

Riedel versus Riedel - How the professionals judged the difference a glass makes.

Road testing Riedel- By John Stimpfig

As a consumer, I readily admit to being something of a Riedel convert. After all, I've done the tastings, seen the light and got the glasses – (well, some of them). Wine really does seem to taste better in a Riedel glass – especially if it's the 'right' one.

And yet, the journalist in me can't help but remain a tad agnostic about some of the proselytising in Riedel's sales pitch. For instance, I do wonder whether anyone actually needs quite so many different glasses for so many different wines and spirits. (Riedel's various product lines and range extensions run to a total of well over 150 glasses.) What's more, it now seems the tongue map theory, which underpinned much of the Riedel design philosophy, is no longer supported by scientists. In fact, these days, even Riedel appears to be distancing itself from it too.

Another niggle was the feeling that, at some comparative Riedel tastings, the cards appeared to be stacked in Riedel's favour. For example, if you put a fine elegant Riedel stem up against a bog standard ISO or Paris goblet, it was pretty obvious which piece of kit was going to come out on top – even before you'd nosed or tasted the wine.

Yet surely the best way of really road-testing the Riedel claim that wine really does taste better in its designated glass would be to stage a Riedel vs Riedel tasting. Quite obviously, if the practice stacks up to the theory, then each designated glass should outperform its sibling rivals on what would be a very level playing field. No home advantage here.

Naturally, I imagined that Riedel would be unwilling to participate in this sort of independent event for the basic commercial reason that it had far too much to lose. What if it turned out that a Premier Cru white Burgundy actually tasted better from a Bordeaux glass or a Sangiovese glass? Wouldn't this rather upset the faithful – particularly Riedel's private and restaurant customers who had forked out thousands of pounds on the right glassware only to discover that it might not make that much difference anyway.

Consequently, when I suggested such a tasting to Victoria Morrall, Riedel's PR, to form part of a piece in the FT's How to Spend It Magazine, I genuinely didn't expect Riedel to pick up the gauntlet. So, I was genuinely surprised when she quickly called back to say that Riedel were up for the challenge and would supply the glasses and help with the organisation.

First, we asked a number of the UK's leading Sommeliers to be our independent judges. These included Ronan Sayburn from Gordon Ramsay, Gearoid Devaney from Tom Aikens, Mathieu Longuere from La Trompette, Xavier Rousset from Le Manoir and Matt Wilkin of Genesis Wines and formerly of the Capital. I also invited Mark Bingley MW from Maisons Marques et Domaines to taste as MMD had provided most of the wines. In addition, we also invited a knowledgeable FT reader and wine consumer called Andrew Law, who uses Riedel glassware at home.

It was decided to split the tasting was split into two sections. First up were six flights of still wines to be tasted and assessed in seven different glasses. Each flight consisted of one wine, which also corresponded to each of the six Riedel glasses being tested. We also used one 'control' glass, which was the standard ISO tasting glass. The second section comprised two flights of two champagnes, which were tasted in two Riedel Champagne glasses and the ISO.

The event took place at the Connaught Hotel where the tasters were asked to rank each glass by giving a maximum number of six points to the one which they thought showed the fullest and best expression of the wine – and one point to the worst performing glass. What this meant was that if the 'right' Riedel glass was to come top in each flight, it had to outscore all the other glasses. Given the fact that there were as many as six glasses per flight and eight flights of wine, the odds, on this occasion, seemed stacked against Riedel.

Prior to the tasting, I spoke to Martin Turner of Riedel UK and asked him how he thought it would go. Turner was understandably a touch nervous. Though he did point out that 'we have done Riedel vs Riedel tastings before and they do work. But you can never guarantee the outcome. For instance, a few years ago at the London Wine Trade Fair we showed just two grape varieties in four Riedel glasses so that people were tasting the same wines from at least two glasses. Yet bearing in mind that these were all trade professionals, it was amazing how many people perceived didn't realise that was the case.

'In this tasting though, all the guys know Riedel. And they know that they are tasting the same wine in each flight. So we won't have those problems. I think what will be interesting will be to see how they rate the glasses, particularly when some of them are very similar in size and shape. I'm sure it will be an revealing exercise.'

It certainly was. Not least because when all the points were totted up a remarkable set of results emerged. That's because in six out of

eight flights, the 'correct' Riedel glass came out on top. In particular, the Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir, Riesling and Bordeaux Vinum glasses all scored impressively with 38, 41, 44 and 45 points out of a possible maximum of 48.

However, there were two 'mishits'. The first was the Vinum Chianti glass which only came third in the flight featuring the SuperTuscan Villa Cafaggio San Martino 2000. This modern, somewhat atypical Sangiovese clearly persuaded a majority the tasters that it showed better in the Bordeaux glass, which scored a substantial 44 points, followed by the Sauvignon Blanc glass. As a result, the 'correct' Chianti/Riesling glass only weighed in with 31 points.

The second mishit was the Vinum Montrachet glass which the tasters did put it in second place with 36 points for the flight of the 2003 Meerlust Estate Chardonnay. What beat it was the Vinum Pinot Noir 'Burgundy' glass. However, Turner suggested that this outcome could be explained by the fact that both glasses are of a very similar shape and mould, the only differences being a slight variation in the depth and aperture of each bowl.

The points also revealed that the most versatile glasses across all the flights were the smaller and similarly shaped, Riesling/Chianti glass and the Sauvignon Blanc glass, both of which scored 195.5 points in total. The significance of this is that Riedel recommends the Riesling/Chianti glass as its best all-round tasting glass, which was borne out by this tasting. The worst all-round performance from a Riedel glass came from the Montrachet glass, which, in total, scored just 142 points. However, the worst glass by some considerable margin was the ISO glass. It managed just 103 points across the six still wine flights.

In the two Champagne flights, the correct Riedel glass (Vinum Prestige Cuvee) came out firmly on top. Although it should be pointed out that with just three glasses in the line-up, this was not exactly a large sample. It is also worth noting that several tasters did not approve of the Vinum Champagne glass. Moreover, in a recent tasting organised by The World of Fine Wine Magazine, Riedel's Champagne glassware did not fare anything like as well against a group of non Riedel Champagne glasses.

Nevertheless, one can only conclude that the results overall of this particular tasting provide a strong endorsement for Riedel and its designated glassware. Martin Turner was understandably delighted by the outcome. 'I think it shows how good these glasses are and it strongly supports our message that the correct glassware really does make a very positive difference to people's perception and enjoyment of wine.' Moreover, as the comments of the Sommeliers show (see below), the wines did quite clearly perform very differently from glass to glass.

Cynics could conceivably argue that this favourable result was entirely predictable. Not least because all the Sommeliers were so familiar with the glasses that they immediately recognised which glass was which. In addition, they also correctly identified most of the wines' grape varieties. So was it then simply a case of putting the two together and scoring the flight accordingly? However, at no point did I get the impression that any of the tasters were simply trying to match a wine with the 'correct' glass. Instead, as their comments suggest, they did as they were asked and judged each wine in each glass entirely on its merits – irrespective of whether it was technically the 'right' or 'wrong' glass for a particular wine.

It's also worth pointing out that, particularly in consumer tastings, Riedel do choose wines which will they know will perform very well in the glasses they are showcasing. For instance, Riedel will often choose an old world style Sauvignon Blanc with crisp acidity which it is extremely confident will taste badly in an ISO glass and extremely well in a Riedel. In this tasting though, none of the wines were chosen by Riedel.

Yet despite this impressive result for Riedel, one very much doubts whether the whole debate about 'designated' glasses is about to go away anytime soon. This was amply demonstrated by the comments of Mark Bingley immediately after the tasting. 'Undoubtedly, what this and other tastings show is that, of course, you can use the most appropriate glass for different wines,' he pointed out. However, you could argue that some glasses' versatility suggests otherwise. For instance, I use the Riesling glass at home as an all-purpose glass and it works extremely well. And given its performance in today's tasting, you could argue that while you do need good stemware, you don't necessarily need all these different glasses. So I'm actually still a little bit ambivalent about the whole Riedel philosophy and marketing approach.'

Moreover, cost element in the equation cannot be underestimated – particularly when dealing with Riedel's top of the range hand-blown, lead crystal stemware. Restaurant breakages are a regular occurrence usually because of too much pressure when polishing. According to Xavier Rousset 'a Sommelier glass lasts no more than 4-8 months – but it depends on who is polishing and how busy you are. Le Manoir has a half case box for broken stems which gets filled every three days.' The result is that it spends hundreds of pounds a month just on replacing stemware. 'There's no doubt that the cost of the glassware is one of the reasons why we have to make additional mark-ups on wine,' added Wilkin. The problem though is that no-one wants to talk about it and no journalist wants to defend it. But it is an issue which has to be dealt with.'

It also emerged that this group of Sommeliers feel under no pressure or obligation to follow the Riedel rules when serving wine. In

fact, they would have no hesitation in pouring a wine in the 'wrong' glass if they felt it was the right thing to do. As Devaney commented, 'you have to keep it objective. Each wine has to be taken on its merit and the decision should be made with the customer at the last minute rather than having a preconceived idea of serving a particular wine in a particular glass. The important thing is knowing both your glasses and your wines – rather than following some pre-set rules laid down by Riedel.'

Only recently, Matt Wilkin put a Penfolds St Henri Shiraz into a Pinot glass rather than the recommended new Syrah glass. Why? 'Because it tasted flatter and more alcoholic in the Syrah glass. In the Pinot glass it was better balanced, more perfumed and more charming. So the next time that I serve that I'll pour it in a Pinot glass,' he says. 'Similarly, if I was serving a very delicate claret, I might even go for the standard Riesling glass rather than the big Bordeaux glass.' Sayburn, meanwhile, often favours the Riesling glass for some Pinot Noirs, particularly those from New Zealand.

And what about the ISO glass? Looking at the figures, it was comprehensively outgunned by Riedel. Indeed only in one flight did it come anywhere other than last or last equal. Time and time again, the tasters criticised it for being 'poor', 'disappointing' and 'inadequate'. For Wilkin this raised a very important point about wine judging. 'With some of these flights, just imagine how many of these wines might have been thrown out of a competition because they tasted shit in the ISO. Whereas, in a Riedel they tasted completely different and scored much more highly.'

The same question had evidently also occurred to James Halliday in Australia who, for the first time last year, introduced the Riedel Riesling/Chianti glass as the standard tasting glass at the National Wine Show in Canberra. According to one taster, who wrote in to Jancis Robinson's website (www.jancisrobinson.com), the results were dramatic and resulted in 'a big increase in well deserved medals.'

As Jancis pertinently pointed out, 'this sounds like good news for Georg Riedel and even better news for Australian winemakers whose wares may well be better appreciated by show judges from now on. I wonder how many wine competitions results would be changed by the results of different glassware. In my experience, wine producers and judges in German speaking countries and Italy have long used very good quality glasses while France, Spain and Anglophone countries have in general been slower to make the necessary investment.' In the light of this and other tastings, perhaps that time is now.

Through a Glass Darkly:

Flight one: Mudhouse Sauvignon Blanc 2005

Gearoid Devaney: I thought there were some very stark differences here between the bigger and the smaller glasses. Glasses 2 and 3 really stood out – particularly on the aromatics. The bigger glasses (1, 4 and 5) though didn't really work. Matt Wilkin: I preferred glass 3 followed by glass 2, but not by very much. I just felt that the wine was a bit lighter, fresher and cleaner in glass 3. The ISO glass was just about OK, but it didn't bring any aromatic lift. The larger glasses, particularly glass 5 made the wine too fat, flat and dilute.

Point spread:

Glass 1 (Vinum Montrachet) 25
Glass 2 (Vinum Riesling/Chianti) 33
Glass 3 (Vinum Sauvignon Blanc) 38
Glass 4 (Vinum Burgundy) 30
Glass 5 (Vinum Bordeaux) 21
Glass 6 (ISO) 21

Flight 2: Riesling Grand Cru Saering Domaines Schlumberger 2002

Ronan Sayburn: Rather like the first flight, I found that the big bowl glasses and the thinner, fluted glasses 2 and 3 tended to accentuate two different types of aromas. The latter showed more mineral characters whereas on the bigger glasses I got more petroleum Riesling characters. But on the palate, the big glasses really killed the wine, whereas the smaller glasses made it much more balanced. Mark Bingley: For me, acidity is very important with Riesling. So glasses 2&3 seemed to concentrate the aromas very well and also keep the impression of acidity in your mouth. In contrast, the big bowl stems made the wine taste much softer which killed the elements of freshness and crispness. I was surprised by this because I thought that the bowl shaped glasses would be good. But in fact, the acidity just didn't hold up.

Point spread:

Glass 1 (Vinum Montrachet) 17
Glass 2 (Vinum Riesling/Chianti) 44
Glass 3 (Vinum Sauvignon Blanc) 37
Glass 4 (Vinum Burgundy) 24

Class 5 (Vinum Bordeaux) 23

Class 6 (ISO) 22

Flight 3: Meerlust Estate Chardonnay 2003

Matthieu Longuere: The larger glasses worked well in this flight. But I also thought the smaller tulip glasses helped to integrate the oak. Had the wine been more elegant, I would have preferred glass 4. But because the oak was so prominent, I think glass 5 gave the impression of the best oak integration. Matt Wilkin: My preferences were glasses 1 and 4. But I also enjoyed glass 3 because it showed more well integrated oak and floral fruit expression. The larger bowl glasses flush out the oak expression and thereby show a bit more of the wine's minerality.

Point spread:

Class 1 (Vinum Montrachet) 36

Class 2 (Vinum Riesling/Sangiovese) 25

Class 3 (Vinum Sauvignon Blanc) 26

Class 4 (Vinum Burgundy) 39

Class 5 (Vinum Bordeaux) 26

Class 6 (ISO) 16

Flight 4: Mercury La Framboise 2002 Domaines Faiveley

Ronan Sayburn: I preferred the thinner more fluted glasses because they accentuated the acidity and that raspberry/cranberry character of the wine. With the larger glasses, I felt this style of Pinot just died. Mark Bingley: For me glass 4 works the best. However, I was surprised by the ISO glass which, on this occasion, did give some concentration of fruit, which I wasn't expecting. Gearoid Devaney: With the bigger glasses, I thought that the acidity was more pronounced and was too harsh. I liked glasses 2&3 because they focused the fruit more. But overall, I thought Glass 4 worked particularly well for this particular Pinot.

Point spread:

Class 1 (Vinum Montrachet) 27

Class 2 (Vinum Riesling/Chianti) 30

Class 3 (Vinum Sauvignon Blanc) 28

Class 4 (Vinum Burgundy) 41

Class 5 (Vinum Bordeaux) 24

Class 6 (ISO) 18

Flight 5: Villa Cafaggio San Martino 2000

Matthieu Longuere: I thought the smaller glasses were better for this rich wine purely because it remained more concentrated. So I preferred glass 3 to glass 5. Both have a similar shape but are different sizes. I just felt the wine lost its focus in the bigger glass. Matt Wilkin: For me, glass 5 showed the most complexity. Glass 2 was good, but not so multi-dimensional as 5. Ronan Sayburn: I preferred 2 and 5 for complexity and balance. The ISO made it taste very harsh.

Point spread:

Class 1 (Vinum Montrachet) 17

Class 2 (Vinum Riesling/Chianti) 31

Class 3 (Vinum Sauvignon Blanc) 33

Class 4 (Vinum Burgundy) 29

Class 5 (Vinum Bordeaux) 44

Class 6 (ISO) 14

Flight 6: Chateau de Pez Cru Bourgeois Exceptionnel 2000

Gearoid Devaney: Glass 5 stood out on this flight. I felt that glass 4 softened it out but didn't show its varietal definition. Glass 2 did well but Glass 1 did it no favours at all. The ISO really struggled. Mark Bingley: The red wines have given no joy whatsoever in the ISO glass. All I got out of it was wood rather than fruit. Also, this was also the first flight where glass 5 worked really well. Having said that, I was surprised by how well 2 and 3 did too.

Point spread:

Class 1 (Vinum Montrachet) 20

Class 2 (Vinum Riesling/Chianti) 32.5

Class 3 (Vinum Sauvignon Blanc) 33.5

Class 4 (Vinum Burgundy) 25

Class 5 (Vinum Bordeaux) 45

Glass 6 (ISO) 12

Flight 7: Roederer Vintage Champagne 1999

Xavier Rousset: Number 3 was the most successful at showing off this Champagne's elegant creaminess. Glass 2 doesn't do it any favours. On this occasion though, I was quite impressed by the ISO. Matthieu Longuere: I liked No 3 for structure. Glass 2 though wasn't good. It showed a completely different character – almost as if they were two completely different wines. Gearoid Devaney: I agree with Matthieu. Glass 2 made it taste much more like an aperitif style wine, whereas glass 3 showed much more roundness and depth. Mark Bingley: This was very interesting because you have three very different shaped glasses. However, glass 3 was the only success. Glass 2's delivery makes the wine rush into your mouth and almost splash you. The mechanics of this glass don't work at all.

Point Spread:

Glass 1. (ISO) 14.5

Glass 2 (Vinum Champagne) 14.5

Glass 3 (Vinum Prestige Cuvee) 19

Flight 8: D de Devaux Prestige Cuvee Champagne

Xavier Rousset: Again, I still preferred glass 3. Glass two was a bit better on this occasion. The ISO was OK, but no more. Ronan Sayburn: The ISO was good on the nose, but harsh on the palate. I don't like the shape or performance of glass 2. Overall 3 was best again. Matthieu Longuere: 3 showed more structure and definition. 2 was all over the place and the ISO showed quite well.

Point Spread:

Glass 1. (ISO) 10

Glass 2 (Vinum Champagne) 16

Glass 3 (Vinum Prestige Cuvee) 22.