

CAN DRY TOKAJ ELEVATE SWEET?

While Hungary's Tokaj region is famous for its sweet wines, Mathilde Hulot says the future has to be dry wines, for two good reasons.

At the Great Tokaj Wine Auction in Tokaj that took place on 26 April in Sárospatak, one lot went for an astonishing price. The reserve price was €4,000 (\$5,400), with an estimated price between €4,800 and €5,500 – yet the wine went under the hammer for €26,667. What's even more surprising is that the 136-L barrel wasn't an Aszù wine, or even a sweet Szamorodni, but a dry wine from Tokaj – which cost the equivalent of €140.00 per 750 ml bottle. The buyer, a Hungarian business man, said he had been prepared to pay even more for the Furmint Nyulászó '58' 2013, an exclusive lot made by the well known István Szepsy.

The producer himself was not surprised. "I think in the future, these wines from selected vineyards will be sold at even higher prices." His son, István Szepsy Jr, thinks that €140.00 is "ridiculous and that €200.00 will be soon achieved". He also believes that, in a couple of years, the heights reached by the dry wines will bring up the prestige and price of the sweet Aszù wines.

More dry than sweet

The image of the 'crus' (dülő), established since 1737, have improved in recent years as the wines have become more fashionable, the most famous ones being Szt Tamás, Nyulászó, Király, Betsek, mostly from the village of Mád. To show the potential of the 'growths', the producers are also choosing to release a dry version of Furmint or Harslevelü. Urágya, another famous growth of Mád, does not even produce Aszù berries, but has nevertheless always been considered a first growth.

Dry production in Tokaj is mainly due



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to two factors: climate and economy. If the 24 wines presented at the Great Tokaj Wine Auction were mostly dry, it's because of the climatic conditions of the last vintages. Tokaj's heart beats with the production of Aszù berries, but is still subject to reality: if 2008 and 2013 gave loads of botrytised Aszù berries, the four vintages in between were not favourable to sweet wines. In this sense, Tokaj is more comparable to the Loire Valley than to Sauternes.

A numbers game

"There's no other solution than to produce dry wines in this region," says László

Kalocsai, director of French-owned Château Dereszla and vice-president of the Regional Wine Comity (Hegyközség). He says an average year produces only 5,000 quintals of berries in any case. New regulations stipulate that, from the 2013 vintage, a producer can produce a maximum of 1.2 L of wine from one kilos of Aszù berries, and the region can produce 1m L, or 2m bottles of 500 ml. But the Tokaj area covers 5,500 ha, producing around 6,000 to 7,000 bottles of dry wine per hectare. A region that produces 38m bottles can't be sustained by the production of 2m to 3m bottles of the Aszù. "Eighty percent of the Tokaj wines have always been dry or semi-sweet," says Kalocsai.

The second reason for the production of dry wines is economic. Château Dereszla, for example, produced around 150,000 bottles in 2002, with 80,000 bottles of Aszù wines. Today, while it buys enough grapes to boost its overall production to 600,000 bottles, the amount of Aszù produced has

not changed. "We made a lot of effort to sell more bottles of sweet wines, but it didn't succeed," says Kalocsai. For 10 years, the company has built its growth on dry wines, especially on Dorombor, a wine aimed at 25-to-35-year-old Hungarians. For the export market, they make a Tokaj Dry and a Dry Furmint. So great is the demand, that Château Dereszla is building a winery in the center of the Henye hill.

Other producers are also concentrating on dry wine. The Royal, whose image was built in London with the Aszù wines, started dry production in 2003. "I want consumers to drink dry Tokaj wines the whole year long as an everyday easy-to-drink wine," says Sarolta Bardos, owner of Nobilis. "The Aszù should always be an exception." Both Pince and Kikelet also see their best turnover from dry wines.

"But there are still too many bad wines in the region," warns Kalocsai, saying that's why the dry wines have not yet boosted export sales. One third of the production of dry wines comes from Kereskedőház, the former state farm, which has recently been strongly criticised in the Hungarian press for the low quality of its wines. Another third comes from the 'Big Plain', wineries in the centre of Hungary, far from the growing areas, that sell for €0.80 (\$1.08) a 750 ml bottle.

Dry future

There are measures in place to improve quality, such as a new law that demands that, from the next vintage, the wines of Tokaj must be bottled in the Tokaj area. This is a first crucial step towards securing the future – which is probably going to be dry. That's what has led a company like Szt Tamás, created in 2009 with strong investor backing, to bet on dry wines. They are producing a dry wine called Mád, sold at €5.00 ex-cellar to the UK. "Tokaj is not a brand yet, says Szepsy Jr, "but dry wines are definitely easier to sell than sweet."