

The Wine of Tokaji



Tokaj-Hegyalja

The excellence of the wines of Tokaji is due to several factors. Soil, macroclimate and microclimate, grape variety, the method of wine making and handling the wine all contribute to the exceptional wine we know as **Tokaji** (Tokay) wine.

Classified Vineyards

In March 1995 the Classified Vineyards of Tokaj was created. A group of like minded vineyards with the intention of restoring the image of one of the most noble wines in the world, through the production of modern, quality wines deserving of their historical stature.

- **Disnókő Estate** - belonging to AXA Millésimes, a subsidiary of the French insurance group
- **Hétszölő Estate** - A former Imperial Estate, belonging to Grand Millésimes de France.
- **Château Megyer** - belonging to the French GAN insurance company.

- **Messzelátó Dülö Estate** - which belongs to the Nantes-Ancenis agricultural cooperative in France.
- **Oremus Estate** - belonging to Vega Sicila vineyards in Spain.
- **Château Pajzis**, belonging to Jean Michel Arcaute, a vineyard owner in Bordeaux, and noted Bordeaux oenologist, Michel Rolland, among others.
- **Royal Tokaji Wine Company** (including the Nyúlaszó, Betsek, Bisalmas, and Botja estates) - Belonging to Anglo-Hungarian group of independent associates.
- **Szarvas Szőlő Estate** - Another former imperial estate, which belongs to the Hungarian government.

Tokaji Wines

Special quality Tokaji wines are distinguished from the other wines by the shape of their clear long necked ½ litre bottles, originally designed for the Great Exhibition of 1851. Tokay wines in 70 cl. bottles *Furmint* and *Hárslevelű* are "quality wines" as opposed to "special quality wines"

Even within the special quality wines, **dry and sweet Tokaji Szamorodni, Forditas, Tokaji Aszú**, (pronounced "ossoo") **Aszú Eszencia** and **Tokaji Eszencia** separate quality categories exist. For **Tokaji Aszú**, a distinction is made between wines made from 3, 4, 5, and 6 *puttonyos* or hods.

- **Tokaji Szamorodni** is Hungary's finest dry wine. Its excellent qualities emerge after a prolonged period of maturation. Several years of maturation, however not only promotes valuable characteristics, but can-in the event of inferior ingredients and unsatisfactory vatting expose deficiencies in the wine. No amount of residual sugar can mask a bad wine, so the making of good dry Szamorodni is one of the most taxing challenges in viniculture. This is the only- occasion when it is impossible for us to speak in terms of new-and old wine, because dry Szamorodni not only-indicates a method of preparation and a category of quality, but also the peak of the maturation process. On account of the long vatting, the colour of Szamorodni is yellowish brown. After admiring its colour, the very embodiment of the wholesome beauty of old wines, we discover the essence of dry Szamorodni in its unique bouquet. The Tokaji bouquet is at its best in this wine; despite the fact that it is formed during maturation and is therefore only secondary, it matches the finest grape aroma and fermentation bouquet. A perfect dry Szamorodni's bouquet is reminiscent of fresh bread or bread crust. The harmony of its acid and body can already be discerned in the bouquet and reaches its peak in the aroma. Tokaji Szamorodni is a dry wine in the truest sense of the word, the dryness being the product of the complementary effects of alcohol, acid and body. All three constituents are present to an exceptional degree, although none exerts an excessive influence. High alcohol content is heightened by the acids, but in their turn

the alcohol and the body alleviate the harshness of the acids. This is the backbone of dry Szamorodni and onto it are added the vatting flavour and aroma through years of maturation. Our favourable impressions are further boosted when we discover a lingering taste of plain chocolate or bread crust.

- **Dry Szamorodni** is an excellent aperitif and also well suited to dishes such as roasts and poultry.
- **Sweet Szamorodni** is produced when a large number of Aszú grapes sweeten the must to a point where the proportion of sugar reaches 25 per cent. The preservation of the valuable sugar depends on the activity of the wine yeast, the temperature of the cellar. but. above all. the skill of the cellarman, who by intervening at the right time. prevents full fermentation. The 2-3 per cent sugar remaining in this wine conceals the acids and slightly blunts their edge. Sweet Szamorodni is one of the most popular of Tokaji wines.
- **Tokaji Forditas** is made by leaving Aszú grapes in their skins to absorb the sugars and aromatic substances.
- **Tokaji Aszú** is truly one of the greatest natural dessert wines of the world. It is as though the autumn colours of the grape leaves lingered on in the wine. Every single shade is there. from the light golden-yellow colour of the new Aszú, the brownish old gold of the mature Aszú. to the reddish-brown colour of the vintage Aszú However. it is not only the wine's colour we admire. but also its oily- movement. so typical of full bodied wines. The drops of Aszú gently slipping down the side of the glass hold out the promise of great things to come It is almost impossible to distinguish Aszú's bouquet from its aroma. for the combination of the two in this wine is so unique that the merest whiff is enough to kindle our sense of taste. Tokaji wine is even mentioned in the Hungarian National Anthem. "*On Tokaj's vine stalks you have dripped nectar.*" Sándor Petöfi. the great 19th century poet. Described Tokaji Aszú as "*a golden flame locked up within a bottle.* Perhaps ecstatic descriptions such as these should be followed by a simpler. more mundane description. A young Aszú is dominated by flavours reminiscent of raisins, which come from the Aszú berries shriveled by the noble rot. The complex aroma and bouquet of honey and grape flower dominate. Maturation produces the characteristic earthy and bready flavour, which, depending on the vintage and the part of the vineyard the grapes come from, are complemented by the taste of almonds, chocolate or Saint John's bread.
- **Tokaji Eszencia (Essence)** is the most fabled and rarest of all. Eszencia is the first run juice of the Aszú grapes, which seeps from the press under the grapes own weight. The sugar content is extremely high, and the wine will ferment at an extremely slow rate, often over many years. Normally Essence will be used as a blending wine, although under exceptional circumstances, the best wine from the best grapes in a top vintage, will be released in its own right. These wines, will keep for many years (as will most Tokaji), and often command very high prices. Its legendary restorative properties are widely documented in Hungarian folk lore.

Viticulture and Viniculture

It is the combination of several factors that produces the special character of the wines of Tokaj-Hegyalja. The vines are grown on two types of soil; most of the local soil is broken andesite and rhyolite tuff of volcanic origin, the rest is loess. The Carpathian Mountains embrace the wine region from the north, east and west, creating an excellent microclimate with long, hot autumns and humid nights. The warmth of the autumn sunshine ripens the grapes to a golden yellow colour. Favourable location and adequate humidity combine with a fungus called *Botrytis Cinerea* exist to produce the so-called noble rot. The skin of the grape is penetrated by the fungus and part of the water content evaporates through it. The 20 per cent original sugar content is concentrated to 40-60 per cent. This high concentration is not the only or even the most valuable property of the Aszú grape. The bouquet and aromatic substances formed as a result of the *Botrytis Cinerea* metabolism distinguish Tokaj grapes from raisins and other artificially dried berries.

The Tokaj character requires suitable grape varieties that ripen late in order to make good use of the sunshine and warmth of the long autumn. When fully ripe, they have the 20 per cent sugar content that induces the noble rot and the creation of Aszú grapes. High sugar content must be counterbalanced by distinct and fine acids, and an adequate dry extract content. Centuries of experience and tradition have shown that **Furmint** and **Hárslevelű** grapes meet all these requirements. Furmint is grown in two-thirds of the vineyards, Hárslevelű in the rest. In addition, a small quantity of **Muscat Lunel** is cultivated in order to enhance bouquet and aroma. The carefully planned combination of these three grape varieties produces the wine specialties of Tokaj.

Viticultural procedures in Tokaj do not differ greatly from those employed elsewhere. Great care, however is taken in pruning, lest the quality of the remaining buds impair quality. The late vintage is the other important difference. Traditionally,

the vintage in Tokaj would start on Simon-Judas's Day, 28th October. Nowadays owing to large scale production, it would be too great a risk to wait that long. Accordingly the vintage starts slightly earlier, but even so it is not over until mid-November. The preparation of the special wines of Tokaj begins with the particular methods used during the vintages. In sections of the vineyard where half or more of the grapes have turned into shrivelled Aszú grapes, the berries are picked individually and collected in tubs. In sections with fewer Aszú grapes this procedure would be unprofitable, therefore, the Aszú grapes are harvested and processed together with the healthy grapes. The mixture forms the basis of **Szamorodni**, meaning "as it was grown", or "as it comes". This refers to the fact that the Aszú grapes and healthy grapes are processed together in accordance with their natural proportion.

The vintage yields three different basic ingredients: the selected Aszú grapes from which Aszú wine is made; un-selected grapes containing proportion of Aszú grapes from which Szamorodni is made (dry or sweet depending on the sugar content); and grapes from which all Aszú' grapes have been removed and from which *vin ordinaire* is made. The latter is bottled in 75cl bottles and labelled *Tokaji Furmint*, *Tokaji Hárslevelú*, or *Tokaji Muscat*.

After crushing and stemming, the Szamorodni ingredients are soaked for between 12 and 24 hours, during which the sugar content, bouquet and aroma substances of the Aszú grapes are released. Pneumatic presses are usually used to press out the wort.

It does not require any special technology to make Tokaji Aszú. There are two components the Aszú berries and the base wine. The Aszú berries are selected during the vintage, collected in tubs and stored there until the second component, the base wine, has fermented. Choosing the base wine requires great discretion and expertise It should have a high alcoholic strength (13-15 per-cent by volume), distinct

and delicate acids, a high dry extract content, excellent flavour and aroma. Some unfermented fructose is an advantage.

Traditionally the unit of measure of the base wine is the *Gönc* cask (136 litres).

The Aszú number depends on how many *puttony* or hods (approx. 20-25 kilograms) of Aszú grapes are added to a one Gönc cask of base wine, there are Tokaji Aszú wines of between 3 and 6 puttonys. To extract the sugar, flavour and aroma from the Aszú grapes, they were first crushed by foot in coarsely woven linen, and the base wine poured over this pulp-like Aszú dough. Because of the varying quality of the base wine, Aszú wines made in this way were variable and differed from each other. This clumsy traditional process has been replaced by updated technology, but one which has nonetheless preserved certain elements of the old tradition.

Today there are explicit standards defining 3 to 6 puttony) Aszú, so Aszú wine is made on the basis of the analytical values of the base wine and the Aszú grapes.

The mashing of the Aszú berries is now carried out by means of a mechanical device that does not impair the grape seed. The base wine is poured over the Aszú dough thus obtained and then stirred several times. The valuable compounds of the Aszú grapes are extracted by 24-36 hours of soaking. Then follows the pressing. The new Aszú wines are poured into the aforementioned Gönc casks and matured for several years in small, cool cellars (10° C) hollowed out of the rocky hillsides. The walls of these cellars are thickly lined with a fungus called *Racodium cellare*. During the maturing period the wines are moderately sulphurated and kept at a low rH value. Special Tokaji Wines have high nitrogen and protein content. Protein stability is achieved by fining and physical treatment. The maturing of Tokaji wines are enhanced by surface aeration. The casks are not filled up completely for 1 to 3 months, as the Process of fermentation needs both space and air. As a result, an unbroken layer of natural film is formed on the surface, creating the precondition for reduction. The alcoholic strength of the wine decreases while its aldehyde and ester content

increases. Tokaji aeration differs from sherryfication in that it takes place at a low temperature.

Although special Tokaji wines are given intensive oxidation treatment (small cask, aeration, moderate sulphurisation), a stable reduction system is created. The more Aszú grapes that are used to make Aszú wine, the lower the rH level (between 14.4 and 16). Maturation time for Szamorodni wines is 3 to 4 years, for Aszú wines the minimum age at which they should be drunk is their puttonyos number plus two. Aszú must be matured in barrels made from the oak trees of the Zempleni forest, but not just any barrels. Barrels for a high puttonyos wine must be at least twelve years old.

The Wine Of Kings....



The role played by Tokaj wine over the centuries tells all. Aszú as we know it, was first made in the 1560s. Tokaj wine scored its first international success in 1562 when Pope Pius IV, on the occasion of the Council of Trident, said the following after tasting the Tällyai [Tokaji] wine presented to him by György Draskovich, the bishop of Zagreb. "*Summum pontificem talia vina decent*" [Such wines befit the supreme pontiff]. Incidentally, the Hungarian Diet of 1655 made the separating of the Aszú grapes from the rest of the berries obligatory. By the mid-eighteenth century. Tokaji wines had earned real world fame. Royalty. Great statesmen and prominent figures

of cultural life competed in their quest for more and better Tokaji wine. Louis XV of France offered Tokaji Aszú to Madame Pompadour with the following words "*C'est le roi des vins et le vin de rois.*" [This is the wine of kings and the king of wines]. Voltaire, who was a friend of Frederick the Great and lived in Berlin from 1749 to 1753 wrote the following about the king. "*To our greatest fortune, he has Tokaji wine in his cellar and this one can only welcome with an Ave.*" Once during a feast, when Frederick the Great was sipping his Tokaji Aszú, Noel, the steward of the royal household encouraged his master with the words "*Carry on drinking Tokaji. Your Majesty the first two humans were expelled from Paradise for eating, not for drinking!*" Pope Benedict XIV thanked Maria Theresa's gift of Tokaji Aszú as follows: "*Benedicta sit terra, quae te genuit, benedicta sit mulier, quae te misit. Benedictus sum, qui te bibo.*" ["Blessed be the land that has produced you., blessed be the woman that has sent you., blessed am I who drink you."]

The oldest bottle of wine ever to be sold at auction was a bottle of 1646 imperial Tokay, which was bought by John A. Chunko of Princeton, New Jersey, USA, and Jay Walker of Ridgefield, Connecticut, USA for the sum of S Fr1,250 (including buyers premium) at Sotheby's, Geneva, Switzerland, on Nov 16, 1984. At the time the sum paid was equivalent to £405. - Guinness Book of Records 1997.

To the Future

Today Tokaji wine is no longer exclusively the wine of kings, but it has persevered as the king of wines.