

Hungarian oak - a report from Mel Knox

23 Nov 2004 by JR

Someone was asking about eastern European oaks recently in Your turn on purple pages. Coincidentally I have just received this report on a visit to fancy French coopers François Frères's new Hungarian cooperage. It's written by their San Francisco-based barrel salesman extraordinaire Mel Knox who wrote most of the words of the *Oxford Companion to Wine's* entries on oak, even if not necessarily in the order they are printed. Whether you ever plan to buy barrels or not, I recommend you get yourself on his mailing list by applying to icilabas@pacbell.net for regular despatches of zaniness, à la Randall Grahm of Bonny Doon but much briefer and therefore more digestible.

Father Crush is getting dressed. Do you have your barrels ordered??

Once again, we have to remind people to look in their desks and make sure the barrel confirmations are there. It happens every year. Maybe one page of a two-page fax came through to our office. Maybe Moke used your purchase order to write down the phone number of one of his girlfriends and it never got to Sally. This happens all the time.

We still have a few François barrels available and some in stock. I am not sure how much longer this will be true. My Taransaud barrel allocation has been exhausted and it looks as though it will not grow next year. One thought: sign up for their Chêne Club and perhaps you will find clues on how to increase your allocation. Log on to www.taransaud.com and sign up for the Chêne Club. This is almost as good as belonging to a chêne gang.

Over Memorial Day weekend [late May] I spent three days visiting Hungary, where the François family purchased half-interest in a stave mill and cooperage two years ago. With a group that included Americans, French, South Africans, and Hungarian-Americans we visited most of the country. Indeed, another four or five hours on the bus and we could have visited about ten countries!

The first day we boarded a double-decker bus and headed south to the cooperage and stave mill. As a young boy I had been profoundly impressed by the Hungarian uprising of 1956 and we debated whether American intervention would have led to nuclear war. Talking about this period of history with Erica Molnar, who escaped to Austria when she was a little girl, really touched me.

The stave mill looks just like a French one... not too surprising since the equipment came from France. The cooperage is pretty up-to-date as well. The wood park is one of the largest I have seen.

After all the visits, including a nice ride in a helicopter, the Trust people celebrated ten years of business with a gala dinner featuring folk dancing, gypsy music, a traditional *chanteuse*, and finally a cover band singing ABBA's 'Waterloo' and the Melodians 'Rivers of Babylon'. Naturally as soon as the party got really going, we had to get back on the bus. I guess the concept of 'for the good of the party' has lost its meaning.

The next day we visited the forests. As in France, the forests are managed for long-term viability. This means that Hungarian oak will not be a short-lived phenomenon, as was Yugoslavian oak in the 70s. The final day we visited wineries in Tokaj and discovered that fifty years of Communist rule had not eliminated noble rot. Capitalist influence was seen in the form of foreign investment from AXA and Vega Sicilia, not to mention winemaker studies in California and Oregon. On the drive back to Budapest the South Africans sang hymns while Jacques Jaboulet meditated.

François Hungary:

225 or 228 L export barrel.....	\$440/each FOB Napa
265 L barrel.....	\$465/each FOB Napa
500 L barrel.....	\$690/each FOB Napa

Château barrels and other sizes are available. Quantity discounts available. The wood for these barrels is well-dried and tight-grained. Results to date have been excellent. What are you waiting for??

Prices for François Frères [French] barrels:
1-10 barrels: 660 Euros, 11-24: 650 Euros, 25-49: 640 Euros

Go Giants!

Mel Knox
June 2002

Well this is obviously a sales pitch but more fun than most. It's characteristically long on human interest and light on technical detail. I will ask for more, though suspect that phrase 'well-dried and tight-grained' may be the sum total on offer.