Rieslings. Rather than hitting an exact number, he'll consider his Riesling bone-dry when it conveys "steely citrus and minerality." Such wines, he believes, "are designed to be food wines."

From a food-pairing standpoint, Riesling's natural high acidity serves as a flavor

magnifier making them extremely food friendly. Removing residual sugar allows bone-dry Rieslings accessibility to a larger variety of foods. These wines will be as equally welcomed at the table alongside light and fresh starters like a mesclun salad in a classic vinaigrette, where the wine will accentuate the salad's freshness while matching the zippiness of the dressing, as well as with rich curries or other flavorful dishes, where the wine's acidity will cut into the richness and make the flavors pop.

Like Bellangelo, more and more Finger Lakes producers are adding bone-dry Ries-

lings to their portfolio and getting recognized when doing so. The standard bearer is Forge, whose 2015 Riesling Classique was recognized in the top 100 best wines of 2017 by *Wine Spectator*. Landing in spot number 31 (out of 17,000 wines sampled) makes this the high mark for the region on this coveted *Wine Spectator* list. However, it doesn't end there. Remarkably, in the 2017 *San Francisco Chronicle* Wine Competition, almost 50% of the 38 medal winners in the Bone-Dry Riesling category were from 10 different Finger Lakes producers, including double golds from the 2015 Rieslings of Anthony Road and Wagner Vineyards.

Historically, the Finger Lakes would never be considered a region with the long-season, sunny and dry climates favorable for producing these bone-dry Rieslings. However, vintages like 2015, which produced so many good examples, are becoming more common as our region experiences more extreme weather fluctuations. When the weather cooperates, and we get that perfect combination of long hot summer, just the right amount of rain and a seasonal autumn, the result is some of the ripest fruit the region has ever seen. This quality of fruit allows winemakers to create Rieslings in this bone-dry style. This season could be another vintage where winemakers will be able to create Rieslings that focus on minerality, tension and an intense, zingy concentration that comes by fermenting to dry in the Finger Lakes. The ability to create wine in this style adds another level of depth to Finger Lakes Riesling portfolio, further proving its place among world-class growing regions for Riesling.

Laura Winter Falk owns Experience! The Finger Lakes, a touring and events company that provides immersive wine experiences. She holds a PhD in food and nutrition and is a Certified Sommelier, with WSET 3 award in wines. She is also an adjunct professor of wine at Tompkins Cortland Community College. All this means she makes a living talking about and drinking wine in the Finger Lakes, which makes her very happy.