



S z a b o l c s H a t v a n i

This text gives a quick overview of the grape-growing and wine-making history of Hungary and Tokaj, then it presents the grape varieties and the rich spectrum of wines and technologies of the region.

At the beginning, some words on the wine history of Hungary in general. Archaeologists found Celt, Illyrian and Roman traces of viticulture and wine-making in the Carpathian basin, and the wandering Hungarian tribes brought their own experience with themselves, too. During the medieval centuries Walloon settlers arrived and grapes were grown and wine was made throughout the historical Hungarian Kingdom. Due to historical reasons in the 16th century the reputation of Tokaji region started to increase and the revolution of making natural sweet wines has begun. To the second half of the 19th century the area of the vineyards reached its maximum; this development was broken by the phylloxera. After this further disasters came: the two world wars and the peace treaties destroyed the smallholders with their traditional knowledge and experience, damaged vineyards and mutilated the historical and the inner markets. Then came the 45 years of command-and-control era when quantity was over quality, and significant losses of image and trust occurred. The change of regime in 1989 opened the possibilities of renewal, and a significant development started in the frame of market economy, the re-establishment of traditions occurred and now Hungary has to face a world-wide competition in wine markets.

The first Wine Act of 1893 provided strict requirements for grape-growing and wine making. The next Act in 1908 banned the fortification of wines by alcohol,

but the Act of 1924 allowed it again. The next and hopefully last ban occurred in 1991, so in Hungary now it is forbidden to fortify wines. The latest regulations (from 2004) declared Tokaj as a closed wine region and limited the name of aszú only to this region.

The Tokaji wine region is located at the north-eastern corner of Hungary, at the meeting point of a submontane and a plain region, along the Bodrog river (and close to the Tisza river). Regarding the soil, the base rocks are of volcanic origin and they are covered by a layer of marine sediments, then further volcanic activity occurred, then the precious minerals got into the soil in large amounts. This structure and mineral content makes the soil of the Tokaji wine region unique and very much diversified. Another important piece in the mosaic is the encounter of the hills and the rivers. They protect the vineyards on the one hand and, on the other hand the evaporation of water surface ensures the misty environment necessary to the formation of *Botrytis cinerea*, the grey mould that is a disaster in other wine regions but here, in Tokaj it is the key factor of producing aszú wines. When the autumn is long and dry – it is a requisite for optimum botrytisation – the noble mould penetrates the flesh of the fruit, where it transforms the aromas and desiccates the berry. However, it rarely injures the skins, and practically never forms film on them. So the berries can be selected from bunches one by one.

The wine region confines 28 settlements, and has about 5000 hectares planted out of its 7000 hectares of first and second class sites.

Up to the 16th century Tokaj produced common dry wines (it was called *ordinarium*), but something stirred on the slopes: during that decades the techniques of making aszú and *szamorodni* have developed. The date of this event is the first half of the 16th century according to the latest researches – it refutes the common legend that a protestant minister, Szepesi Lackó Máté invented the aszú when he started the vintage on 10th November because he was afraid of Turkish. The grapes became very ripened so excellent wine was made from the selection of aszú berries. The fact that such an accidental event resulted in this wine would be doubtful, even if we did not have reliable proofs about the earlier existence of aszú. But we have it. We know that the first aszú was mentioned in *Fabrícus Balázs's Nomenclatura*. *Fabrícus* was a Calvinist minister, teacher, and the main narrator of viticulture and oenology of the 16th century in Tokaj. The work was published in 1590, but was written for a long time before 1576.

Till the last third of the 19th century the technology of making aszú wines has been continuously developed and dry wines has been overshadowed. And it was



broken by the phylloxera in the last third of that century. The re-establishment resulted in different structure, varieties, tillage, planting, pruning. This was the period when the current two main varieties (Furmint and Hárslevel?) started to dominate the vineyards in the region, and the traditional cultivation methods, the plantation structure, the way of pruning were changing. During the next, socialist era the situation went on worsening, the industrialised agriculture shifted the grapes and wine from quality to quantity to a large extent.

After the change of regime the old traditions started to live again in a more modern way, market economy was introduced, and Tokaj, after a rocky re-start commenced to regain its former respect. The role of terroir is increasing, the role of dry wines is strengthening. Hungary is at the very beginning of this route, but the outcomes are hopeful so far.

Grape varieties of Tokaji wine region:

Furmint

Furmint is a grape of uncertain origin, probably native to Tokaj. The bunches are medium-sized with round berries. Furmint is a late variety, usually ripening in the second half of October, and a very good host of botrytis.

Hárslevel?

The "Linden Leaf" is an old variety of Tokaj. The bunches are long and loose, with the tip often bifurcating like the swallow's tail. Similarly to the Furmint, Hárslevel? grows vigorously, ripens late, and contracts botrytis easily. Hárslevel? is sensitive to drought, powdery mildew, and mite.

Sárga muskotály (Muscat Lunel or Yellow Muscat)

This grape is mentioned in records among the first in Tokaj. It is characterised by unmistakable aromas, and brisk acidity even fully ripe. A grape of very low resistance to disease, Sárga Muskotály does best planted in deep, nutritious soil that manages water well.

Zéta (Oremus)

Created in 1951 as a cross between Bouvier and Furmint recognised in 1990. It is more similar to the Furmint parent, although it ripens four to six weeks earlier, in the second half of September. Zéta is also noted for its predilection to invite botrytis.

Kövérsh?

Also known as Fehérsh?, this is one of the oldest varieties in Tokaj; it all but disappeared from the vineyards after the phylloxera. Kövérsh? received state

recognition only in 1998, but it is expected to be among the grapes recommended for propagation in Tokaj in the near future. Its bunches are medium-sized and loose, with round berries. It is resistant to frost and drought, however. It ripens to 14 days before Furmint, and yields large quantities of good quality Aszú fruit.

Gohér

It is also an old variety of Tokaj. Gohér is characterised by easy ripening, very loose and long bunches, and oval berries. It was marginalized in production partly because of its pistillate flower that is not easily fertilized. Gohér is a vine of low productivity that must be planted together with other varieties with good fertilizing abilities. While its berries tend to shrivel and accept botrytis very well, it is somewhat sensitive to frost, less so to drought. Experiments are under way to re-establish Gohér in Tokaj.

Some definitions and old Hungarian liquid measures:

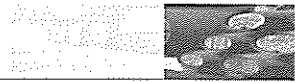
In terms of making aszú wine, the most important liquid measure is puttony. It is the traditional measure of aszú berries. The next important liquid measure is called icce. Puttony is equal to 45 icces. Must is the Hungarian word for the pressed grape-juice before fermentation, and szamorodni is the Polish counterpart of the Hungarian f?bor (prime wine) – it is a technology and product, too.

Dry wines can be pure variety white wines or their cuvees – these wines live their renaissance today, it is one of the biggest challenges to produce great quality dry white wines in the Tokaji region.

Szamorodni

The special quality category includes the specialities that for centuries laid the groundwork for the world-wide reputation of Tokaji. For long periods, particularly until the early 1600s and in the first half of the 19th century, the most popular wine type of Tokaj was the Szamorodni, initially known as f?bor (“prime wine”). The term remained the dominant one for another 250 years to come. From the 1820s on the Polish, the greatest devotees to this wine type began to propagate the name Szamorodni in Hungary, which completely displaced the word f?bor within just a few decades.

There has never been essential difference in the technique of ordinary wines and Szamorodni: the grapes and for both are picked and pressed in the same way. What makes Szamorodni different is the fact that the bunches used for it contain a considerable amount of botrytised berries, which help make a more substantial



wine. Moreover, the meaning of the Polish word “szamorodni” (“the way it was grown”) indicates a method of processing different from that of the Aszú in the botrytised berries are not picked out of the bunches before pressing. Compared with an ordinary white wine, Szamorodni is typically higher in alcohol and extract, and it often contains up to 100 or 120 grams of residual sugar. When it does, it is called sweet Szamorodni.

When the bunches contain fewer Aszú grapes, allowing all the sugar in the must to be converted into alcohol, then the emerging wine will be dry Szamorodni. In terms of alcohol and concentration, even this dry version surpasses ordinary wines in quality.

Some wineries prefer to mature Szamorodni in the presence of oxygen by keeping it by not filling up the barrel completely. Szamorodni treated in this way may develop a thin film of yeast on its surface. This phenomenon and the taste it imparts to the wine explain why Szamorodni is sometimes likened to sherry. Dry Szamorodni differs from sherry significantly since it is made from grapes partially infected by botrytis, and it is never fortified by adding alcohol.

Tokaji Aszú

Aszú is the highest possible fruit selection: picking out the botrytised berries of the bunches by hand. Aszú is made in a way that the individually selected Aszú berries are collected in vats and trampled to pulp. The Aszú dough is poured by must and after that soaked for one or two days to extract aroma and sugar. Then it is strained, fermented and matured in wooden casks. The proportion of Aszú berries (the number of puttony) and the base wine determine the concentration of wine; we can speak about 3-6 puttonyos aszú and aszúeszencia over 6 puttony.

Fordítás, máslás, eszencia

These are three radically different wine specialities of Tokaj. By far the most significant of them is the Eszencia, possibly the most precious wine in the world. Strictly speaking, it cannot even be called wine, because it has such an enormous concentration of sugar that its alcohol level is incapable of rising higher than between two and six degrees.