

Hungary

10 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

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In a nutshell: Some fiery whites and some good value, plus the historic sweet white of Tokaj.

Main grapes: Furmint, Hárslevelű, Leányka (white); Kadarka and many more plus the usual international mix (red).

Like all wine-producing countries in Eastern Europe (and there are many), Hungary is still in the throes of restructuring its wine business in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Until 1989 wine was viewed as simply a commodity like grain or potatoes to be supplied, according to long-term economic plans, to Hungarians and, particularly, Russians. The state monopoly handled all wine sales and distribution and, although much of the vineyard land remained in private hands, many vines were planted in unsuitable areas. Quantity, not quality, was the priority.

In the 1990s, Hungary's vine-growers and wine-makers had to grapple with a completely new system which offered them no security and no very obvious market. The Russian one had evaporated, the domestic market was (and is) shrinking, and export markets had never been so competitive. All things considered, Hungarian wine responded well.

Of all the eastern European wine producers to come out of the Soviet shadow, Hungary was most comprehensively invaded by the so-called 'flying winemakers', technically clued-up wine producers who spent just enough time in the wine region to make the cleanest, fruitiest, most 'international' wine out of that harvest's grapes. This resulted in a bevy of inexpensive, well-made, if not breath-stoppingly characterful varietals from Hungary - notably Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir, Cabernet and Merlot, which have been increasingly joined by the likes of Hárslevelű, Irsai Olivér, Furmint and Leányka among whites and Kadarka, Kékfrankos (Austria's Blaufränkisch) and Portugieser (previously known as Kékoportó) among reds.

This century has seen an increased appreciation of Hungary's indigenous grapes and her more traditional wines, which have benefited from improved winemaking and the commitment of passionate smaller producers, even if the best wines rarely find their way onto the export market.

If Hungarian whites can be said to share a characteristic it is that they are relatively full-bodied and have a certain Magyar fire or spice. Reds are less distinctive. The best exported tend to be merely clean, frank and fruity, although locals swear by the more characterful offerings of the likes of Josef Bach. Young Kékfrankos can be particularly juicy and appetising, while some vintages (Hungary's weather can vary considerably from year to year) yield some fine Pinot Noir fruit. Cabernets Sauvignon and Franc are starting to shine, especially in Villány in the south.

If many Hungarian vineyards are underachievers, many Hungarian wineries are severely underfunded, as the production system continues to adapt to private enterprise. Most of the newer equipment has been provided by western investment, often with only one intermediary between a British supermarket shelf and the imported tank press.

The country's legacy of native vine varieties is distinctive, rich and diverse, encompassing light-skinned grapes such as Ezerjő, Furmint, Hárslevelű, Irsai Oliver, Juhfark, Kéknyelű and various Muscats. Olaszrizling is the Welschriesling of Austria, Szürkebarát is the Hungarian name for France's Pinot Gris, Tramini is Traminer, the grapey Leányka is originally from Transylvania and **Királyleányka** is Romania's Feteasca Regala.

Kadarka is Hungary's signature red grape variety, although it has been a casualty as growers have increasingly planted the internationally better known varieties Cabernet, Merlot and Pinot Noir. Some of the best Kadarka is grown in Szekszárd, although it is also cultivated in Kunság, Hajós-Baja, Csongrád and Villány.

Quite apart from the difficulty of pronouncing and spelling most of the wine regions, many of which were redefined and renamed by law in 1997, it will surely be some time before wine drinkers outside Hungary come to demand Hungarian wine by these names. It is still too early in Hungary's reconstruction to make long-term generalisations about the aptitude of various regions for different varieties and wine styles. The country is still being plundered by outside investors and the success of the resulting wines can often reflect the level of investment more than the natural potential.

It seems unlikely, for instance, that **Sopron**, which is effectively a continuation of Austria's Neusiedlersee sweet wine region, will be producing wines to match Austria's most sought after half-bottles in the foreseeable future. It is best known for dry reds today, their reputation revived by producers such as Austrian Franz Weniinger. Wines from **Somló** and **Mór** tend to be aromatic whites, while nearby **Etyek** and **Ászár-Neszmély** have established a reputation for exportable varietals of both colours such as those widely exported by the Hilltop winery.

On the shores of **Lake Balaton** are many important and increasingly modernised vineyards, with **Badacsony** on the westernmost part of the northern shore and **Balatonfüred-Csepak** at the north-eastern end.

Three wine regions on the right bank of the Danube (Duna) in the south of the country are **Szekszárd**, **Villány** and **Pécs** in the Mecsek hills, once famous for its Olaszrizling. Many fine, concentrated red wines are made here by the likes of Attila Gere, Ede Tiffán, Vylan, Ferenc Takler, Malatinszky and Péter Vida. The historic Italian firm of Antinori conferred international respectability on Szekszárd by launching a joint venture with its co-operative to produce wines under the Bataapáti Estate label. Antinori has also invested in **Tolna**.

Just across the Danube from here is Hungary's famous Great Plain, or **Alföld**, a flat, sandy expanse populated largely by itinerants and horses. Vines joined them in quantity soon after phylloxera invaded the country (phylloxera cannot thrive in sand). This is the source of Hungary's bulk of basic blending wine although it has three designated areas which can produce some good-value international varietals, **Hajós-Baja**, **Kunság** and **Csongrád**.

The rest of Hungary's vineyards are in the north west of the country. In the **Mátra** foothills, vines are protected from cold winds by the Northern Massif, and the Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc of Gyöngyös Estate were some of the first 'new wave' Hungarian wines to be exported in the 1990s.

To the east is the historic town of **Eger**, whose most famous wine, **Egri Bikavér**, was sold for years on export markets as red, sometimes powerful but often not, Bull's Blood. G1A, founded by the late Tibor Gál, is just one winery producing impressive Pinot Noir here too.

But Hungary's most famous wine by far is made in the north-east corner of the country in a strange region known as **Tokaj** (which historically extended over the border into Slovakia - except that the Czechs exchanged the right to use the name Tokay for a large beer contract). **Tokaji**, the wine named after the town of Tokaj (and sometimes called Tokay outside Hungary), was in its time the world's greatest sweet white wine, made from **nobly rotten** grapes as early as 1650 according to local history - long before botrytised wines were recorded in Sauternes and the Rheingau, the birthplace of such wines in Germany.

The main ingredients are Hárslevelű and, especially, Furmint, with some Muscat (Sárgamuskotály) grapes. The local conditions around the 27 Tokaj villages in this very protected corner of middle Europe are such that in a good year the best are affected by noble rot, here called *aszú*, and can reach exceptional sugar levels. (As in Sauternes, a confluence of rivers encourages morning mists.) They range from dry to quite extraordinarily sweet with the following descriptions: **Szamorodni** (in which there is no selective picking of grapes affected by noble rot), dry or sweetened; then **Aszú 3, 4, 5 or 6 Puttonyos**, 6 being the sweetest. (A *puttonyo* is the traditional hod used as a measure for the sweet grape paste, made from pulverised botrytised grapes, added to wine made from unaffected grapes before a slow second fermentation, though the timing of this addition may vary.) **Essencia** is very rare grape sugar essence - a grape syrup really - made from the tiny amount of free-run juice from the botrytised grapes that are used to make Aszú paste. Because its sugar content is so high, yeasts can work only at a snail's pace and these wines continue to ferment in cask for many a year. These were the sort of wines which made Tokaji's reputation as elixir of life and love. The final ingredient in Tokaji's extraordinary character is that in its traditional guise, it is aged rather like sherry, under a film of local yeast, in barrels partly filled, in strange underground caverns lined with mould like black felt and signalled only by the low doorways hollowed out of the small hills of the Tokaj region. Some producers now make their wines in a less oxidative, more modern, style and there is much debate as to which style or exact method of winemaking is more traditional or desirable. For more details, see [Tokaji](#).

Of all Hungarian wine regions, this one has attracted most attention from outside investors, who include no fewer than three French insurance companies (AXA own Disznókő, for example), Spain's Vega Sicilia with their Oremus, and a consortium, the Royal Tokaji Wine Company, involving the British wine writer Hugh Johnson. Wines made since 1992 are expected to have much more distinct, 'cleaner' (perhaps more Sauternes-like and less Hungarian) flavours than their predecessors, which were effectively thrown into a communal blending vat by the state monopoly. All of them are bottled in a distinctive half-litre clear glass flask.

The figurehead of Tokaji's renaissance is undoubtedly István Szepsy. He and now many others are also producing increasingly exciting, powerful dry wines from the sometimes underappreciated Furmint grape.