

The future of aszú wine production in Tokaj

Motives and objectives of this thesis:

There is a saying in Hungary: "The Hungarian wines are world-famous, but only in Hungary". I think this saying summarizes well the current Hungarian wine scene. Seeing from Hungary, we are making super nice quality wines, which we should be proud of, but cross the border and as you go further, fewer people know about its existence. However, Tokaj is probably more appreciated in foreign markets than in Hungary.

For ten years I work for the Zsirai winery, which is based in Tokaj. It was interesting to go through all the phases during this time: starting from exploring all the wonders, of what Hungarian wines can offer, and seeing that these wines are how marginal in the export markets.

Tokaj is a little bit an exception. We always get the credits on our wines (especially for the sweet ones), but we usually got some critics as well. One of the critics is that our sweet wine categories are simply just too complicated, and it is hard to follow. Most of them cannot separate the sweet wine categories from each other, and they are disappointed when they get a lower category wine labeled as Tokaj.

In my work, I also perceive this problem. It is a general phenomenon that everybody pictures Tokaj as a sweet wine-producing region, while these days only 20% of the production is sweet. Also, the first wine, which is associated with Tokaj is the Aszú, which is even rarer.

My personal involvement, to improve Tokaj's reputation motivated me to choose this topic. My objective with this thesis was to find some ways how the producers to give a simpler, easy-to-understand message, which can clear all the misunderstandings for the consumers. To achieve this I made the following steps:

- Secondary research
- Primary research - Survey among the producers
- Primary research – Blind tasting

Secondary research:

Unfortunately, there is more information about the past, than the future. So I introduced Tokaj's past, highlighting all the critical milestones. About the present, since there are not many trustworthy statistics, I focused on the sweet wine categories of the region, including aszú, szamorodni, late harvest, eszencia, fordítás and másolás.

I also drew attention to the 2,2 liter rule, which enables producers to make 2,2 liter wine from 1 kg botrytized berries. The 2,2 liter can consist aszú, fordítás and eszencia, but it is not necessary. This rule basically allows producers to blend the fordítás (second press of the aszú berries) back to the aszú, which is a common practice these days, making more aszú with lower quality.

I also wanted to show the differences in production methods compared to the most famous sweet wine appellations in the world, like Ruster Ausbruch, Sauternes and German BAs and TBAs.

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Primary research - Survey among the producers:

Of course, I have a pretty strong opinion myself, of what is needed to get Tokaj to the next level, but to be precise it is critical to have a clue about, what the producers in Tokaj are thinking about this. So I made an online questionnaire, which I sent to all the wineries based in the region.

The results showed various things. Most of the producers agree, that the sweet wine categories are hard to understand and that there isn't an easy-to-understand message of Tokaj. The categories are overlapping each other in sugar levels. There is no consent, on which categories are viable, nor if more regulations in the PDO are needed. The volume of the sweet wine production at the wineries varies a lot, but almost all of them exported a significant amount.

Primary research – Blind tasting

I also wanted to put in my thesis a consumer approach. My idea was to make a blind tasting with experts (sommeliers, journalists, etc.). The wine list included szamorodni and aszú with the same sugar level. My hypothesis was that they are unable to taste the difference in the categories if the sugar level is around the same. If this was true, then it is not an exaggeration to say that an average wine lover couldn't either.

The result showed that the participants had a 35% success rate identifying the category, and many szamorodni got a better score than the aszú. So I made a conclusion, that there is no real difference between the categories consumer-wise.

Conclusions:

Based on the results of my research and the secondary data, I came up with two suggestions. Both of them come with big changes in the current system.

In both cases, I would narrow down the numbers of the categories. I would take out from the Tokaj PDO the lesser categories (fordítás, másolás, eszencia), which are very rare anyway. But I would also delete the late harvest category, which is unnecessary besides the szamorodni.

The big difference between the scenarios is the role of the aszú in the pyramid. In the first case, I would leave it as it is, but I would limit the maximum sugar level of the szamorodni to make two distinct categories. There would be the same volume of aszú on the market with the same quality.

While in the second scenario, I would delete the 2,2 liter rule and go back to the traditions, when (at least) the 1:1 ratio was the typical for the aszú. By lowering the volume, the aszú's quality would be better and place it in a higher price range. The second pressing (fordítás) can be blended into szamorodni. I wouldn't set a limit for szamorodni's sugar, but I think with the new aszú rules the distinction would be obvious between the categories to the consumers.