

TOKAJ'S NEW VENTURE

In an effort to bring attention to Hungary's most famous wine region, producers have banded together to create a new event. Mathilde Hulot on the results of the first ever auction.

The Confrérie de Tokaj, a gathering of winemakers, plus amateurs and professionals fond of Hungarian wine, launched its first Auction on April 27th, during a three-day event called the Tokaj Spring. It raised a grand total of 20.25m forints, or \$10,150.

"I've been participating as an expert since the very first Napa Valley Wine Auction, thirty years ago. It was a disaster," said Ronn Wiegand MW MS. "Today, it's one of the most successful wine auctions in the United States and in the world. I can tell you, this Tokaj wine auction is very promising and very impressive for the first ever organised."

The Californian wine writer and consultant took part in the auction, commenting on the 22 lots presented to be sold, along with Gabriella Mészáros, a Hungarian journalist and critic. The auction was conducted by Nóra Winkler, well-known auctioneer and media personality, and held in the historic Knight's Hall in the Castle of Sárospatak in the centre of the region.

Of the 22 exclusive lots – most of the traditional barrel size of 136 L – 60% found a buyer, either present during the sale, or through telephone bidding. All the lots were released exclusively at the Tokaj Spring Wine Auction 2013 and bottled with their own Confrérie Tokaj

Wine Auction label. The bottling and delivery will occur before the next auction.

The highest price was paid for a barrel of Tokaji Aszú 6 Puttonyos 2010 of Hétszőlő: 4.2m forints, (\$18,470) from a starting price of 2.8m forints. It was one of many lots that went for higher than expected.

Buyers of these and the other unique lots of Tokaji wines not only became the exclusive owners of their lot, but also contributed to the restoration and development of the landscape of the Tokaj region, which became a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2002. The Confrérie de Tokaj sets part of the income aside specifically for this purpose.

Image burnishing

In 2012, a few Tokaj producers decided to relaunch the Confrérie de Tokaj, an association created originally in 1987 to give Tokaj more international visibility. The first meeting took place in May 2012, while the first event in September gathered the founding members around an exhibition at Sárospatak Castle entitled 'The history of several hundred years of Tokaj winemaking', which exhibited, among other things, original documents from the region. They decided the auction would be

the key event of the association, taking place each year in the spring. The 2014 auction has been scheduled for Saturday 26 April, with the three-day Tokaj Spring event running from 25 to 27 April.

The auction was organised by the producers themselves, without attracting subsidies from either the EU or the Hungarian government. Instead, participating producers pay a fee to enter. The idea behind it is to promote Tokaj wines internationally, with the lots representing both young and promising wines from vintages ranging from 2000 to 2012, with the wines still in barrel.

In the 20 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Tokaj region has entered a new era. In the 1990s, a lot of foreign investors came into the game, buying vineyards and cellars or creating wineries. In the next decade, it was the Hungarians' turn to found wineries, many of which have been founded by successful business people. But despite the investment, the lack of a regional body working to protect the region has allowed prices to fall to unsustainably low levels; an Aszú 5 Puttonyos can be found for sale locally for less than €10.00 a bottle, which is around the same price as a kilo of Aszú grapes. Different associations have stepped in with a number of initiatives such as tastings and events: Mád Circle, Tokaj Renaissance, Bormivelő, etc. The hope is that the Tokaj Wine Auction will turn into an international event, helping to raise prices. The Confrérie is also starting a series of Tokaji Rendez-Vous on the second Saturday of every month, with tastings, dinner, and a special Sunday market, to build links between producers and wine lovers. "We don't accept the low position of Tokaj," says István Szepsy, president of the Confrérie, saying it's necessary to improve the image of Hungarian wines, though he admits that achieving this may take a long time. He says the public doesn't yet understand why they should pay more for Tokaj wines, but hopes that the opportunity to be part of the development of the region may act as an incentive to participate. "We have to believe in it. And I believe in it." ■



A blind tasting was held just before the auction. The wines were served in three-litre, handmade glass bottles based on a traditional Tokaj bottle, and designed specially for the occasion.