

Two Wines from Hungary

Written by Terry Connor

Tuesday, 16 August 2011 12:00

I arrived back in Austria, from Oregon, where I met up with Franco. He'd taken good care of the car and enjoyed his Austrian vacation. Now it was time to get back to work. I deferred to Franco for a suggestion. Where should we go next? His answer was Hungary. Without hesitation I agreed and off we went. The plan was to explore the regions of Eger and Tokaji. There are others regions in Hungary; very good regions. However, the two regions that we were going to explore export wine in significant volume to the US, including the Lowcountry.

The most best known dry red wine from Hungary is Egri Bikaver; also known as Bulls Blood of Eger. The wine is produced in the region of Eger, and is made from the Kekfrankos grape. The wine enjoyed enormous popularity throughout Europe for at least 500 years until the Communist takeover of 1956. The Communist takeover was not a good event at all. Wine was no longer produced for the nobility. Instead, it was produced for the masses through inexpensive production methods that all but eliminated quality assurance. The Post-Communist era has seen a positive resolution in the making of wine through investment in modern production methods. Also, with most of Eastern Europe joining the EU, and with all the economic benefits to tourism and travel, watch for Bikaver as well as other regions of Hungary to return to their glory days as one of Europe's premier wine producers.

(Before the communist era, the Hungarians had much fun passing along a legend through many generations about the siege of the Eger Fortress in the mid 1500's by the Turks. It appears that the Hungarian soldiers, trapped in the Eger fortress, came upon a cache of Bikaver. They consumed enormous quantities of the wine, giving what appeared to the Turks to be soldiers that possessed super-human strength. The Turks, thinking the red stain on the beards of the Hungarians was the blood of bulls, withdrew and the day was saved. That particular day was saved, however the Turks were eventually victorious and occupied the region until 1686. In September of 1686 the Habsburg Empire was established. The Habsburgs provided an economic climate conducive to the production of wine. Serbs, Swabs, and Romanians were invited to come to Hungary and to bring their winemaking skills with them. It worked very well. Soon the fine wines of Hungary were being sold to all the upper classes of the Austrian Empire, as well as Poland and Russia.)

We switch now from a dry red wine to a sweet white dessert wine. Tokaji-Ascu (Tokay) can lay legitimate claim to being among the first of the world's great sweet wines. Going back to the 1600's we find that the first system for classifying wine on the basis of quality was established in Hungary in the famous Tokaj-Hegyalja region. This was an outgrowth of a very sophisticated wine culture. At that time, Hungary had no problem competing with France or Germany.

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Keeping with the sweet wine topic, we find that Tokay is quite the durable product. It enjoyed success in the 1600's to the late 1800's. Tokay was nearly wiped out by the deadly phyloxera aphid. The early 20th century saw a brief rebuild, only to see it destroyed again by two world wars and the Communist takeover. However, never say die. In 1989, when Hungary became a Democratic Republic, investors from Europe saw value in reviving the once great wine and the rest is history. Tokay is once again a vibrant product.

Tokay is produced from a blend of 60% Furmint Grapes, 30% Harslevelu, and 10% other grapes including Muscat blanc and oremus. Furmint and Harslevelu are high in acid. The Muscat and oremus are used for seasoning and aroma.

How is Tokay made? Properly called Tokaji Aszu is made from hand-selected, over-ripe, botrytis-affected berries. (Botrytis is referred to as noble rot, which results in a very sweet grape.) After careful selection by hand, the berries are processed into an Ascu Paste. The taste and quality of a Tokaji Aszu wine chiefly depends on the amount of Aszu paste added to a Gonc (a 136 liter cask). The typical ratio is three 25 kilogram baskets of paste. (See Winespeak.) More paste is added if the producer wants to feature a sweeter wine. When you purchase a bottle of Tokay, look on the label for a 3, 4, 5, or 6. The sweetest Tokay is a 6 and is called Essencia. Once the blend is determined the wine is set for aging. The wine possesses a long lasting acidity making it one of the slowest maturing wines made anywhere.

Tokay as a dessert wine is ready to be enjoyed when brought to market. However, the flexibility does not end there. Should a buyer decide to store the wine, he or she is able to lay it down for well beyond 25 years. Indeed, some containers of the wine are still in circulation from the 18th and 19th

century. They are in the hands of collectors and fetch enormous prices. The solution seems to be to purchase two bottles. Serve one and store one. Maybe you will get lucky.

Egeszsegedre! In Hungarian: To your health!

Winespeak

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What is a Puttonyos? A puttonyos is a basket that is used in the harvest of grapes. The basket holds 25 kilograms of grapes. The grapes that are placed into the puttonyos are the grapes that are harvested as nobly rotten. After the harvest, the nobly rotten grapes are then added to the dry red grapes in the gonc.