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Claus Josef Riedel, Crystal Maker Who Suited Glass to Wine, Dies at 79

By FRANK J. PRIAL

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Claus Josef Riedel, the former president of Riedel Crystal and one of the first in his age-old craft to realize that the design of a wineglass could alter the perception of how its contents tasted, died in Genoa, Italy, on March 17. He was 79.

The cause was a heart attack, his family said.

A ninth-generation glassmaker, Mr. Riedel was president of the world-renowned Austrian family company from 1957 to 1994, when he was succeeded by his son Georg.

Soon after taking control of the family business, which was founded in 1756, he began experimenting with the shapes of wineglasses. He concluded that a wine could taste notably different in variously shaped and sized glasses. He spent 16 years studying the physics of wine delivery to the mouth and taste buds and experimenting with different glass configurations, matching them with wines of different regions, different grapes and different ages.

The size of a glass, its thickness, the shape of its bell and the diameter of its rim contributed materially to the taste of the wine drunk from it, Mr. Riedel came to believe. The wine's balance, depth, harmony and complexity, he discovered, could and often did change from one glass to another. When told that the glasses he created would have limited market appeal, he said: "Aesthetics and excellence are my criteria, not mere convenience."

From Mr. Riedel's experiments came a line of glassware that included special glasses for many different wines: not just for Burgundy and Bordeaux, but for Italian and California wines.

The first wine-specific Riedel glasses, the Sommeliers collection, was introduced in 1973. Under his son Georg's direction, the line eventually included special glasses for California zinfandel, tequila and single malt Scotch.

At that point, Claus Riedel was already well known for his 1958 Burgundy Grand Cru glass, which is still said to be the world's largest wine glass. It holds 37 ounces; the standard wine bottle holds about 25 ounces. That glass, along with 127 other Riedel glasses, is in the permanent design collection at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In 1959, his Exquisite Bordeaux glass was named the Most Beautiful Glass in the World by the Corning Museum of



Claus Josef Riedel in 1988.

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Glass in Corning, N.Y.

Mr. Riedel was born in 1925 in Polaun, Bohemia, now the Czech Republic. In World War II he was conscripted into the German Army and sent to fight Italian partisans in Tuscany and Liguria. Captured by American forces, he spent 10 months in a prisoner-of-war camp near Pisa. Repatriated in January 1946, he jumped from a train as it entered Austria, where he found work with a glassmaker, Daniel Swarovski, who had once been apprenticed to his great-grandfather, Josef Riedel.

Mr. Riedel's father, Walter, who had turned his glassmaking skills to inventing a type of radar tube, was taken prisoner by Soviet soldiers at the end of the war and spent 10 years in the Soviet Union. In 1955, with Mr. Swarovski's help, Claus and his father bought a bankrupt glassmaking business in Kufstein, Austria, and resumed the family's glassmaking tradition.

In his spare time, Mr. Riedel was an avid motorcycle fan, known for taking his Harley-Davidson through the Brenner Pass in good weather and bad. He was married five times, twice to his present wife, Ute.

Besides his son Georg, Mr. Riedel leaves another son, a daughter and three grandchildren. His grandson Maximilian is executive vice president of a Riedel subsidiary, Riedel Crystal U.S.A.

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