Passport to Hungarian wine
Hungary’s sumptuously rich winemaking heritage and the cutting-edge go happily hand in hand. While the method for making sumptuously sweet Tokaji Aszú detailed in 1630 by Máté Sepsy Laczkó is still in use today, the region’s winemaking fraternity have achieved the unthinkable, in creating world-class dry Furmint in a previously dessert wine focussed region. Now they are also turning their attention to dry Hárselevelű, which is looking just as promising.

Hungarians live and breathe the vine, blogging and debating about wine on internet chat boards with the kind of fervour that other nationalities reserve for sports. Whether hanging out at one of Budapest’s trendy Bohemian kert (garden) bars, or dining out at a high-end restaurant, Hungarian wine is an integral part of daily life as Hungarians have come to be proud of the quality their wines have once again reached. In many ways, the story of Hungarian wines is reflected in the capital’s premier wine festival held every September in the majestic Buda Castle, perhaps the world’s most impressive backdrop for a wine event. Like the Hungarian fine wine industry, the Buda Castle has been destroyed several times but has come back stronger and more impressive than ever.

Come and taste for yourself.

Hungary may be home to the world’s oldest classification wine system, which dates back to 1772 in Tokaj, but its time is very much coming now.

These are exciting times for Hungarian wine, which after more than 20 years has shaken off the damage inflicted by 40 years of post-war communist collectivisation, to emerge stronger than ever. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, winemaking techniques and vineyard management have been revolutionized to embrace the state-of-the-art and all that’s good about 21st Century winemaking. Hungary’s glorious vinous past is also being embraced simultaneously as Hungarian winemakers pay more attention to indigenous varieties and are focusing on expressing the exceptional terroir in their wines.

Hungary has transformed grapes like Olaszrizling and Kékfrankos, its most widely planted grapes in the white and blue grape categories respectively, from the mass-production grapes of the communist era into national treasures. Kadarka, which was effectively wiped out in the former regime due to its labour intense nature, is experiencing a revival. It gives Szekszárd’s Bikavér blends its unique and spicy character. Meanwhile, Hungary has not turned its back on so-called “international” varieties. Cabernet Franc, for one, takes on all together new levels of complexity in Hungarian terroir.
Wine regions of Hungary
Central Europe’s largest lake exerts moderating Mediterranean-Submediterranean effects on surrounding vineyards, which are composed of vastly different soils from one district to the next. The result is distinctive wines from indigenous varietals, plus high standard wines from international grapes, with white grape Pinot Gris (Szürkebarát) taking on a strong local character.

White wines are the norm, with Olaszrizling accounting for 3,000 hectares and 27% of total production. It has successfully made the step up from the high-yielding mass-production grape it was under communist collectivisation, to produce wines of great complexity and a strong sense of place. Olaszrizling is known as rizling in Csopak. Szürkebarát (Pinot Gris) is widely planted in Badacsony, Balatonfelvidék and Balatonfüred-Csopak and excellently expresses the nuances of Lake Balaton’s varied terroirs.

Basaltic Pannonian sand and clay, interspersed with patches of loess, cover the volcanic peaks of Badacsony and Somló, which are both known for mineral-infused whites that possess long ageing potential. Badacsony’s “basalt organ pipes” over-

Balatonfelvidék’s soils have a similar basalt profile, though mixed with various other soils. In Balatonfüred-Csopak, rendzina covers red Permian sandstone, limestone or dolomite. On the southern shore, in Balatonboglár, the influence of the soil is less pronounced on the final wine with brown forest soils formed on typical loess. The Bordeaux varietals achieve great results here, and are catching on in other districts, with Merlot long been associated with Balatonfüred’s Tihany peninsula.

Further away from the lake, mild and wet Zala has a similar soil profile to Balatonboglár, but is also noted for barren areas on eroded slopes.
Fragrant, crispy whites, with purity of fruit, characterize these cooler climate districts, with the exception of **Sopron**, “the Capital of Kékfrankos”, where the blue grape accounts for 60% of the grapes planted.

In **Ászár-Neszmély**, the Hilltop winery has achieved great success abroad with the aromatic white varieties of Cserszegi fűszeres and Irsai Olivér. **Mór** is best known for Ezerjó (lit. a thousand good things), which takes up 20.5% of that district’s plantings and can produce late-harvest and botrytised wines in favourable vintages. Tramini is also common in Mór, as well as in **Pannonhalma**, though Olaszrizling is the prevailing wine in the latter, comprising 26.7% of plantings. The Pannonhalma Abbey Winery also makes red wines, while Etyek Kúria has won the top Pinot Noir award in Hungary.

Rainfall is average across North Transdanubia, summers cooler than the national average, winters milder than the norm, while spring and autumn frosts are relatively rare. Brown forest soil and rendzina is typically formed on loess, limestone, sand or dolomite across the region. An exception is **Etyek-Buda**, where chernozem dominates and its calcareous soils are highly suitable for sparkling wine, which has a long and noble tradition, centred in Budafok on the edge of Budapest. Etyek-Buda is otherwise known for fruit-forward reductive whites from Chardonnay (13.6%), followed by Zöld veltelini (10.5%), then by Sauvignon blanc, Riesling, Szürkebarát, Olaszrizling and Rizlingszilváni, each representing about 5-6% of the total.

In Mór, Pannonhalma and Sopron, there’s also some sand, in particular Oligocene and Pleistocene sand soils.

Until phylloxera devastated the region in the late 19th century, Sopron was known for sweet whites with the influence of Lake Fertő creating ideal condition for botrytis to occur.
The Pannonian Wine Region

Villány enjoys a healthy rivalry with Szekszárd, which is pushing Villány hard for the accolade of Hungary’s premier red wine district, and the competition between the two is further enhancing overall quality. Blue grapes account for 81.9% and 76.7% of plantings in Villány and Szekszárd respectively, while in Pécs and Tolna white varieties lead the way although red wine production is also significant in those districts (18% and 35.9%).

The Bordeaux varietals of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Merlot play a key role in Villány and Szekszárd, and are often blended to make the top blends. Many such blends have been achieved outstanding results in international competitions. In particular, Cabernet Franc, more of a supporting grape in Bordeaux, has been singled out as particularly well suited to Villány and Szekszárd, yielding wines of unprecedented depth and expression.

Kékfrankos, particularly in Szekszárd, has successfully made the transition to a Hungarian flagship, as opposed to easy-drinking local wine, when made from reduced yields. It also makes elegant rosés with an impressive acid structure.

Kadarka is only ranked seventh in terms of planting in Szekszárd, comprising just 80 hectares. However, it was once the dominant variety and makes a fresh, spicy wine with a lighter colour that is used to spice up Szekszárdi Bikavér; the backbone of which is typically provided by Kékfrankos.

The Pannonian Wine Region is Hungary’s hottest with mild winters and dry, sunny, long, often submediterranean summers. The soils of Szekszárd, Tolna and Villány are loess based, mixed with Pannonian sand with terra rossa lower down in Szekszárd. Brown forest soil is also a feature of Tolna, and in Villány there’s also red clay, mixed with limestone, and dolomite.

Pécs, which is known for wines made from the Austrian Cirfandli grape, has brown forest soils with a low lime content, plus rendzina.

In Villány, the early ripening Portugieser is a prominent grape with 17.1% of vineyard share, second only to Cabernet Sauvignon’s leading 17.5%. Portugieser plays a role akin to Beaujolais’ Gamay, making fresh, fruity wines released in time for St. Martin’s Day on November 11, and provides valuable cash flow for wineries. It is also used for making rosé. In general, rosé wines made from Kékfrankos and Merlot are very popular in the domestic market.

Pinot Noir and Syrah take up a few dozen hectares in Szekszárd and Villány, while Zweigelt is common in all areas.

### Planting Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Planted Area (ha)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pécs</td>
<td>733</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Szekszárd</td>
<td>2 644</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolna</td>
<td>2 982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villány</td>
<td>2 553</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>8 912</strong></td>
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**Eger** is renowned for elegant reds, possessing a refined acid structure and long ageing potential. While they may not be quite as full-bodied as reds from Villány and Szekszárd in the Pannonian Wine Region, they exude finesse, balance and complexity.

Blue grapes have taken over in Eger since the 1990s, though blue and white were previously in balance, while Mátra and Bükk make predominantly white wines. Nevertheless, light and playfully acidic reds are increasingly common in Mátra.

Mátra is planted with plethora grape varieties, including Rizlingszilváni (11.2%), Muscat Ottonel (7.6%), Szürkebarát (7.2%), Olaszrizling (6.9%) and Chardonnay (6.6%). However, Irsai Olivér, Tramini, Leányka, Zöld veltelini, Hársvény, Cserszegi fűszeres and Zenit are also important. Late harvest wines are common in all three districts.

Central to Eger and Szekszárd are the famous Bikavér blends, which are based on a backbone of Kékfrankos. Its former name on foreign markets, Bull’s Blood, has been dropped due to its association with the cheap, albeit successful, wine exported far and wide during the communist era. The creation of the Bikavér Superior classification in Eger enables the highest quality wines made from low yields to be distinguished from regular Bikavérs. Kadarka enhances Szekszárd Bikavér with its piquant influence and is being reintroduced to Eger.

North Hungary, the country’s second biggest region, experiences long winters and limited rainfall. Rhyolitic tuff is a typical base rock in all three districts, on which black “nyirok” soils, which are often poor in lime, over which brown forest soils have formed. An exception to the rule is the highly-sought Eged Hill whose ideal south-facing limestone slopes overlook Eger.

Many compare Eger to Burgundy and an increasing number of Egri Pinot Noirs have been capturing the nuances of the districts different vineyards, as Chardonnay has also been doing in the white category. Others compare Eger to the Rhône, and early results with Syrah are impressive. In addition to the likes of Merlot and Cabernet Franc, Eger also has extremely rare Hungarian grapes like the rich Menoir (previously Kékmedoc) and Turán. Kadarka, once a key component of Bikavér but abandoned during communism for being difficult to mass produce, is now being released by a number of wineries. A new white blend called Egri Csillag (lit. Star of Eger), was introduced in 2010. The blend must be comprised of at least 50% of the Carpathian basin grape varieties of Olaszrizling, Hársvény, Leányka, Királyleányka, Zengő and Zenit, and a maximum of 30% of the fragrant Muscat type varieties of Cserszegi Fűszeres, Zefir, Irsai, Tramini and Muscat Ottonel.
The Hungarian Wine Academy’s naming of the region’s János Frittmann as “Winemaker of the Year” in 2007 has led to something a re-assessment of the region, which was previously only associated with mass production. The famously flat “Great Plain” is blessed with a strong suite of indigenous grape varieties which when reductively vinified produce wines of fine fragrance and full fruit. The climate in on the extreme side, though some sheltered areas do exist in this huge region. Since spring and autumn frosts do occur, robust and frost-resistant grape varieties tend to be favoured. These include Cserszegi fűszeres, Zala gyöngye, Kunleány and Kövidinka. As well as for still wine, the highly acidic traditional varieties of Arany sárfehér and Ezerjó are also used to make sparkling wine.

Whites make up the majority in all three districts, though Kékfrankos contributes 13.2% to **Kunság**, 25.3% to **Csongrád** and 21.6% to **Hajós-Baja**, while Zweigelt, Kadarka, Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon are also to be found. Danubian red wines are usually fresh and fruity, have lower acid and tannin content than those in higher areas and are made to be consumed young.

The soil in Kunság is mainly limey sand of Danubian origin deposited on field and meadow soil, varying sometimes with loess in Csongrád. In Hajós-Baja loess is interspersed with meadow clay covered with sand, which makes it closer to the conditions in Szekszárd than to its partner districts.
Tokaji Aszú 6 puttonyos usually contains a minimum of 150g/l of residual sugar while Aszú-eszencia and Eszencia, the free run juice of botrytised berries, a minimum of 180g/l and 250g/l of residual sugar, respectively. Szamorodni, literally “as it comes”, can be both dry and sweet with botryitised grapes picked along with regular grapes. As these wines require long ageing, more fruit forward late-harvest wines intended for earlier drinking have become popular.

But that’s far from all. Pioneered by István Szepsy, the majority of region’s producers now release dry Furmints and the standard has improved dramatically in the last few years. Dry wines made from Sárgamuskotály and especially Hárslevelű are also causing excitement. Sárgamuskotály (Muscat Lunel) is the same as French Muscat Blanc à Petits Grains, and is the third most important grape in Tokaj with 7.7% of plantings. It can have a powerful floral and grapey fragrance that can add to the aroma of Aszú. Zéta has 1.9%, and Kövérszőlő, the so-called “fat” grape, 0.7% of vineyard area and spice up and beef up Tokaji Aszú blends.

Kabar is a relatively new crossing of Hárslevelű with Bouvier and is permitted according to the region’s regulation. However, other whites like Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay, which are practically negligible in terms of vineyard share, are released as so-called country wine (Tájbor) under the name Zempléni, after the region’s hill range.

Regarding the climate, it has warm summers, long, sunny and humid autumns and cold winters. The soil is frequently brown forest soil formed on volcanic cover originating from rhyolite, andesite and the tuffs of these. Hard clay, stony nyirok soil that is difficult to cultivate also occur here and loess on the spurs of Kopasz hill.
Hungary is blessed with abundant indigenous grape varieties, while certain foreign grapes take on new and complex characteristics in Hungary’s unique and varied terroir. Here are just a few you are likely to encounter.

Local heroes and foreign friends

**Olaszrizling** | Hungary’s most planted white grape responds well to fermentation and ageing in oak, which enhances it with serious richness and intensity. However, its unique bitter almond character is more pronounced when made in the fresher, reductive style. Olaszrizling is the same grape as Austria’s Welschriesling, and it to be found in other countries in the region.

**Furmint** | The most widely planted grape in Tokaj, is also a firm favourite in Somló. While it forms the backbone of Tokaj’s word class Tokaji Aszú, it is highly coveted as a dry white. Furmint often reveals the volcanic character of Tokaj’s soil and even captures the individual character of particular vineyards while retaining plenty of fruit, with notes of apple, pear and sometimes citrus fruit. In Somló it can produce outstanding mineral rich dry whites.

**Hárselevelű** | Loosely translated as “Linden Leaf”, Hárselevelű often partners Furmint as the next most important component of many Tokaji Aszús. It often gives the final wine more complex floral aromas and more richness on the palate. Sometimes, by itself the final wine can lack the finesse and balance of Furmint in Tokaj, although there are ever more examples in both sweet and dry styles that suggest a bright future for Hárselevelű. In Somló, it has long produced outstanding single-varietal wines. It’s also found in Siklos, and other parts of Hungary.

**Juhfark** | Almost exclusive to Somló, masculine and full-bodied Juhfark exudes a classy chalky character, merged with classically Hungarian sour fruit flavours. Its acids can be aggressive but quality-minded winemakers who work with sufficiently ripe grapes produce wines of full fruit and balance. Juhfark means Sheep’s Tail.

**Szürkebarát** | Although this is the Hungarian name for Pinot Gris or Pinot Grigio, especially around Lake Balaton, local clones produce waxy, well-structured wines of distinct local character. Fruit forward wines, similar to Italian Pinot Grigio, are also common.

**Irsai Olivér** | Pungent, perfumed, Muscat-like on the nose, light and refreshing with juicy tropical fruit character on the palate. An excellent easy-drinking white.

**Cserszegi fűszeres** | This floral, spicy and generally light wine is a crossing of Irsai Olivér and Tramini (Traminer).

**Királyleányka** | Floral and fruity, with a mix of primary and peachy notes, this often elegant wine has a lovely lightness of touch but plenty of flavour. Good examples can be found in Eger and Etyek.

**Cabernet Franc** | The grape that plays somewhat of a background role in Bordeaux takes on a extra dimension in Hungarian soil, most notably in Szekszárd and Villány, but also in Eger and around Lake Balaton. It makes complex and concentrated wines oozing notes of chocolate, juicy red fruit and blueberry.

**Kékfrankos** | Hungary’s most widely planted blue grape, Kékfrankos, has a fine acid and tannin structure, fruits of the forest flavours and sometimes a spicy character. It’s thick-skinned, a fine articulator of terroir and usually the largest single component of Eger and Szekszárd’s Bikavér blends.

**Kadarka** | This light coloured red is normally low in tannin but has vibrant acidity, a ripe red-fruit (especially raspberry) flavour, and a spicy aftertaste that makes it an ideal easy-drinking wine. However, Kadarka can be classy when made from low yields, which seriously concentrates the final wine. A small amount of Kadarka is added to Szekszárdi Bikavér for its aromas and spiciness. It is also being re-introduced to Eger.

**Zweigelt** | This Austrian grape, a crossing of Kékfrankos and St. Laurent, is typically used for mass production, but winemakers are now paying more attention to it. When made from ripe grapes in low yields, it exudes intense but fresh red-fruit flavours.
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