

Royal Tokaji Continues and Elevates the Story of Hungarian Wine

By Alexandra Schrecengost

The wine region of northern Hungary has been producing fine wines since the 16th century, and Royal Tokaji has served admirably as an iconic representation of this expert craft for nearly three decades. I traveled for the first time to this storied region along with a group of fellow wine professionals for a memorable, wonderfully educational experience that's a must-do for those who live for wine travel.

While these trips can prove a bit of a whirlwind, there's truly no better pace or season for discovering (and falling in love with) Hungarian wine. The more you pack into your trip, particularly during harvest season, the faster you'll notice what makes this region so unique, and why brands like Royal Tokaji are taking the wine world by storm. The brand's portfolio includes dry white Furmint, Aszú blends, single-vineyard wines and small quantities of Essencia, all made in the traditional manner with long barrel-aging in 600-year-old cellars. Those unfamiliar with these wines are in for a treat, and those looking for a better value wine vacation will certainly find what they're looking for in the wine region, the epitome for Hungarian winemaking, which is just two-hours northeast of Budapest.

After landing in Budapest—a dizzying array of eye-catching architecture—my fellow travelers and I, along with Managing Director Charlie Mount, visited Royal Tokaji's Mézes Mály vineyard, followed by a tour and Aszú grape-picking at their Szent Tamás vineyards. It's an uncommon delight to admire and harvest ripe grapes, then sip the very wine they're made into and consider the composition you've just observed. Paired with upscale Hungarian fare at the magnificent Grof Degenfeld Castle Hotel, the Royal Tokaji tasting we enjoyed that evening was one of the most memorable pairing experiences I've ever had, guaranteed to thoroughly charm all lovers of European food and wine.

Having met these remarkable bottles face-to-face, we set out the next morning for a tour of Royal Tokaji's winery and cellars that ended with a full tasting, guided by Charlie (Mount) and General Manger Zoltán Kovács.

The tasting was not only educational but showed how legendary the Tokaji Aszú wines truly are and how they've inspired wine-lovers for centuries. It was also quite interesting to learn about the balance Royal Tokaji sets up between the old and the new with dry Furmint, the terroir's dry wines that have captivated palates and markets alike and thrived in the global market. Both Zoltan and Charlie demonstrated such exceptional pride in all of the work they do, carrying on the longstanding tradition of making world-class wines in Tokaj.

After a lunch of more superb traditional Hungarian food like wild game, local fish and cheese, and foraged wild delicacies all paired to perfection, we visited the Dynamis cooperage in Sárospatak to watch multi-generational barrel-makers craft and bind the oak casks that house Aszú wines as they age. And what would a barrel-making demonstration be without a tour of the village of Hercegkút's centuries-old deep aging cellars? Following the wine from stem to underground barrel gave us each a more profound insight into the history and terroir behind these world-class wines—particularly for the master sommelier traveling with us.

“While the wines from Tokaj have been famous for centuries, the modern era was pioneered by Royal Tokaji after the fall of communism in Hungary in 1989, revitalizing one of the wine world's greatest and unique treasures,” says Chris Tanghe, MS and Chief Instructor of Guildsomm.com. “Furmint, Hárslevelű; Sárgamuskotály (Muscat Blanc à Petite Grains) and Zéta (Oremus) are native to the region, heavily influenced by the special combination of the Bodrog and Tisa rivers which shape the perfect conditions for botrytis. This magical mold concentrates the flavors and sugars, creating one of the most perfumed, honeyed and unctuous wines found the world over. Furmint itself possesses an incredibly complex character and adapts to a dry style readily, showing luscious tree fruits tinged with sweet herbs and a lovely texture that has immense versatility in pairing with many cuisines. Royal Tokaji sets the standard for the style and shouldn't be missed!”

Back in Budapest, you'll find no shortage of beautiful Hungarian wines served in the city's countless restaurants, bistros, and bars. The guided Segway tour was particularly fun and efficient—no more sore feet! And for a traditional afternoon of enjoying relaxation and wellness as the locals do, visit the beautiful, memorable outdoor Szechenyi Bath – a gorgeous ending in the rain.

Observing Hungary's love for wine from all countries, but especially the love and pride for its own product, was a learning experience I won't soon forget. The vineyards tended by Royal Tokaji's dedicated team are as robust as they've ever been in their vast history, and the brand continues to gain notoriety for collection-worthy releases, setting the bar sky-high. Bring as many bottles as you can carry in your suitcase, have the rest shipped home, and prepare to truly wow your next dinner guests.