Reasons to go Hungary

21 Apr 2010 by Jancis Robinson/FT

See my detailed tasting notes on Purple pages.

Ask most wine buyers, both private and professional, how they view Hungarian wine and most would be inclined to put it in the same category as, say, wine from Bulgaria and Moldova, which they probably believe to be cheap and not that cheerful. In fact, thanks to ambition and investment, most of the ex-Soviet bloc countries are now producing a handful of fine wines as well as potential fodder for the cheaper supermarket shelves, but Hungary is rather different. The wine-producing country with which it should most properly be compared is its old Hapsburg neighbour Austria. Not only is it geographically similar, with the Danube flowing through it and a strong Pannonian warming influence, but a typical Hungarian wine today is really quite fine - not quite as high quality across the board as Austrian wine is today, but definitely getting there.

The only trouble is that Hungarians are so fiercely proud of their own viticultural heritage that they are prepared to pay high prices for their best and/or most famous wines, which tends to make them seem unrealistically overpriced outside Hungary. This is a common problem for emerging fine-wine producers. The same phenomenon curbs exports of the new generation of much-improved wines from countries such as Greece, Turkey, Israel and Mexico - and even makes the top wines of Spain difficult to sell abroad.

Hungary's most famous wine by far is the legendary sweet elixir made around the town of Tokaj in the far north east of the country. One of the most immediate wine-related reactions to the fall of communism was the wave of investment by western wine companies in the wine then known as Tokay, now written Tokaji in a more Magyar fashion. But both these investors - the likes of AXA Millésimes of Bordeaux, Vega Sicilia of Spain and my co-author Hugh Johnson - and the local Hungarian wine producers in the Tokaj region have been finding it increasingly difficult to see a return on selling highly priced sweet wines whose quantity and quality can vary alarmingly from year to year.

They have accordingly done what their counterparts in the middle Loire and Germany have done: started to make a higher and higher proportion of dry white wines instead, dry whites of heartening quality - typically dry versions of Tokaji's signature grape variety Furmint. István Szepsy is the acknowledged, if exceedingly mild-mannered, leader of the Tokaji pack. On a recent visit to Budapest I had the pleasure of witnessing him present his wines to a packed hall at the ground-breaking VinCE consumer wine fair, and of tasting a wide range of new-wave Hungarian wines with him in a more intimate setting the next day. He freely admits, 'nowadays we couldn't 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. But today I couldn't imagine our future without them.'

He made his first dry Furmint by accident in 2000 when he was not only working at his own eponymous estate but was also consulting at a new enterprise, Királyudvar, owned by Philippino businessman Anthony Hwang, who had recently bought Domaine Huet in Vouvray in the Loire. The first great post-communist vintage in Hungary was 1999, which had been a glorious one for traditional sweet Tokaji, but in 2000 they simply didn't have enough botrytis-affected grapes to make great sweet wine and so the distinctly delicious, dry, and still delightful Királyudvar, Úrágya Furmint 2000 was made, heralding a new generation of dry wines with Furmint's minerality, fiery richness, life-saving acidity and real ability to become more interesting in bottle.

Today, Szepsy is developing a range of dry wines designed to demonstrate the terroir of his individual vineyards such as Szent Tamás (Saint Thomas) and admits, '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.' Dry versions of Tokaji's other white wine grape Hárslevel? are also made, and it seems to me that all of these wines, from a reliable producer such as Béres, are a valuable addition to any fine wine lover's armoury of ageworthy dry whites to serve as an alternative to fine white burgundy.

Hungary is not short of characterful indigenous pale-skinned grape varieties with names such as Juhfark, Kéknely? and, most commonly grown, Olaszrizling, called variously Welschriesling, Laski Rizling and Riesling Italico elsewhere in middle Europe. The Somló wine region in the east of Hungary also grows some fine Hárslevel?, and is good at demonstrating terroir differences for a wide range of grape varieties.

But, as seems to be the general rule today, Hungarians themselves seem readier to pay high prices for red wines - perhaps because they represent the minority in Hungary. There are few all-Magyar dark-skinned grape varieties of any note, although Gere Attila (Hungarians like to put the family name first) of the southern red wine region of Villány, the red wine producer with arguably the highest reputation of all in Hungary, is experimenting with the little-known Járdovány that tastes a little like candied mulberries. As leading Budapest wine educator Gabriella Mészáros puts it, 'Hungarian red wine varieties tend to have light tannins, lots of fruit, and good acidity - like a good Gamay.'

Certainly the most distinctive Hungarian reds I tasted tended to be blends including Kékfrankos, the increasingly fashionable grape variety known as Blaufränkisch over the border in Austria, which with its racy fruitiness is not unlike the Gamay of Beaujolais. There are also some less obviously Hungarian but impressive copies of red bordeaux, with Cabernet Franc rather than Cabernet Sauvignon increasingly the favoured variety that is easier to ripen in Villány - although perhaps the single most dramatic red I tasted was based on the Austrian Zweigelt grape grown almost on the Austrian border by restaurateur Ráspi.

These are treats that are savoured mainly in Hungary itself. Even István Szepsy has not found it easy to export his superlative wines. But one man who is trying to introduce foreigners to the exciting progress that has been made in Hungary's vineyards and cellars is US financier Nimród Kovács, whose brand is, of course, Kovács Nimród, based on vineyards in Eger, traditional source of Egri Bikaver, the wine whose name used to be translated as Bull's Blood in Anglophone countries. His lees-stirred 'Batonnage' (sic) Chardonnay 2007 may not be the most definitively Hungarian wine, but at $20 a bottle is an absolute steal and would serve as an excellent introduction to the wines of the New Hungary.

TOP NEW HUNGARIAN WINES

Surnames precede first names below.

Balassa István, Mézes-Mály and Betsek Furmints 2006 Tokaji

Bére Hárslevel? 2008 Tokaji

Bussay László, Szürkebarát 2006 and 2007 Zala (Lake Balaton)

Demeter Zoltán, Kakas Furmint 2007 Tokaji

Györgykovács, Imre Hárslevel? 2006 Somló (Lake Balaton)

Királyudvar, Úrágya Furmint 2000 Tokaji

Kovács Nimród, Battonage Chardonnay 2007 Eger

Kreinbacher Birtok, Nagy-somlói 2007 Somló

Szepsy István, most dry Furmints, Tokaji

REDS

Gere Attila, Merlot 2002, Attila 2002 and 2007, Solus 2006 Villány

Gróf Buttler, Bikavér 2006 Eger

Heimann, Birtokbor 2007 Szekszárd

Heumann Evelyn, Cabernet Franc 2007 Villány

Malatinszky, Kúria Cabernet Franc 2006, 2007 and 2008 Villány

Ráspi, Zweigelt 2007 and Máté Cuvée 2006 Sopron

St Andrea, Mereng? 2006 Eger

Sebestyén, Iván-völgyi Bikavér 2007 Szekszárdi

Weninger, Spern Steiner Kékfrankos 2004 Sopron

Weninger-Gere, Cabernet Franc 2007 Villány

See my detailed tasting notes on Purple pages. One of the very few specialist importers of Hungarian wines into the UK is Mephisto Wines of London,