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**Tokaj** The region of Tokaj (note the wine it produces is called Tokaji) is located in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains in the far north east of Hungary and close to the Slovakian border. It has a long-standing reputation for producing premium botrytised sweet wines, but Late Harvest sweet wines and dry wines are becoming more popular.

#### CLIMATE AND GRAPE VARIETIES

Tokaj's climate is moderate and the best vineyards are located on hillside slopes with southerly aspects. The Bodrog and Tisza rivers and their many tributaries help generate the early morning humidity necessary for the development of noble rot.

There are three principal white grape varieties that are used in the making of Tokaji; they are often blended.

**Furmint** is the most widely planted variety and makes concentrated, high acid white wines with flavours of apples when young, developing into nuts and honey as they age. It can make premium quality dry white wines but due to its late ripening and susceptibility to botrytis it is better known as the principal grape variety used for sweet Aszú wines. **Hárslevelű** is also late ripening and contributes perfume to a blend. **Sárga Muskotály** (Muscat Blanc à Petits Grains) is also used for its aromatic qualities.

#### WINE STYLES

Tokaj has long been famous for its sweet wines, which rank among the best in the world, but producers are increasingly making top-quality dry wines as well. The dry wines are bottled in 75 cL bottles whereas the sweet wines are by tradition bottled in distinctive 50 cL bottles.

Depending on the degree of noble rot development,

a producer will often make a number of different styles of wine in each vintage. To allow for this, pickers may separate the grapes into three different categories during the harvest. Where noble rot has been widespread pickers pass through the vineyards several times selecting individual aszú (rotten) grapes. Bunches that remain unaffected by noble rot are collected separately. There is also a selection known as *Szamorodni*, which means 'as it comes'. This involves bunches that are partially affected by noble rot. These three different harvests can then be used to make a variety of different styles of wine.

#### Dry Wines

**Dry wines without botrytis** – This category is gaining importance. It allows producers to make wine in years where there is not much noble rot. These dry wines can vary in style from simple, unoaked wines that are made to be drunk young to more concentrated age-worthy blends, which are often fermented and matured in new oak. These wines are usually made from Furmint.

**Tokaji Szamorodni** – These wines are made from the grapes harvested as *Szamorodni* and may be dry (*száraz*) or sweet (*édes*), depending on the amount of noble rot that is present. By the nature of the harvest the dry

#### TOKAJI SWEET WINE LAWS

As of the 2013 vintage, the producers of Tokaj have been working in line with new regulations regarding the winemaking and labelling of their sweet wines. At the time of writing, these regulations were awaiting EU approval. If these laws are approved it is still essential to be aware that wines made to the traditional laws (vintages up to and including 2012) will still be on the market for many years. It is therefore useful to be familiar with both the traditional laws as well as the proposed changes.

##### Traditional Laws

The minimum residual sugar for Tokaji Aszú was traditionally 60 g/L and the wines would be labelled on a scale of three to six *puttonyos* depending on the level of residual sugar above this minimum amount. Minimum ageing requirements were stipulated whereby the wines had to spend 24 months in oak and could only be released from the January in the fourth year after harvest. The sweetest wines in the Aszú category could be labelled Aszú Eszencia; a minimum of 180 g/L residual sugar was required.

##### 2013 Laws

The minimum residual sugar for Tokaji Aszú has been raised to 120 g/L. This is the level of sugar that was traditionally needed for a wine of five *puttonyos*. Wines with a lower level of residual sugar must now be labelled as Late Harvest or Tokaji Szamorodni depending on how they are made. The labelling term Aszú Eszencia has been abolished (but note that the term Tokaji Eszencia still exists for wines made from the free-run juice of aszú berries). Wines in the Tokaji Aszú category are also now subject to shorter ageing requirements; a minimum of 18 months in oak is needed and the wines can be released in the January of the third year after harvest.



**FAR LEFT:** Grapes in Tokaj showing the different rates at which noble rot affects the bunches.



**LEFT:** The picker is selecting individual aszú grapes, which can be seen in the bucket.

wines will show noble rot characters. The wines must be aged in cask for a minimum of one year and be two years old before release. Most wines are aged for longer. Casks for the dry wines are not completely filled, to enable *flor*-like yeast to form naturally on the wine; the wine develops a character similar to that of a *Fino* Sherry. This yeast does not have a role to play in the sweet styles, which consequently may have an oxidative character although the modern trend is to produce a less-oxidative wine by filling casks for sweet wines completely.

### Sweet Wines

**Aszú wines** – The production of **Tokaji Aszú** starts with a base wine that is made from healthy grapes. Before, during or after fermentation, the *aszú* berries are macerated in the base wine. The maceration usually lasts for 12 to 60 hours. Traditionally the botrytised berries were made into a paste, but using uncrushed *aszú* berries avoids the extraction of bitter flavours. This mixture is pressed and then the wine is matured for a period of time in oak.

The amount of *aszú* berries used determines the sweetness of the final wine. The unit used to express the level of sweetness is the *puttony*. Classic Tokaji is deep amber, with high acidity and intense aromas, and flavours of orange peel, apricots and honey. The wines become more concentrated and intense as they rise up the sweetness scale.

**Tokaji Eszencia (Essence, or Nectar)** – These are extremely rare wines that are seldom available outside the region of production. *Eszencia* is made using just the free-run juice of the *aszú* berries. The must is so sweet it can take years to ferment, and even after that time the wines remain very low in alcohol (usually less than 5% abv). The legal minimum level of residual sugar is 450 g/L. This is balanced by very high acidity and the wines have an enormously concentrated flavour. They are able to mature and retain their freshness for a century or more.

**Modern style sweet wines** – These wines are usually made from grapes that have spent extended time on the vine and are often labelled as Late Harvest. Some may use botrytis-infected fruit. Where noble rot is present, these wines are produced by fermenting the botrytised grapes (the method used for wines such as Sauternes or TBA) rather than by the macerating process used for Tokaji Aszú. They may also be matured for less time than Aszú wines. These wines are typically labelled with the term Late Harvest.