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As good as her word

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For Di Miller, of Bellarmine Wines, the glass is half empty when it comes to the perfect riesling descriptor.

This former vet has perfected her rieslings but is stuck for labels.

NEXT year, Australian winemakers have to give "auslese" back to the people from whom they pinched it: German winemakers. They know it's the right thing to do.

It doesn't make it any easier, though, for those still using the borrowed descriptor on bottles of their sweeter rieslings - winemakers such as Di Miller, of Bellarmine Wines. She's biting her nails to the quick. This week she has to come up with not only a replacement name for auslese but two other names for her stable of rieslings from the Pemberton wine region. The label maker desperately needs her decision. What will it be?

As soon as Miller knows, the label maker will know. It's that close and that difficult. It's a great dilemma, no doubt about it.

Miller makes three rieslings (all \$22 a bottle). In the wake of a visit to Germany last year, she says she would love to make five. But first she has to sort out the mess over names and identities.

Her dry riesling is labelled "riesling dry". OK, that makes sense.

Her medium-sweet riesling is curiously labelled "riesling", and her generously sweet riesling is labelled "auslese riesling".

Miller doesn't go with the trend of giving a RS number (indicating the level of residual sugar in the wine) on the front label of riesling - it's too hard to understand; wine drinkers aren't trained winemakers. She doesn't want to put the word "sweet" on her label; no winemaker does - it's the kiss of death.

And she doesn't like the term "off-dry" to indicate her medium-sweet wine. "I don't want the word 'off' connected with my wine," Miller says.

She toyed with the idea of giving her rieslings the designations A and B and C - but which wine would be A and which wine C? It would also imply that not all her rieslings are equal and in her eyes they most certainly are.

Miller, a past wine judge at the International Riesling Challenge in Canberra, is serious about riesling, be it dry or sweet. She values the intrinsic quality of each style. The grape is now practically in her DNA.

Her boss, Willi Schumacher, who bought Bellarmine in 2000, is German and a riesling enthusiast.

Her first job in the wine industry was in 1998 with Andrew Wigan, a master riesling maker at Peter Lehmann Wines in the Barossa. Her first serious winemaking job was in the Great Southern region of Western Australia, an area making some of the most expressive floral rieslings in the country.

While Pemberton isn't a stronghold for the grape (it is primarily a chardonnay and pinot noir kind of cool-climate area), Miller has made riesling all her own.

"To me, Pemberton riesling is quite different to any other in Australia," she says. "Compared to the Porongurups and Mount Barker rieslings that I used to make, Pemberton has more flavour, is less austere and more approachable."

The soils help - limestone with red gravel on top, providing natural structure and minerality, prized riesling characteristics.

Miller is a bit of a brainiac (she has more letters after her name than most) and a thinker, so she's sticking with riesling - if she was a wine marketer, she probably would have chucked it in years ago.

A former veterinarian, she turned to wine while working "James Herriot-style" in the farming communities of Yorkshire in northern England in the 1990s. She would drop into the local Oddbins wine shop at every opportunity. When her father died, she decided life was too short not to explore this new thing by which she was entranced - wine. So she did, and loved it.

Now Miller is in her second year of study for a Master of Wine title.

Her winemaking style appears to be heavily influenced by her science background. Riesling masters such as John Vickery would undoubtedly approve. She does things by the book and her wines are clean and fashioned along classic lines.

The Bellarmine 2010 riesling dry is a case in point: a soft, gently floral wine with a light honeysuckle scent and citrus and grapefruit flavours. Drinkers who would usually avoid riesling because of its piercing acidity will find this more to their liking.

Her medium-sweet riesling from 2010 (labelled riesling) isn't immediately sweet; the floral characters blend nicely with a little spice, while the sugar (22 grams of residual sugar) is modest and appears more as a tang. Again, it is entirely approachable; a lover of dry riesling could easily manage a glass.

"Some people think it's dry," Miller says. It's easy to see why.

The 2010 auslese riesling, the last of its kind by that name following the implementation of the EU-Australia Wine Trade Agreement, is sweet, with 65 grams of residual sugar. That kind of sweetness needs a good backbone of acidity for balance. It's there, along with the arresting flavours of apricot, fruit peel and something mealy and biscuity (an excellent partner to apple pie, perhaps?).

Miller does make other wines. In keeping with the Pemberton region's forte, she makes chardonnay and pinot noir. The 2009 chardonnay is still tight but some attractive textural qualities soften the mid-palate. The chardonnay and the 2008 pinot noir (\$39.95) share solid fruit, not particularly expressive.

However, in 2009 Miller changed just two small things about her pinot noir, introducing lower yields and higher-quality oak, and what a difference. The solid, compact nature of the '08 pinot, almost dry red-ish, is gone, replaced by a lifted, aromatic pinot with black, juicy fruit. It is a stunning transformation. The 2009 pinot is more expensive (\$58), yes, but all the better.

Now Miller is considering a similar makeover for her shiraz. The vines are hitting 10 years old and a clearer picture is emerging of just what the vineyard can deliver.

Now, if only defining her stable of rieslings was that simple.

Bellarmino Wines are distributed by Macro Beverages and are available from Blackburn Fine Wines; Elwood Cellars; Red, White and Amber, Hawthorn; Cloudwine, South Melbourne; and Star City Liquor, city.