

Hungary Returns to a Sweet Past

By [ERIC ASIMOV](#)

AS with the first person to have eaten a lobster, it took a brave soul to have first made wine from grapes infected with *Botrytis cinerea*, the noble rot. The fungus attacks the fruit, absorbing water and shriveling skins, and a metamorphosis takes place as ripe, healthy grapes shrink into a ghastly, desiccated mass.

That ancient plunge into seeming peril was telling. Almost always, making great sweet wines requires taking great risks. Whether it's encouraging botrytis, which intensifies the sweetness and adds a gorgeous honeyed aroma, or leaving certain grapes to hang long after others have been picked, hoping that they will become lusciously sweet, that it won't rain and that animals won't eat them, or even allowing the grapes to freeze in hopes of concentrating the juice to nectarlike levels, the costs of time and labor are high, and the chances of failure are great.

For these reasons alone, elevated prices seem understandable for sweet wines that haven't been produced through technological shortcuts. They are not everyday wines by any means, which makes them ideal for special occasions like the holidays, when the sweetness of life is celebrated through cookies, cakes and other desserts. The exquisite perfume and lush, rich flavors of a great sweet wine are a sublime counterpoint.

Sauternes, of course, is the best known of all sweet wines. Germany is renowned for its sweet wines as well, as are Vouvray, Alsace, certain parts of Italy and even Australia. Yet one of the greatest and most unusual sweet wines is one of the least known, Tokaji aszu, which for centuries has been made in the Tokaj-Hegyalja region of Hungary.

To try a good Tokaji aszu (pronounced TOKE-eye-ee AHS-oo) for the first time is a revelation. The color of a wine of recent vintage, say six or seven years old, is already a shocking orange bordering on red, and it can be rich, thick and lavishly sweet, with the flavors of dried apricots and oranges. Yet a high acidity keeps the wine in a thrilling balance, teetering between cloying and syrupy on one side and overly harsh on the other. Though far sweeter than a Sauternes, a Tokaji aszu will generally be more refreshing because of the higher acidity.

The trick is finding a good Tokaji aszu. With that in mind, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by two

guests, Paul Grieco, an owner and general manager of Hearth in the East Village, and Richard Luftig, wine director of Cookshop in Chelsea, as the wine panel tasted 17 bottles of Tokaji aszu. While we found wines we adored, we also found bottles that seemed flawed, indicating uncertainty in an industry that, despite its long and illustrious history, is paradoxically very young.

The Hungarian wine industry was reborn after the overthrow of the Communist government, which capped more than a century of difficulties, despair and neglect for the once-great Hungarian wines. In fact, the first documented discovery of the noble rot was not in France, but in Hungary, in the late 16th or early 17th century, when growers found that the shriveled, rotten grapes, called aszu, produced a wonderfully sweet, unctuously honeyed wine. When they mixed the sweet wine with a dry base they created the model that Tokaji aszu has followed ever since.

Tokaji aszu became celebrated, favored by royal families throughout Europe. But phylloxera hit Hungarian vineyards hard in the late 19th century and they were slow to recover. Then, swiftly, came World War I and the crumbling of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, World War II and then the rise of Communism. The industry was controlled by the state, which for the most part made insipid wine in big cooperatives rather than offering the incentive necessary for the painstaking work required to produce Tokaji aszu.

The 1990s saw tremendous progress in the reawakening of the Hungarian wine industry, propelled mostly by outside investment. Among those now in the Hungarian wine business are Anthony Hwang, an owner of Domaine Huet in Vouvray, whose estate, Kiralyudvar, made our top-rated wine; Vega Sicilia, the great Spanish producer, which owns Oremus; and AXA, the French insurance giant whose wine holdings include several prominent Bordeaux chateaus, which owns Disznoko. But the most prominent name in Tokaji aszu, and certainly the easiest for Americans to pronounce, is the Royal Tokaji Company, whose shareholders include the wine writer Hugh Johnson. Royal made 4 of the 17 wines we tasted. All made it to our top 10.

Tokaji aszu is unique not only because of the indigenous Hungarian grapes used in the blend — primarily furmint but also harslevelu, muscat blanc, zeta and koverszolo — but because of the method used to make the wine. Grapes without any botrytis are harvested and made into a base wine. The aszu grapes are picked separately and made into a paste, which is added to the base wine in various proportions. In the old days the proportions were measured in puttonyos. A puttony is a hod, as the old carrying vessels were called, so five puttonyos, for example, meant that a cask of base wine had been blended with five hods of aszu paste. Nowadays the puttonyos number corresponds with the amount of residual sugar in the wine.

We tasted several wines of three or four puttonyos, but they all seemed unbalanced. Quality takes a definite step upwards at five puttonyos, and so does price, though our best value, the 2000 five puttonyos Red Label from Royal Tokaji, is an excellent introduction at \$35, exhibiting a fine balance between fruity sweetness and taut acidity. Our top three bottles were all six puttonyos wines, which don't get much better than the ambrosial 1999 Kiralyudvar Lapis. At \$122, though, it's not cheap, and

we also very much liked the perfumed, floral '99 Oremus at \$69, and the elegant 1999 Tokaj-Hetszolo Szolobirtok at \$65.

What lies beyond six puttonyos? At that point, my friends, you are truly talking about nectar of the gods. The free-run juice of aszu grapes, unblended with a base wine, may take years to ferment because of the astronomical sugar level, and may only reach 4 or 5 percent alcohol rather than the more typical 11 percent. The resulting wine, eszencia, is almost excruciatingly intense, wildly expensive and rarely seen. As with many fantasy scenarios, it's maybe better off relegated to the imagination.

A sort of pretend eszencia exists, though, called aszueszencia. We had one bottle, a 2000 Chateau Henye, that was syrupy and almost oozing. It was undeniably complex, but a little bit went a very long way.

Tasting Report: A Wine You Can Almost Eat With a Spoon

Kiralyudvar Lapis 6 Puttonyos 1999

\$122

***1/2

Like orange and apricot slowly caramelized in butter; honey rich, elegant and beautifully balanced. (Importer: Robert Chadderdon, New York)