


## Napa Valley Riesling: Then And Now



**Michelle Williams** Contributor   
Dining & Drinking



Four of Napa Valley's outstanding dry Rieslings. MICHELLE WILLIAMS

Prior to Prohibition, Riesling was the most planted white grape variety in Napa Valley, taking a dip until the 1970s, where its prominence rose again. In 1972, Riesling was the first wine released by Chateau Montelena. “This was well before Cabernet and Chardonnay were anointed King and Queen of Napa Valley,” shares Matt Crafton, Winemaker at Chateau Montelena, “I’m sure it was an exciting time.”

Some may argue the excitement has faded for Napa Valley Riesling, but that depends on who you ask. According to Hailey Trefethen, Vintner at Trefethen Family Vineyards, there were 4,401 tons of the grape crushed in Napa Valley in 1979. By 2017, that number dwindled to 266.20 tons, according to the USDA 2017 Grape Crush Report, but it is a labor of love for those who still produce it.

### **Chateau Montelena**

“Early on, winery founder Jim Barret realized the future of the winery was tied to its estate vineyards,” explains Crafton. Needing quick cash for the fledgling brand, he turned to his winemaking team for guidance. “Riesling, easy to produce and quick to market, was planted because it made financial sense. Today, it is one of our favorite wines, and a rarity in Napa Valley.”

“Growing the right grape at the right place,” lead them to Potter Valley. “It’s a simple concept, but sometimes takes you places you wouldn’t expect,” adds Crafton. The cool location offers the proper soil and climate combination for long hang-time, resulting in crisp acidity and texture while unlocking the grape’s flavor potential.

Crafton hopes newcomers to Riesling taste the [Chateau Montelena Potter Valley Riesling](#) and have an “A-Ha moment, realizing they do like Riesling.” He hopes fans of the grape will appreciate the “varietal purity and stylistic complexity” across each unique vintage. “But most of all, I want them all to recognize the wine as delicious. If we haven’t been able to convey that in the bottle, we haven’t done our job.”