

## Cluster Struck!

### Chateau Grand Traverse 'Whole Cluster' Riesling

Well, I don't know why we were so surprised. The reason we asked our friends at Chateau Grand Traverse for a few wines from their library for the issue's Retrospective is because we know they make great Rieslings, and we know Riesling can age fabulously, so it was a natural. But boy, we weren't prepared for how well these babies showed and the shape they are (for the most part) in. To underscore how much confidence we had to begin with, look at these quotes from non-Michigander wine experts:

*"It doesn't surprise me at all that Chateau Grand Traverse wines should take a clean sweep of gold medals in LA with its Rieslings. Anyone who has tasted the previous vintages with mind and palate open for this grape will have discovered that this producer is right at the cutting edge of Riesling in North America. They are in the process of discovering how world-class wines can be produced on the Old Mission Peninsula in Northern Michigan."*

— Stuart Piggott, Noted Wine Writer and Riesling Wine Authority

*"All vintages of Chateau Grand Traverse Late Harvest Rieslings are world class to one degree or another, but it is more difficult to make a dry style of Riesling and Chateau Grand Traverse's Select Harvest and Whole Cluster Dry Rieslings are where the winery truly excels."*

—Tom Stevenson, British Wine Writer and Editor of Sotheby's Wine Encyclopedia

Of course, it didn't start out this way. When Ed O'Keefe Jr. started the winery and began to plant Vinifera vineyards outside of Traverse City in 1974, people thought he was nuts. Literally. And frankly, he probably was: not only had no one else tried this up there, he was specifically advised against it by the 'experts' (i.e. grape growing scientists at Michigan State University, for example). If you know Ed a little bit, you know someone telling him he couldn't or shouldn't do something was probably reason enough for him to do it, but frankly, he's as good a businessman as he is a grape-grower (he had a little bit of seed money from a previous, very successful career in the nursing home industry), and he knew this was a viable area for his beloved Riesling. After some early successes (and a few misses we're sure), slowly but surely people started to take notice and it wasn't too long before there were plenty of people willing to follow Ed's lead and 'take a chance' on Riesling on the Old Mission Peninsula, as well as over on the Leelanau Peninsula. So in a quick 35 years, the area is now an overnight success, generally recognized as one of the world's pre-eminent Riesling growing areas. Thank you Ed!

Part of Chateau Grand Traverse's success is attributable to the family aspect of the business as well. As good fortune would have it, Ed has two sons—Ed III (Eddie) and Sean O'Keefe who have been involved in the winery since before they could drive—likely grudgingly at first (who wants to work with their dad after all?), but now we're sure Ed would admit, equally responsible for the thriving well-run operation Chateau Grand Traverse has become. As is usually the case among siblings, Eddie and Sean have different skill-sets, Eddie more involved in the day to day operations/finance side of the business, with Sean more involved in the vineyards/grape-growing/winemaking side of things—a perfect complement to each other. They are master-marketers and swell guys.

## RETROSPECTIVE

### Rating System



An extraordinary wine. Complete in every way, as well as possessing that magical, indescribable and elusive quality that makes some wines truly special.



An excellent wine, boasting varietal character, ideal balance, a high degree of complexity and some *personality*.



A very good wine, displaying 'varietal integrity' or typicity, excellent balance, and no apparent flaws.



A 'quiet' wine which, albeit 'sound', shows no real personality, complexity or typicity.



An unsound or offensive wine; one which is best avoided.



The family should be lauded too for the 'paternal' role they have taken on in promoting the Traverse Bay area wine industry, Riesling in particular and Michigan wines at large. Indeed, they are founding members of the International Riesling Foundation, involved in several other trade bodies, and are the face (Sean especially) of Michigan Riesling, traveling to all sorts of international festivals and conclaves promoting the virtues of and sharing knowledge of Riesling to the world at large. Indeed, Michigan was the buzz of the show at last summer's 'Riesling Rendezvous' in Washington where Ed and a few other Michigan vintners officiated at one of the featured tasting events. They are truly ambassadors of Michigan wine.

So, though the winery makes numerous Rieslings every year, one of their best and most consistent wines is the 'Whole Cluster' Riesling. Many, many of Michigan's top tables use this as their go-to Riesling. Made from 100% Riesling from select vineyard blocks, usually made in a traditional German Kabinett style (i.e., just off-dry with great acidity). Typically around 11-12% alcohol—which of course makes it a Michigan, not German wine—though in some cooler vintages (like 2009) it is closer to the Germanic 10 to 10.5%. But always balanced, always delicious. Plus it has a way cool label—part of CGT's 'eclectic' range... the fun, off-beat stuff that they produce to make sure they are always pushing the envelope (as in a Grüner named Laika, after the dog in the Sputnik launch in the 50's ?!). One other thing; in spite of all this praise for Riesling, one would be remiss to think that is where it stops for our entrée into world-class wines. Gewürztraminer and increasingly Pinot Gris are way ahead of the curve as well. Not to mention we're getting some outstanding (albeit not as consistently—yet) Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Cab Franc and Gamay. But do yourselves a favor—just for fun, stick some Whole Cluster in your cellar...you'll be 'Cluster-Struck' when you open them in a few years.



**2001** Limpid straw/gold / Candied lemon peel, flowers and fusel nose—gorgeous and complex / mature, but still firm, balancing acidity; citrusy, creamy palate / long, fresh, gorgeous



**2002** full gold / a bit more mature/oxidative; spicy, orange-petrol notes / still shows freshening acidity and a lemon curd note / very long. Ok, but mature—could be bottle variation?



**2003** alas, spring frosts wiped out most of the crop that year



**2004** light straw / most mineral nose, with requisite lemony notes / perfectly balanced palate with fruit cocktail mixed with minerals and citrus; has the perfect acid component, all perfectly balanced / light, pretty soft. Drinking perfectly



**2005** brilliant light straw / woof. a gorgeous, aromatic nose of spice and melon and lemon curd, with just a faint whiff of petrol / creamy citrus and pear on palate; very complex, perfectly balanced and integrated / long and lush. outstanding wine.



**2006** brilliant pale straw / classic Germanic nose of stone fruits, mineral and lemon peel / soft, lush palate with a twinge of asparagus—very complex with just enough acidity / long and lacy.



**2007** brilliant straw-green / bright nose of citrus and pear, with that little drop of mineral / mineral citrus continues on palate; firm acids—a bit malic, but all woven together well / very long, very delicious. A triumph for what was a difficult vintage



**2008** bright straw-green / woof. A perfect, classic Riesling nose citrus, green apple, mineral, talc / ripe lush palate, but with balancing tension from the always abundant, integrated acidity; has an extra dimension / long, pretty, complex. Gorgeous.



**2009** very pale straw / fresh, green 'Mosel' nose / kumquats, minerals, mouth-watering acidity; the kind of Riesling that you want to smell for 10 minutes / lean, fresh. A sleeper.



**2010 (tank sample)** gobs of ripe fruit underneath the fermentation notes—lush pear and apple; firm acids / verry long. Going to be a winner!