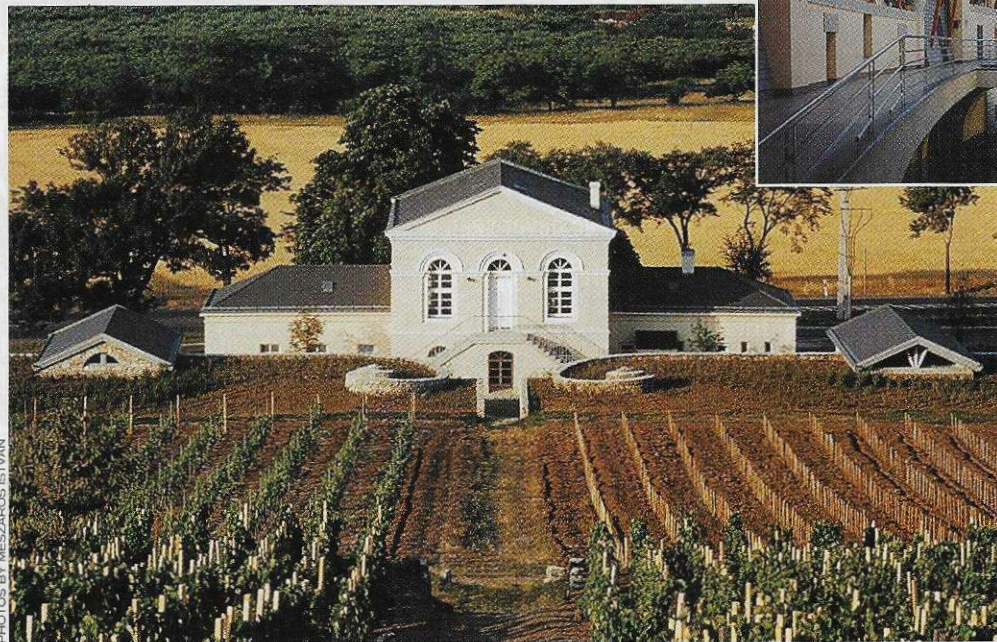




— The Disznókő vineyard and winery in Tokaj, Hungary, is owned by France's AXA Millesimes, which also owns vineyards in Bordeaux and Portugal. Last year, the Disznókő 1992 Tokaj Aszú 5 Puttonyos won a gold medal at the International Wine Challenge, and vintners here are investing in the hope Tokaj dessert wines regain their lost glory.

## Tokaj Sweet Wine—Tomorrow the World

*This Hungarian "wine of kings and king of wines" enjoys a resurgence.*

BY THERESA AGOVINO

**T**he impulse to draw the sheepskin vest tightly to one's chest on the walk through the Tokaj Oremus wine cellar in northeast Hungary is overwhelming. It isn't the cold; the vest given out before entering the 14th-century cellar is thick and warm. The cellar, however, is quite creepy.

A dim light emanating from wrought iron lamps reveals that the walls of the cave and the bottles resting in it are cloaked with a black, spongy fungus. Is this a wine tasting or a tour of a horror movie set?

Andras Bacso, managing director of Bodegas Oremus, grins as his visitors cringe. The region's climate, Bacso explains, provides the damp weather conditions responsible for the fungus that is key to producing Tokaj

(pronounced TOE-kai) dessert wines, widely considered to be some of the world's best. The vineyard, owned by Spain's Vega Sicilia, is located in Tolcsva, a town in the Tokaj region of Hungary.

In fact, Tokaj may be the wine industry's best blessing-in-disguise tale. According to legend, in 1620 the lords who ruled the Tokaj-Hegyalja region of northeast Hungary postponed the grape harvest, because they feared an attack by the Turks. When the grapes were finally picked in November, they were covered with a fungus called *Botrytis cinerea* or noble rot. Hungarians called the fungus aszú and the grapes aszús, and when they were added to a white wine produced in the Zemplén hills region, Tokaj wines were born.



## FOOD & WINE

Indeed, those who dislike a cloying sweetness in dessert wines will be very pleasantly surprised. The region creates a wine with a calibrated sweetness that is intense, but not overwhelming. A tasting reveals that the much-praised 1972 6-*Puttonyos* Tokaji Aszú from Tokaj Oremus is wonderfully indulgent, the liquid equivalent of satin. (The number of *puttonyos* is a measurement of the intensity of the wine's sweetness.) All of a sudden the fungus on the cellar walls seems more like velvet.

The basic process for making the wines is the same as it was in 1620. The region's volcanic soil continues to lend an acidity to the wine, while the two nearby rivers produce the humidity that leads to noble rot. Making these wines is difficult, because the aszú grapes must be picked individually by hand to ensure they are sufficiently rotted. "Being able to pick the grapes is an art form, a talent," says Bacso. "You can't change 400 years of tradition."

The aszú wines are made by adding 25-kilogram tubs (called *puttonyos*) of

aszú grapes to 135 liters of white wine. The base is made with either Furmint or Hárslevelű grapes, or some other combination of the dry white wines grown in the region. The higher the number of *puttonyos*, the higher the sugar content. The range stretches from three *puttonyos* to six *puttonyos*, and a six-*puttonyo* aszú will have a residual sugar content of 15 percent to 18 percent.

### REGAINING GLORY

Everyone from Beethoven to Brown-ing to Louis XIV has lauded Tokaj wine, with the latter declaring it "the wine of kings and the king of wines." Voltaire, who was a friend of Frederick the Great and lived in Berlin from 1749 to 1753, wrote the following about the king. "To our greatest fortune, he has Tokaj wine, in his cellar." Once when Frederick the Great was sipping Tokaj wine a steward of the royal household was said to exclaim: "Carry on drinking Tokaj, your majesty, the first two humans were expelled from paradise for eating, not for drinking." Unfortunately, Tokaj's most illustrious boosters died centuries

ago, and the wine's reputation was soured by 40 years of Communist rule that followed World War II, when quantity was prized more than quality. After being served in most of the royal courts of prewar Europe, Tokaj descended into anonymity in the West. It is slowly regaining some of its lost glory now that foreigners have snapped up existing wineries or started new ones and invested heavily in equipment and technology.

The Disznókő vineyard in Tokaj, Hungary, is owned by France's AXA Mille-simes, an insurance company which also owns vineyards in Bordeaux and Portugal. In 1992, it purchased 60 hectares (about 148 acres) of land which has since been expanded to 130 hectares (about 321 acres), and has spent more than \$10 million building a state-of-the-art winery.

Last year, the Disznókő 1992 Tokaj Aszú 5 Puttonyos won a gold medal at the International Wine Challenge, where judges lauded its "smooth, rich caramel, and sweet raisin flavors with a hint of toasted nuts." The rich, amber-colored wine luxuriously coats the mouth, leaving a comforting and satisfying finish.

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The vintners are understandably proud of the wine, because the 1992 vintage is from the first harvest they controlled from the outset.

The new owners of the Tokaj wineries successfully lobbied to lower the minimum aging requirement for the wines from seven years to three years. The result is wine with a less oxidized, more fruity, approachable taste, which enhances an acidic streak that is a traditional characteristic of the aszú wines. The acid balances the wine's high sugar content and keeps Tokaj wines from being as sweet as other late harvest dessert wines, such as Bordeaux's Sauternes.

"It is more than just the technology," says Eniko Kiraly, marketing manager at Disznókő. "We control everything so carefully. We follow each vat, each barrel, each bottle." And indeed one doesn't have to be a wine connoisseur to taste the difference. A Disznókő 1988 Tokaj 5 Puttonyos is certainly pleasant and offers some of the same flavor sensations as its 1992 counterpart. It has a harsh tinge, however, and lacks a lingering sensation in the mouth. Experts say favorable weather conditions portend

well for the 1993 wines. A preview of the Disznókő 1993 6 Puttonyos reveals a wine rich with the flavors of apricots and honey.

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*"We have to build a  
good image. Hungarian  
wines aren't even known  
in the U.S.A."*

—ENIKO KIRALY

#### **BUILDING AN IMAGE**

A hurdle facing the vineyards is reintroducing Tokaj to the world. Eastern Europeans still revere the wine, but it is expected that few will be willing to pay more for the improved version of the traditional Hungarian specialty. Eastern

Europeans who can afford to spend more on wines are now much more likely to buy high-end French or Italian wines.

In 1995, winery owners formed a trade organization, the Tokaj Renaissance, to promote the wine at international fairs and festivals. The owners say they don't have much to spend on advertising, and add that reaching consumers who appreciate fine dessert wines is difficult since the market is slim.

Hungary began privatizing the Tokaj wine region in 1992, and in order to participate, companies had to agree to buy and sell some of the government stock. The Disznókő vineyard, for instance, has labels that differentiate between the wines it purchased and those it has produced. Spain's Vega Sicilia, wine writer Hugh Johnson, and noted New York restaurateur George Lang (who also owns Gundel, Hungary's most famous eatery) are among the investors who have poured a total of \$28 million into modernizing the industry.

"We have to build a good image. Hungarian wines aren't even known in the U.S.A.," says Kiraly. "It is not enough to have just good quality." ♦

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