

# THE EGER REGION



The Mátra, or Mátraalja, are the foothills of the hilly range that boasts Hungary's highest peak. Further east, Eger is the region around the town of the same name, known for its Bull's Blood (Bikavér). Further east again is the Bükk, a producer of thin and tart wines in the past but where a small band of winemakers is now starting to offer some classier bottlings.



# Mór, Neszemény, Pannonhalma

Officially three separate regions within the North Transdanubia wine district, these small winegrowing areas are bringing their own unique flavours to the Hungarian wine scene.

With 559 hectares of limestone-rich vineyards wedged between the Vértes and Bakony hills, **Mór** is the home of the Ezerjő grape, but also the source of some classy Királyleányka. The climate is cool, with an average temperature of 10°C, and much of the rain falls in summer. With sunshine peaking at 2,000 hours, it is only white grapes that can be sure of ripening sufficiently—and even then the sharp acidity can stick out, which often calls for some rounding out in the bottle. However, this acidity remains firmly in place even in hotter years, leaving the region well placed should temperatures keep heading upwards.

Tucked away in the western Gerecse hills south of the Danube, the vines of **Neszemény** benefit from the sun's rays being reflected back onto them by the river, which flows directly east and defines the border with Slovakia, providing a regulating influence and compensating for the slight lack



*Blessing the vines at Pannonhalma.*

of sun. The predominantly white wines grown in the region's 1,400 or so hectares are typically aromatic with pronounced fruit flavours, and even low-acidity varieties like Irsai Olivér can have a certain zip about them.

I recall the late, great winemaker Tibor Gál saying that he could 'feel the magic in the air' when he became involved in resurrecting the thousand-year-old winemaking tradition of the Benedictine abbey of **Pannonhalma**. More than a decade later, Pannonhalma wine has come into its own, as the roots of its 52 hectares of vines bed down further and Gál's protégé Zsolt Liptai learns to get the best from the terroir. It is indeed magical looking up from the village at the majestic monastery on the hilltop. What you find here is a formidable blend of tradition and modernity, with the cutting-edge, gravity-fed winery tastefully integrated and hidden from view. Cynics may scoff that this is simply a cash cow for the abbey. But it is more than that. The monks are devoted to their winemaking and the sight of the abbot blessing the wine is a sight to behold.

## RECOMMENDED PRODUCERS

### Ambrus Bakó

*Erdős u. 23, Badacsonytomaj.*

*T: +36 70 310 9628. Map opposite.*

Ambrus Bakó is living proof that you don't have to own vineyards to make top wine. He always buys grapes from other growers: Barcza (who in Bakó's words has eight hectares of prime Riesling), Békesi

and the local research institute and also sometimes from Sandahl and Szeremley, if they have grapes to sell. All of his wines are from single vineyards, with the exception of the basic Olaszrizling. His entry-level wines come from vineyards where he can't exert an influence over the way the grapes are grown. However, the 2013 Olaszrizling came out

*DJ-ing with a demijohn: Ambrus Bakó.*



made when temperatures allow the grapes to freeze on the vine, typically in January. The temperature needs to drop to around  $-7^{\circ}\text{C}$  for a period of several hours, which is by no means guaranteed given the recent run of mild winters.

### Yeast

*Some say that using native or indigenous yeasts, i.e. the yeasts inherent in the grape skins and the cellar, gives the most authentic wine possible. Indeed, it is hard to dispute that the yeast itself can be counted as a part of the place of growth and thus a component of the terroir. It is also how wine was made before modern technology came along and is thus in line with the new-found desire to get back to our roots. However, tasting some—but by no means all—wines made with native yeast in Hungary can show why cultured yeast is a godsend. Indigenous yeast sometimes doesn't have the legs that its commercial counterpart has and can die out before the fermentation is complete, leaving considerable residual sugar in a wine that you were hoping might be bone dry. Fermentation can also stall much easier than with commercial yeast, causing all kinds of headaches for the winemakers (large wineries generally daren't take the financial risk), as a wine can take so long to ferment that the freshness and fruit of the grapes are consigned to history by the time the process is complete. However, when natural yeast does its job, it can help create some of the most compelling wine you're likely to encounter. Indeed, more flavour-enhancing chemical reactions can occur, as 'wild fermentation' involves more species of yeast. Indigenous yeasts tend to be favoured by smaller producers who are prepared to fly with the wind and don't necessarily need to create identical wines year-in, year-out.*

*Cultured yeast on the other hand enables winemakers to take more control of the process in what is known as an inoculated or controlled fermentation. Cultured yeasts are composed of different strains of yeast which each possess different attributes and can even be concocted to handle the demands of*

*a particular vintage. They can be criticised for making wines that are too formulaic. A yeast can be neutral in character to enable the natural characteristics of the grapes to come to the fore or even be designed so as to impart certain flavour characteristics when those aforementioned characteristics are lacking: the trademark gooseberry aroma of Sauvignon Blanc, for example.*

*Ultimately, there are terrific and terrible wines made with both indigenous and cultured yeast in Hungary. There is no easy answer.*



## TASTINGS & EVENTS

The world of Hungarian wine-tasting is centred—perhaps unsurprisingly—on the capital, Budapest, although a buzzing wine scene is developing in other cities around the country, not to mention in the wine regions themselves. Here is a roundup of just a few of the tastings that are regular fixtures in Budapest and further afield.

NB: Not all the events have their own websites, nor are dates always the same every year. But a quick web search on all the events mentioned below will reveal precise details close to the time.

The Tokaj region plays host to a large number of events. The excellent English-language Tokaj Today ([www.tokajtoday.com/category/events](http://www.tokajtoday.com/category/events)) and Tokaj Wine Region ([www.tokajwineregion.com](http://www.tokajwineregion.com)) offer free coverage of them. Details of the monthly artisans' market can be found on their website ([www.tokajhegyaljapiac.blogspot.com](http://www.tokajhegyaljapiac.blogspot.com)).

### FEBRUARY/MARCH

• **Furmint February Grand Tasting.** A *tour de force* of mainly dry offerings from Hungary's most highly-esteemed white grape. It takes place in the elegant surroundings of the Hungarian Agricultural Museum in Budapest's Városliget (City Park). It includes one or two wines from neighbouring countries. [www.furmintfebruar.hu](http://www.furmintfebruar.hu). Hungarian Agricultural Museum, Budapest XIV. Városliget, Vajdahunyadvár.

• **Bikavér Párbaj.** The 'Bull's Blood Duel' showcases Bikavér from Eger and Szekszárd, on the grounds that a healthy bit of competition can only be a good thing in the quest to shake off the blend's earlier poor reputation. A web search close to the date will confirm details. *Corinthia Hotel, Budapest VII, Erzsébet körút 43–49.*

• **Hungarian Wine Ball** (Magyar Borok Bálja). No fixed venue, but the website will have the details. [www.borbal.hu](http://www.borbal.hu).



• **VinCE** is a bumper wine event, either at the end of February or the beginning of March, focusing on the wines of Hungary and the globe. Aside from a wide selection of master classes and workshops, there are more than 150 (mainly wine) exhibitors. It is worth planning a trip to Hungary to coincide with this. (In summer, the same formula is applied at VinCE Balaton.) *Corinthia Hotel, Budapest VII, Erzsébet körút 43–49, [www.vincebudapest.hu](http://www.vincebudapest.hu).*



• The **Great Tokaj Wine Tasting** (Nagy Tokaji Kóstoló) is a tasting jamboree in the capital at the end of March, organised by Wine Lovers. Seventy wineries and a number of master classes attended the inaugural event in 2015. *Corinthia Hotel, Budapest VII, Erzsébet körút 43–49.*

### APRIL

• The **Great Tokaj Wine Auction** in the atmospheric Sárospatak Castle on the banks of the Bodrog

### Hungarian Pronunciation Guide

*Hungarian is a completely phonetic language and when you know which sounds match which letters and letter combinations, is not hard to pronounce. Sounds that differ from the English alphabet are the following:*

- a:* similar to the 'o' in hot  
*á:* similar to the 'a' in madness  
*c:* like the 'ts' in lots  
*cs:* like the 'ch' in church  
*é:* similar to the 'a' in baby  
*gy:* like the 'du' in duress  
*j:* like the 'y' in yes  
*ö:* 'euh' as in bird  
*ő:* the same as above, but hold it for longer  
*s:* like the 'sh' in shout  
*sz:* like the 's' in sound  
*ü:* like the 'u' in the French 'tu'  
*ű:* the same as above, but hold it for longer  
*zs:* 'zh', like the 'ge' in beige

### USEFUL HUNGARIAN WINE WORDS

<i>bor</i>	wine	<i>félszáraz</i>	off-dry	<i>pince</i>	cellar
<i>fehér</i>	white	<i>pezsgő</i>	champagne-	<i>pincészet/</i>	
<i>vörös</i>	red		style wine	<i>borászat</i>	winery
<i>rozé</i>	rosé	<i>habzó</i>	sparkling	<i>birtok</i>	estate
<i>száraz</i>	dry	<i>gyöngyöző</i>	sparkling	<i>hegy</i>	hill
<i>édes</i>	sweet	<i>hordó</i>	barrel	<i>dűlő</i>	vineyard
<i>félédes</i>	semi-sweet	<i>szőlő</i>	grape	<i>völgy</i>	valley

## GLOSSARY

**Animal** *see Brett.*

**Autolysis** A key process in the development of traditional-method sparkling wines whereby the developing wine interacts with the yeast cells deposited at the bottom of the bottle during the second fermentation stage. It leads to the development of complex biscuity and brioche-like flavours.

**Barrique** A 225-litre new barrel whose shape originated in Bordeaux.

**Batonnage** *see Lees.*

**Bordeaux** A 'Bordeaux blend' is a red wine made from the classic grape varieties of Bordeaux: Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Merlot (and occasionally Petit Verdot or Malbec). The latter two are virtually unheard-of in Hungary, while Cabernet Franc plays a key role, especially in Villány.

**Botrytis** A benign fungus, *Botrytis cinerea*, that is encouraged by foggy mornings and afternoons.

It attacks especially thin-skinned varieties like Furmint, Semillon, Sauvignon Blanc, Chenin Blanc and Riesling, and greatly concentrates sugars, acidity and flavours. It enables premium sweet wines to be made, such as Tokaji Aszú, Sauternes and Barsac from Bordeaux, Beerenauslese and Trockenbeerenauslese from Germany, Beerenauslese, Ausbruch or Trockenbeerenauslese around Austria's Neusiedlersee, and sweet wines from France's Loire Valley. Also known as 'noble rot'.

**Brett** Short for *brettanomyces*, from certain species of the *brettanomyces* yeast, which can lead to barnyard-like aromas in the finished wine if not controlled. Sulphur can limit its impact. A small amount can be viewed positively and some of the world's great wines have a touch of brett about them, but too much overpowers the wine and makes it