



DESSERT WINE

Rich pickings

As interest, investment and innovation in dessert wines increase across Europe, **Darrel Joseph** examines their rarefied charms

Understated, yet seriously impressive, could equally describe the current renaissance in Europe's great dessert wines, or indeed the wines themselves.

Botrytised sweet wines, such as Hungary's Tokaji aszú, the luscious Beerenauslese and Trockenbeerenauslese styles from Germany and Austria, and of course France's Sauternes, are some of the most sought after, prestigious and expensive wines around.

Tokaji has arguably been the dessert wine that has experienced some of the most attention from innovative winemakers and eager investors. Produced in Hungary's northeastern Tokaj region for more than five centuries, botrytised Tokaji aszú, was once served in the royal and imperial courts of Europe. But during Hungary's Communist rule, the quality and reputation of the wine declined, as it became mainly produced for the somewhat undemanding markets of the Soviet Union.

However since Communism's fall just over a decade ago, local winemakers and several foreign investors, have been putting passion, new knowledge and plain, hard cash into the local vineyards in order to restore the wine's lustrous image and bring it to even higher levels of quality.

"I think the first stage of development here has been completed," said innovative Tokaji producer, István Szepsy. "Tokaji stepped out of development after World War Two; and then, 10 years ago, we stepped back in. Those 10 years were our childhood. Now in the new Millennium, we are entering our adult period – a new consciousness; new standards, new competitors."

Foreign investors too, have been fuelling the Tokaji revival. These include AXA, the French insurance group, with Disznókő; the Royal Tokaji Wine Company, with British wine guru Hugh Johnson as one of its investors; the German-based Degenfeld family, which



Alois Kracher, putting Austria on the map

reclaimed some of its ancestral Tokaji heritage by starting the Gróf Degenfeld Winery; and more recently, the Füleky winery, which was founded in 1998 by German families Walderdorff and Pfeil, from Italy's Graf Pfeil winery.

More than €110 million of foreign investment has been poured into the Tokaj region over the last 10 years, a figure that Szepsy feels is only 10% of what is needed to restore further the area's wineries, cellars and vineyards.

Nevertheless, the progress so far has affected global quality, sales and prices. A decade ago, you could buy a bottle of Tokaji aszú in Hungary for between €3 to €10. Today, a 50cl bottle of his Tokaji aszú 6 puttonyos 1998 is sold via specialist merchants for around €100 retail.

"I have worked for a year to help

build István Szepsy as a brand name here in London," said Akos Forczek, owner of Top Selection International, an importer and distributor of Szepsy wines in the UK and Europe. "I went out and sold his product, because I believe it is the best. And sommeliers from many top restaurants have tasted the wines and agree. Now they have Szepsy wines on their lists."

Other countries, such as the US, Germany, Switzerland and even France, are importing more Tokaji. The Disznókő winery, for example, exports nearly 80% of its 5 and 6 puttonyos aszú production, with the US getting a significant portion. The Gróf Degenfeld Winery sends approximately 35% of its production to Canada, Switzerland, Finland and Germany. And several other wineries like Szepsy, Oremus and Füleky have built, or are building, export markets for their Tokajis.

Some Tokaj wineries, such as Gróf Degenfeld, have had to build their export markets from nothing. Its managing partner, Thomas Lindner, said: "We are one of the few major wineries in Tokaj that have started from scratch. Many companies, like Oremus and Disznókő, already have a worldwide sales network from their other wine activities." On the other hand, having the networks is not enough; there must be enough Tokaji wine buyers in those markets.

As well as the harmonious balance of fruit, acidity and sweetness from the indigenous Hungarian varieties Furmint, Hárslevelű and Zeta, as well as Muscat, it is the limited quantity of Tokaji which is part of its allure. For example, Szepsy produces around 15,000 bottles a year of his own label wines, and 60,000 to 70,000 bottles for the Királyudvar winery, which he co-owns. Gróf Degenfeld usually

produces 50,000 to 70,000 bottles.

"Tokaj as a wine region has around 5,000ha of vineyards, 2,000 of which are of top quality," explained Lindner. "By world standards, 2,000ha is the equivalent of one Californian estate! Then there's the fact that very special climate conditions are needed to get botrytised grapes. Sweet wine is an image wine, but one that has a sophisticated following. These consumers want wines with individual character and authenticity, and Tokaji certainly has that."

Isabelle Walderdorf, co-owner of the Füleky winery, agreed that Tokaji is a specialist wine; so specialist in fact, that she is willing to wait several years before realising a profit. "We started out on a small scale" she said. "In 1998, we began working with 2ha of vineyards. Today, we are working with 9ha. But keep in mind that we couldn't sell our first aszú until three years after the harvest, as is required by the wine law. So we think it will take eight to 10 years before there's a profit."

Austria: room for growth

Austria does not have such regimented rules for its botrytised wine production. Nevertheless, only small amounts of premium sweet wines, mainly Beerenauslese (BA), Ausbruch (similar in style to a Tokaji aszú), Trockenbeerenauslese (TBA) and ice wine, can be produced. These account for around 1% of the country's average annual wine production, but are attracting much international attention.

While the Ausbruch wine produced around the town of Rust, near lake Neusiedlersee in Burgenland, is the most traditional Austrian botrytised wine, the BA and TBA wines across the lake, around the town of Illmitz, are capturing wine lovers' imaginations.

One much awarded Illmitz winemaker contributing significantly to this development, is Alois Kracher. His exotic TBA wines, such as the Zwischen den Seen and Nouvelle Vague ranges, are exported worldwide.

On Kracher's 15ha estate, 80% of the wines are sweet, with only 30% of them sold in Austria itself. Most are exported to the US, Western Europe and Asia. Despite September 11th, the US is showing strong enthusiasm for the wines, which have caught the attention of influential wine critics such

as Robert Parker.

"Every winery needs the US," Kracher observed. "The media there is so powerful, and with their help, sweet wines are getting stronger and stronger in image and demand."

Kracher believes that with their unique fruit-driven flavours and character from varieties such as Chardonnay, Welschriesling and Traminer, and their price structure – often between \$35 and \$70 per bottle – Austrian noble sweet wines still have growth potential – he estimates around 20% in the US, and even Europe.

Germany: Riesling revival

The noble sweet wines from Germany, like those from Tokaj and Austria, are in a class of their own. But perhaps what distinguishes them best are the attributes of the Riesling grape.

"There is no other grape that produces wines balanced with generous acidity, lovely natural sugars and, here in Germany, low alcohol," said Jochen Becker-Köhn, export director at Rheingau's Robert Weil estate. He pointed out that the German climate, damper than that of Tokaj, Austria and Sauternes, means that botrytised grapes are more of a rarity in Germany.

The prices for these wine can be high, with recent-vintage 75cl bottles of Riesling TBAs from the Rheingau, Mosel and Pfalz regions retailing in Germany for between €100 to €400, while 75cl Goldkapsel bottles from Robert Weil can often command record prices of over €2,000 at auction.

The growing interest worldwide in Riesling means sales of botrytised versions are predicted to fare well. Becker-Köhn observed: "Right now there is a strong trend towards Riesling. And our Robert Weil estate wines are doing well in Asia and the US as American wine magazines do tasting reports of sweet wines, and consumers are catching on to the wines as well."

But even in a terrific vintage, quantities are extremely limited. For example, from the 2001 vintage, the Robert Weil winery was able to

produce a mere 1,000 bottles of BA, 1,000 bottles of ice wine and 500 bottles of TBA.

"With top estate German noble sweet wines, there is always a demand because there is so little of it," stated Hew Blair, purchasing director at UK wine merchants, Justerini & Brooks. "The price is usually a secondary issue. Getting it is the primary one!"

Blair is excited about Germany's 2001 vintage as well. He observed: "It was a sensational vintage in the Mittelmosel (Mosel-Saar-Ruwer). And great Rieslings from the Mosel are the bee's knees when it comes to giving purity and pleasure."

The 1997 vintage was another excellent one in the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer, with top estates such as JJ Prüm and Fritz Haag showing fine wines and a healthy customer following. Blair noted: "Whenever there is a good vintage, there will always be an interest."

Sauternes: well established

But what about interest in the grande dame of noble sweet wines, Sauternes? "Our customers know what they want, and Sauternes has a definite following," said Blair. "But there does not seem to be the interest that there used to be."

Too traditional for the wine lovers? Not the exciting and rich fruit flavours like those coming out of Austria and Tokaj? Well, a 75cl bottle of 1997 Chateau d'Yquem, the most famous Sauternes producer of them all, can be had in the UK for around £195 (€305). And there are still devotees who are paying it. Of course, with many Yquems living well over 15 years, and some over 100, the price could be a bargain.

Whether it is as much of a bargain as, say, a Szepsy Tokaji aszú 6 puttonyos or an Alois Kracher Nouvelle Vague TBA remains to be seen.

But as Kracher observed: "My wines have been in the world market for 10 years. Yquem has been there for hundreds. To become known as a real brand, you have to be around for a long, long time."



Botrytised grapes give wines their concentration and rarity