

## Istvan Szepsy's Tokaji

23 Mar 2010 by Jancis Robinson

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I managed to taste a few dozen Hungarian wines while in [Budapest last weekend](#) and found them generally of a high standard. (I will be reporting in more detail.) But in Hungary is one absolutely outstanding producer who will be well known to any wine lover familiar with Hungary but whose wines deserve far more international attention.

**István Szepsy's** wines are not cheap. In fact the average price of wine in Hungary is quite high - for imported wines as well as for Hungarian wines, partly because so many Hungarian winemakers are so ambitious. But I do feel the word genius is not too hyperbolic a word to describe the modest Mr Szepsy. He is based in Tokaj, Hungary's world-famous sweet wine country, on some of the most extraordinary, and extraordinarily varied, soils in the world of wine.

He carries the same surname as the man who originally put immortal sweet Tokaji, reputed to revive corpses, on the map by developing the complex Aszu technique in the seventeenth century, and is today the acknowledged king of that unique wine style. But, unfortunately for the locals and the many foreigners who have invested there, sweet wines are not in vogue. (You may have noticed this.)

As a consequence, as we have noted [here](#), wine producers in Tokaj have been focusing increasing attention on dry wines. In a tasting he led at last weekend's VinCE wine fair, and at a subsequent private tasting we attended together, Szepsy admitted, 'nowadays we cannot survive financially without dry wines. For a long time I didn't drink them because I have a very weak stomach and they used to be too acid.' (I dread to think what life must be like as a Tokaji producer who finds it difficult to digest acidity...) He continued, 'I didn't believe in them at first but today I cannot imagine our future without dry wines. I don't know the ideal style yet. I know only directions. We're trying new things every day and we try to integrate feedback from consumers into the style too.'

He is continuing to explore the potential of new areas in the Tokaj region, and of course the vines are getting older and the wines more intense all the time. He makes enormous sacrifices in terms of crop thinning and even cutting off the wings of individual bunches to imbue his wines with the essential character of each parcel of vines. Although he continues to make sweet wines that stand head and shoulders above those of most of his peers, his aim is increasingly to understand the very precise but varied character of his different vineyards and express them in a range of dry wines, notably from the great grape of Tokaj, Furmint - although he does make varietal Hárslevel? too. (Unfortunately I did not have a chance to taste any on this trip.)

Szepsy says that he conducted an experimental blind tasting with some very well qualified palates (I got the impression they were French sommeliers but I may be wrong) to compare how accurately they could spot individual vineyards in a range of his wines and in a range of Côte d'Or white burgundies and - guess what? - the Furmints were much more expressive than the Chardonnays. (He ages them in large Hungarian oak.)

The sweet wines are sold in the half-litre flasks characteristic of Tokaji, and you can also taste some of the Szepsy magic in various bottlings from **Királyudvar**, the Tokaji estate run alongside Domaine Huet of Vouvray by owner Anthony Hwang, where Szepsy was involved until 2006 (see my recent tasting notes on [Huet and Királyudvar](#)).

I can honestly and thoroughly recommend any Szepsy wine, though among dry wines, the individual vineyard bottlings such as **Szent Tamás** (St Thomas) are by far the most exciting, have real potential to age, and deserve a place in any fine wine lover's cellar. I prefer the 2008 vintage to the 2007 of the 'basic' (if that is not too insulting a word) dry wine, the **Estate Furmint**. The dry wines tend to retail at between £20 and £33 a bottle while his painstakingly made sweet wines are even more expensive: from around £40 to hundreds of pounds a bottle.

But, unusually, I do think these expensive wines are worth it. Szepsy is utterly convincing. Very low key, very quiet, obviously thoughtful and troubled, he says 'the quest for quality is a daily way of life'. He is clearly on a journey, and fortunately has his son and daughters alongside him so he almost certainly has not arrived at the final destination. 'In terms of style there are no limits', is another of his observations.

Clicking on the [Find these wines](#) link above or below reveals many a listing around the world. In the UK the wines are imported by fellow Hungarian Akos Forczek of Top Selection and listed mainly by Fortnum & Mason (who even had an ownülabel sweet wine from Szepsy until recently), Huntsworth Wine of Kensington Church Street, Selfridge's, and online, though chiefly by the six-bottle pack, via [www.one4wine.com](http://www.one4wine.com)

Some releases are also offered for sale [here](#) on Szepsy's own website at prices from 18 to 80 euros a bottle.

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