

*Sommelier* INDIA

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# WINE

For Indians around the world who enjoy the good life

## MAGAZINE

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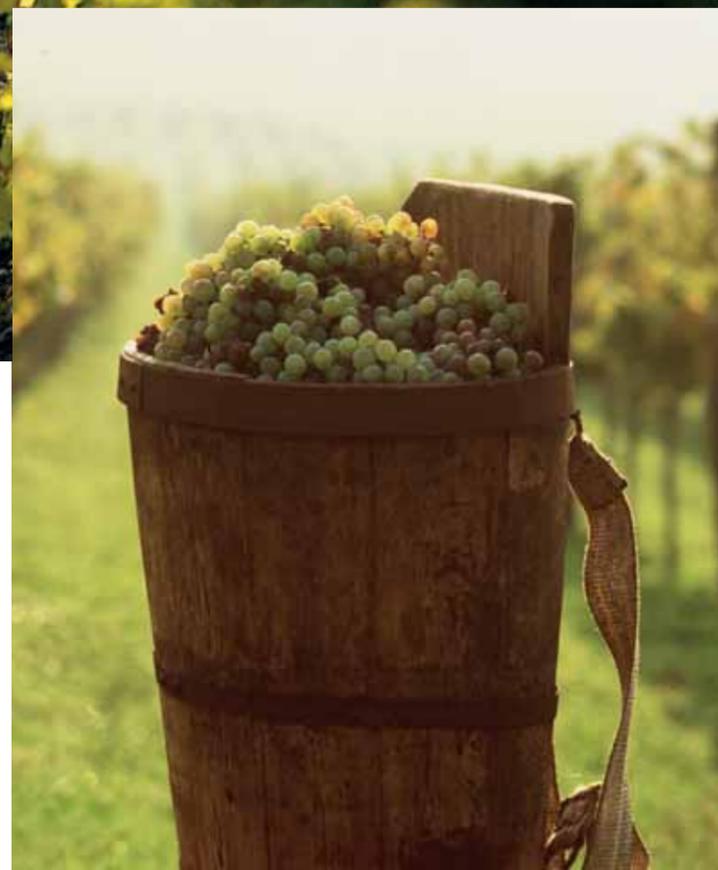


Over two decades after the fall of the Iron Curtain and following tremendous investment in the vineyards and cellars of Tokaj, **Péter Csizmadia-Honigh** believes this Hungarian wine region is set to regain its fame and glory on the international stage

**T**wo hundred years ago, Tokaji Aszú, the sweet dessert wine from northeastern Hungary, was hailed as “Vinum Regnum, Rex Vinorum” – wine of the kings, king of the wines – as it was a delicacy enjoyed in the royal courts of Europe and by the Russian tsars as well. The 5,500-hectare region suffered a great deal during the 40 years of Communism, because there was a focus on quantity at the expense of quality. It was only in 1993 that the first truly great vintage of Tokaji was produced after the collapse of Communism, and today the region has completely reinvented itself as a result of restructuring vineyards, focusing on high-quality varieties, upgrading winery technology and, most importantly, employing dedicated and passionate viticulturists and winemakers to work in Tokaj.

An undeniable fact is that Tokaji Aszú is responsible for the fame of the region. Legend has it that in the 16th century, during the Turkish invasion of Hungary, grapegrowers abandoned their vineyards in order to escape the devastation of the Ottoman invaders. By the time farmers returned to pick their grapes, a considerable part of the clusters had been attacked by a fungus called *Botrytis cinerea*. As such, the berries became shrivelled due to dehydration (Aszú means shrivelled in Hungarian), causing the concentration of sugar and aroma precursors in addition to imparting a peculiar but pleasant flavour often simply referred to as the taste of *botrytis*. Today Aszú wines are still made from botrytized and shrivelled grapes which are harvested by hand, berry by berry. Once picked, they are added to must, fermenting must or base wine. The amount of Aszú berries put into the so-called *gönci* barrels is measured by the *puttony*, the bucket used for carrying grapes during harvest. As one *puttony* equals 27 kilogrammes, it takes five portions to reach the same amount of Aszú grapes as the wine that you could put into one *gönci* barrel, which is 136 litres. Thus, a six-*puttonyos* Aszú, the highest quality

The harvest at Domaine Disznókó where elegant Aszú wines are produced. Inset: A *puttony* of grapes with 27 kg of fruit



# The Fame and Glory of Tokaji

## WINES of Hungary

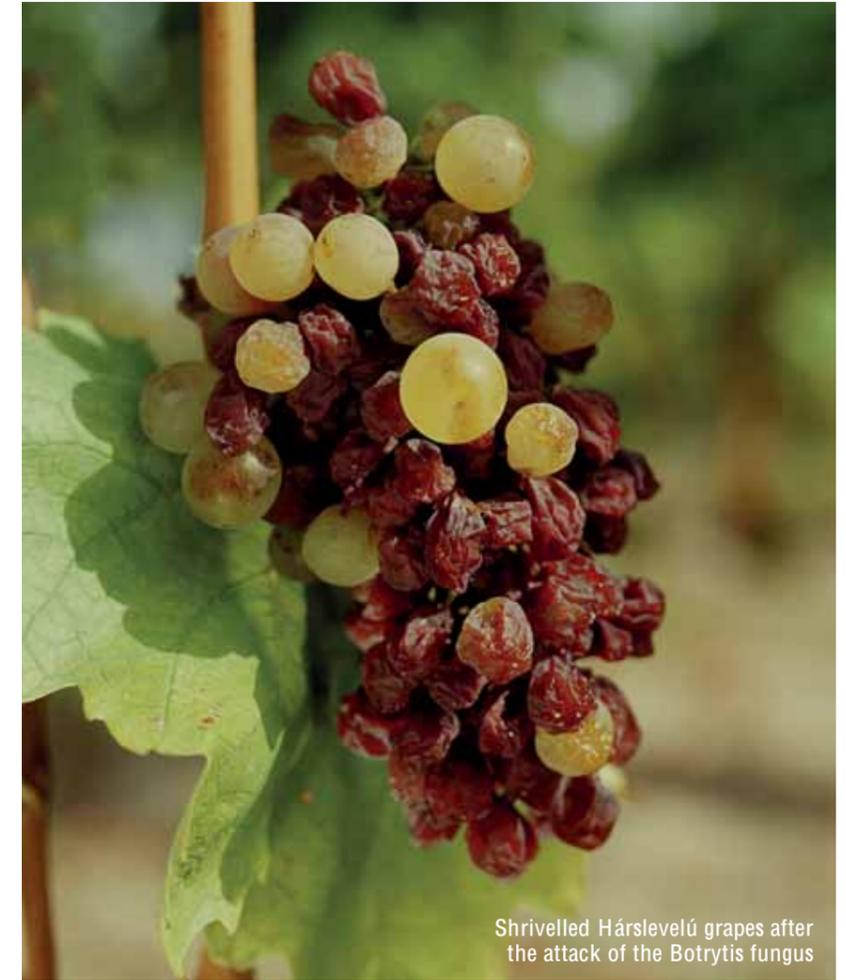
category within this style of Tokaji wines, contains more Aszú berries than base wine or must, which explains the wonderfully seductive sweetness of the final product. Aszú wines have a minimum-ageing requirement, which is crucial in shaping the flavour profile of the final product.

Today the vibe of the region can be captured through the manifold winemaking philosophies of the cellars. For example, the Royal Tokaji Company produces Aszú wines in a more traditional style, meaning that a tiny bit of oxidative ageing is allowed, thereby enhancing the complexity of the wines through nutty and roasted almond aromas. On the other end of the stylistic spectrum is Királyudvar Winery, owned by Anthony Hwang who is also proprietor of Domaine Huet in the Loire, which produces pristine wines with great purity of fruits and botrytis. In between, you will find refined styles, such as that of Patricius, which produces a stunning vineyard-selected six-*puttonyos* Aszú on their Bendeçz site; and elegant ones such as that of Domaine Disznókó, the AXA-Millésimes property.

The other Tokaj classic is Esszencia, the hero of auction rooms and a sweetheart of connoisseurs. It



Fermenting Aszú in large wine flagons



Shrivelled Hárslevelű grapes after the attack of the Botrytis fungus

**SEMI-SWEET WINES ARE PRODUCED FROM VERY RIPE GRAPES, HARVESTED EARLIER THAN THOSE DESTINED FOR LATE HARVEST WINES. AS A RESULT, THEY HAVE SOME SWEETNESS, BUT WITHOUT THE COMPLEXITY OF BOTRYTIS OR DRIED FRUITS**



Bottles of Tokaji Aszú wines from Domaine Disznókó

is produced only in the best of vintages from the juice of Aszú berries extracted by the pressure of their own weight. This most concentrated juice is able to ferment out only up to 2 – 3% alcoholic strength, usually in 50-litre glass flasks, retaining some 600 to 800 grams per litre of residual sugar. Production is tiny and prices are sky high, often reaching £400 (Rs 33,000) for a 375ml bottle of a recent vintage. The wine is extremely long-lived, as also reported by Dhruv Sawhney in *Sommelier India*, August–September 2010, following the tasting of an 1858 vintage of Tokaji Esszencia.

**W**ith dessert wines not quite so much in vogue (however unfair it is), Tokaj had to adapt itself in order to remain competitive in the global marketplace. Dry wines are the most important due to a demand for non-sweet wines and their cash-earning ability soon after harvest. These wines are normally made from Furmint and/or Hárslevelű, two indigenous Hungarian varieties, though there is some Yellow Muscat produced too. Dry Tokaji wines, if made from Furmint, lend themselves to barrel fermentation and/or ageing, thereby giving the wine an extra layer of complexity in both flavour and textural terms, as with Patricius Winery's dry Furmint, for example.

Semi-sweet wines are produced from very ripe grapes, harvested earlier than those destined for late harvest wines.

As a result, they have some sweetness, but without the complexity of botrytis or dried fruits. Such is the fresh and fruity Furmint of Tokaj Nobilis winery.

Late harvest wines are made from grapes that had a long hang-time sufficient for some impact of the noble rot. The level of sweetness and concentration, however, puts these wines into a category entirely their own. They are not as light as the semi-sweet wines, nor are they as rich as the Aszú wines. Barta Winery's 2008 late harvest, made from Furmint and Muskotály grapes, is a lovely example with its creamy texture, fleshy fruits and gentle botrytis.

Szamorodni is quite a traditional category of Tokaji, and is somewhat similar to late harvest wines in that they are made from partly botrytized grapes, which are macerated for a short period before pressing. Szamorodni must is then fermented either dry or sweet. If dry, they usually get oxidative barrel ageing, which lends the wine sherry-like aromas: floury and yeasty notes. If sweet, they tend to have more sugar than late harvest. Dry Szamorodni is definitely a wine delicacy for gastronomy, and fine examples come from Samuel Tinon's cellar.

Through these more easily approachable styles, the region of Tokaj has got a new lease of life and a sense of variety. With a nice balance of the traditional and the new, its wines are well poised to make a grand comeback into the global wine arena. ♦