

SUMMER WINES

It's not that old Mad Dog 20/20 anymore

I squinted through the grimy glass of our office window on the 14th floor of Eugene's oldest high-rise (and eyesore). I stared down at the city's streets lined with flushed sweetgums and pin oaks.

We're warming fast — maybe too fast — zooming into summer, maybe another hot, dry vintage, promising big bold pinot noirs, not the cool-country delicacy we've come to know and love. The global news on climate change (warming) has been grim: retreating glaciers, sweltering droughts, disappearing species.

Locally, the rains of May were sweet, allowing us to cling to our delusions — we're all right, still cool, still moist and comfy — but summer's near, and so quickly.

Mole tinkered in our lab, testing wines. We both had been wrestling with our sense of futility, the feeling that we might be playing mazurkas with the band while the ship sinks beneath the rising water. But what else might we do? Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

Mole sez: "Weah gonna pull corks, raise glasses, sip good vino, huddle-up wit' ouah loves, 'til the end. Sleut', s'been grand." (He still calls me Sleuth; it's an honor.)

In a recent *New Yorker*, the brilliant and prolific author Jonathan Franzen took a cruise to Antarctica and had to view first-hand the trail of planetary destruction. Franzen ended his piece in beauty: "In a world of dying, new loves continue to be born."

We have some new loves in wine for you to savor at this edge of the world.

At a tasting room, guy sez, "I don't like sweet wines. Like rieslings."

"OK," I say, though I'm thinking: "Nuh-uh." Two reasons: First, I note that the guy and I are about the same generation, and I'm willing to bet he's channeling wine memories from our youth — MD 20/20, T-Bird and others like, awful schlock, associated with winos drinking out of paper bags; second, common tasting-room wisdom sez, "People talk dry and drink sweet." Often, they also buy sweet.

My main reason for thought-denying the guy's blurt is that rieslings are

one of the world's great wines and come in many styles, from bone-dry to naturally sweet — and all shades between — the sweetest dessert wines, so complex and pretty (and expensive) we can feel like we're drinking the soul of the grapes. We finish a fine dinner with a thimbleful, some white cheese, fresh fruit, nearly heavenly.

Rieslings are also wonderfully versatile, friendly to a wide array of foods — fresh seafood, of course, Asian dishes like a spicy stir-fry or yellow curry, white meats or poultry; bring 'em on. An additional virtue of rieslings is that they make cool, refreshing summer sippers — they can stand alone.

The world's masters of rieslings wield their best craft in two regions, Germany and the Alsace area of France, but others are deeply involved in this grape (from Austria to Australia and points between). In the New World, Washington's Chateau Ste. Michelle has made a remarkable variety of rieslings. Upstate New York does fine with the grape; in Canada, Okanagan rieslings can be world-class.

And Oregon has proven to be more than hospitable to riesling. Cases in point:

In Germany's Mosel Valley, riesling vines thrive on hillsides of degraded shale with hardly any soil. Dr. Ernst Loosen makes some of the world's finest rieslings from grapes grown on those stressed vines; Loosen is also a maverick when it comes to marketing, including establishing a partnership with Ch. Ste. Michelle.

He's even broken new ground in labeling. Unlike traditional German labels (nearly unreadable), Loosen's is plain, clear: **Loosen Bros 2014 Riesling Dry** (\$12), and the flavors carry the wine in traditional directions, toward ripe pears, some citrus, hints of petroleum, all backed by racy acidity.

Here's a ringer: **Bradley 2014 Riesling** (\$13) originates in cool, moist Elkton and is called, on the back label, "off-dry," but winemaker Tyler Bradley says that "it walks and talks like a sweeter wine, with flavors that tend toward pineapple," the residual sugar (RS) is less than 1 percent (close to dry) but, because 2014 was such a ripe year, the fruit is very forward. However, alcohol is high (14.5 percent). In any case, it's delish and food-friendly.

Barnaby Tuttle makes the wines for his (and wife Olga's) Teutonic Wine Company, and **Teutonic 2014 Riesling Medici Vineyard** (\$24) is simply superb, distinctly Alsatian, which means utterly dry, but with the fruit (riesling's definitive acidity) and the alcohol (10.99 percent) in acute balance. The effect is stylish, elegant. All of Tuttle's wines are small productions, using wild yeasts, worth every cent, just for the experience.

Summer's here, with a brutal lesson: Life is brief, too brief for old prejudices to prevent new knowledge. Let's live — and drink good wines, including rieslings — to the end. ■



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