

Wine & Spirits

SPECIAL ISSUE

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INSIDER'S GUIDE



Conversations & Tastings with 50 Masters of Place

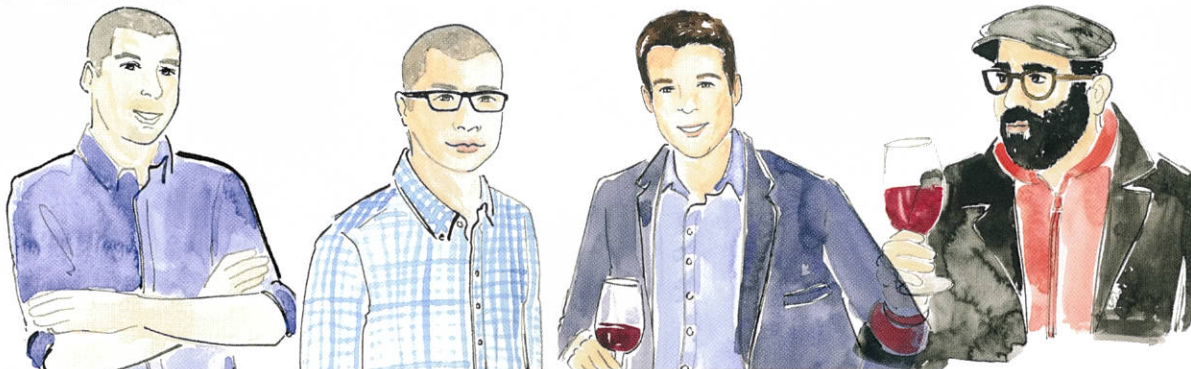


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Chuck Hayward on Clare Valley Riesling

interviewed by Luke Sykora

In the early 1990s, Chuck Hayward was buying wine for the Jug Shop, a small San Francisco retailer. With family-owned wine shops going out of business as big fish like Costco showed up, he felt he needed to set the store apart—so he started stocking an unusual amount of Australian wine. He found that the bolder versions of Aussie shiraz and cabernet were a hit with customers familiar with California zinfandel. Australian winemakers began making detours to visit the store, and soon Hayward was heading Down Under, drawn into the regional particularities of Australian terroir.

His first taste of Australian riesling was a bottle from Margaret River, which he found to be juicy and pleasant enough. But soon importers were bringing him rieslings from Clare Valley, a cool upland region north of Barossa. And they were something else. “Tasting them for the first time, I dare anyone not to get excited about them,” he says. He found that the fresh, bone-dry whites often took on fascinating flavors and texture with age, knit together by Clare’s unmistakable acidity.

“That spray when you squeeze a lime, that’s Clare,” he says. While a good Clare riesling should be instantly recognizable, he finds that soil, elevation and producer style do give different expressions, especially in the case of these six definitive Clare rieslings that he pulled together for a conversation and tasting.



1 Pikes Clare Valley Traditionale Riesling This, says Hayward, is a relatively inexpensive multi-vineyard blend that manages to be fully, classically Clare: “I love the focus of the acidity; it’s very pure, very vibrant. It reminds me of lemon hard candy—it’s crunchy, but there’s a sheen to the best wines.” Pikes got its start in 1984, when brothers Andrew and Neil Pike built on their experience at larger corporate wineries to start their own business. Pikes, he says, “is one of the best if you like that classic style.”

2 Grosset Clare Valley Polish Hill Riesling Today, says Hayward, pretty much everyone considers Jeffrey Grosset the best riesling producer in Australia. His Polish Hill grows at a rocky vineyard in northeastern Clare, in a mix of silt, shale, clay and gravel over a bed of hard blue slate. “This is all about austerity, tightness and grip,” he says, referring to the 2014. “It’s classic Clare, but more wound-up. These wines will definitely go twenty or thirty years, no problem. You’ve got to put it away; drinking it now, it’s infanticide.”

3 Jim Barry Clare Valley The Florita Riesling The rolling hills of Watervale in central Clare are considered classic riesling ground. This comes from what may be the most revered vineyard in Watervale, a site identified by Clare legend Leo Buring. “It’s broad,” says Hayward. “Watervale is about breadth, the big belly,” noting this wine is particularly rich, both because of vine age (planted in 1962) and because the vineyard’s slope faces west and catches the warm afternoon sun, maturing the fruit toward spicy, weighty intensity. Still, it’s only weighty in the context of Clare; in fact, it’s a firm, zesty wine.

4 Grosset Clare Valley Springvale Riesling Springvale is the highest, coolest vineyard in Watervale, an organically farmed site on red loam and shale over limestone—soil very similar to Florita’s. Compared to Polish Hill, the softer soils here give a more accessible wine. “It’s well defined; it has precision and drive, but it’s more drinkable right now. It’s pretty ripe,” says Hayward of the 2014. We linger over this one—it’s a delicious, harmonious riesling.

5 Kilikanoon Clare Valley Mort’s Block Riesling “To me, this opens up a whole other prism of food, because of the texture,” says Hayward, pouring a 2009 that came from a 40-year-old vineyard in Watervale. It’s still a racy wine, but oilier, with a toasty aroma that gives its citrusy element more depth. “They get a little marmalade [with age]—that conserve, candied lime,” Hayward observes. “[Winemaker Kevin Mitchell] is just one of those really good dudes. He works hard, and doesn’t ask for a lot of attention. He isn’t so into going to [wine] awards shows and wearing a bow tie. I’ve never seen him over here in the States.”

6 Wakefield Clare Valley Riesling If you’re in Australia, look for Taylors; the Taylor family uses the Wakefield label in the US due to trademark restrictions. This riesling is slightly riper than the others—12.8 percent alcohol rather than the typical 12 or 12.5—and carries an almost imperceptible 1.2 grams per liter of residual sugar, which gives it a softer impression. “This has broader appeal,” says Hayward, “for people who don’t want that crunchy, linear style.” It’s the kind of wine, he hopes, that can serve as a gateway to Clare’s more esoteric pleasures: “These wines are too good to be a secret.” ■