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## Hungary for progress

By Jancis Robinson  
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Ask wine buyers how they view Hungarian wine and most would be inclined to put it in the same category as, say, wine from Bulgaria and Moldova, which they probably believe to be cheap and not that cheerful. In fact, thanks to ambition and investment, most of the former Soviet bloc countries are now producing a handful of fine wines, as well as potential fodder for the cheaper supermarket shelves, but Hungary is rather different.

The wine-producing country with which it should most properly be compared is its old Habsburg neighbour Austria. A typical Hungarian wine today is really quite fine – not quite as high quality across the board as Austrian wine but definitely getting there. The only trouble is that Hungarians are so proud of their viticultural heritage that they are prepared to pay high prices for their best and/or most famous wines, which tends to make them seem overpriced outside Hungary. This is a common problem for emerging fine wine producers. The same phenomenon curbs exports of the new generation of much-improved wines from countries such as Greece, Turkey, Israel and Mexico – and even makes the top wines of Spain difficult to sell abroad.

Hungary's most famous wine is the legendary sweet elixir made around the town of Tokaj in the north-east. After the fall of communism, there was a wave of investment by western companies in the wine then known as Tokay, now written Tokaji in a more Magyar fashion. But both these investors and the local Hungarian wine producers in the Tokaj region have been finding it increasingly difficult to see a return on selling highly priced sweet wines whose quantity and quality can vary alarmingly from year to year.

They have accordingly done what their counterparts in the middle Loire and Germany have done: started to make a higher proportion of dry white wines instead, dry whites of heartening quality – typically dry versions of Tokaji's signature grape variety Furmint. István Szepsy is the acknowledged leader of the Tokaji pack. On a recent visit to Budapest I had the pleasure of witnessing him present his wines to a packed hall at the VinCE consumer wine fair, and of tasting a wide range of new wave Hungarian wines with him in a more intimate setting the next day. "Nowadays we couldn't survive financially without dry wines," he freely admits. "I couldn't imagine our future without them."

He made his first dry Furmint by accident in 2000 when, while working at his own eponymous estate, he was also consulting at Királyudvar, a new enterprise owned by Filipino businessman Anthony Hwang who had recently bought Domaine Huet in Vouvray in the Loire. The first post-communist vintage in Hungary was 1999, which had been a glorious one for traditional sweet Tokaji but in 2000 they simply didn't have enough botrytis-affected grapes to make great sweet wine and so the distinctly delicious, dry, and still delightful Királyudvar, Úrágya Furmint 2000 was made, heralding a new generation of dry wines with Furmint's minerality, fiery richness, life-saving acidity and real ability to become more interesting in bottle.

Today, Szepsy is developing a range of dry wines designed to demonstrate the terroir of his individual vineyards such as Szent Tamás (Saint Thomas). "I don't know the ideal style yet," he says. "I know only directions. We're trying new things every day and we try to integrate feedback from consumers into the style." Dry versions of Tokaji's other white wine grape Hárslevelu are also made, and it seems to me that all these wines, from a reliable producer such as Bérés, are a valuable addition to any fine wine lover's armoury of age-worthy dry whites to serve as an alternative to fine white burgundy.

But, as seems to be the general rule today, Hungarians themselves seem readier to pay high prices for red wines – perhaps because they represent the minority in Hungary. There are few all-Magyar dark-skinned grape varieties of any note, although Gere Attila (Hungarians like to put the family name first) of the southern red wine region of Villány – the red wine producer with arguably the highest reputation of all in Hungary – is experimenting with the little-known Járdovány, which tastes a little like candied mulberries. As Budapest wine educator Gabriella Mészáros puts it: "Hungarian red wine varieties tend to have light tannins, lots of fruit, and good acidity – like a good Gamay."

Certainly the most distinctive Hungarian reds I tasted tended to blends including Kékfrankos, the increasingly fashionable grape variety known as Blaufränkisch over the border in Austria, which with its racy fruitiness is not unlike the Gamay of Beaujolais. There are also some less obviously Hungarian but impressive copies of red bordeaux, with Cabernet Franc rather than Cabernet Sauvignon increasingly the favoured variety that is easier to ripen in Villány – although perhaps the single most dramatic red I tasted was based on the Austrian Zweigelt grape grown almost on the Austrian border by restaurateur Ráspi.

These are treats that are savoured mainly in Hungary itself. Even István Szepsy has not found it easy to export his superlative wines. But one man who is trying to introduce foreigners to the exciting progress that has been made in Hungary's vineyards and cellars is US financier Nimród Kovács, whose brand is, of course, Kovács Nimród based on vineyards in Eger, traditional source of Egri Bikavér, the wine whose name used to be translated as Bull's Blood in Anglophone countries. His lees-stirred "Battonage" Chardonnay 2007 may not be the most definitely Hungarian wine but, at \$20 a bottle, is an absolute steal and should serve as an excellent introduction to the wines of the new Hungary.

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**Top new wave Hungarian wines****REDS****Gere Attila**, Merlot 2002, Attila 2002 and 2007, Solus 2006 Villány**Gróf Buttler**, Bikavér 2006 Eger**Heimann**, Birtokbor 2007 Szekszárd**Heumann Evelyn**, Cabernet Franc 2007 Villány**Malatinszky Kúria**, Cabernet Franc 2006, 2007 and 2008 Villány**Ráspi**, Zweigelt 2007 and Máté Cuvée 2006 Sopron**St Andrea**, Mereng 2006 Eger**Sebestyén**, Ivánvölgyi Bikavér 2007 Szekszárdi**Weninger**, Sporn Steiner Kékfrankos 2004 Sopron**WeningerGere**, Cabernet Franc 2007 Villány**DRY WHITES****Balassa István**, MézesMály and Betsek Furmint 2006 Tokaji**Bére**, Hárslevel 2008 Tokaji**Bussay László**, Szürkebarát 2006 and 2007 Zala (Lake Balaton)**Demeter Zoltán**, Kakas Furmint 2007 Tokaji**Györgykovács**, Imre Hárslevel 2006 Somló (Lake Balaton)**Királyudvar**, Úrágya Furmint 2000 Tokaji**Kovács Nimród**, Battonage Chardonnay 2007 Eger**Kreinbacher Birtok**, Nagysomló 2007 Somló**Szepsy István**, most dry Furmint, Tokaji*See Purple pages of [www.jancisrobinson.com](http://www.jancisrobinson.com) for tasting notes on new Hungarian wines*

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