

TRADITION AND INNOVATION IN THE TOKAJ REGION

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Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.

TS Eliot, 'Burnt Norton'

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Author's note: To avoid confusion, I have used the word 'Tokaj' to refer to the place and 'Tokaji' to refer to the wine produced in the region.

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Introduction

Tokaj-Hegyalja is one of the world's great historic wine regions. Over the centuries, this hilly area in north-east Hungary has been praised by writers, gourmets and assorted potentates: kings, emperors, popes, princes and tsars. Its wines have been regarded as a sign of wealth, a source of gold, a focus of nationalist sentiment, a diplomatic lever and a semi-miraculous curative. More recently, the region has provided a vivid illustration of the advantages and disadvantages of the privatisation process and of Hungary's attempts to adapt to the post-Communist world.

Historic wine regions are mythical places, and Tokaj is no exception. Winnowing fact from fiction is never easy in such circumstances. This makes it difficult to establish an historical blueprint for Tokaji (the wine). When was Furmint first planted in the region? Where were the best vineyards sited in the 17th century? When were the first aszú berries picked, and was it, as some claim, the result of war-delayed serendipity? Who introduced gönci barrels and why? And, most controversial of all, was traditional Tokaji deliberately oxidised or not? The first chapter of this study attempts to provide answers (necessarily tentative in some cases) to these questions.

The second chapter examines a much shorter and, as far as Tokaj is concerned, infelicitous chapter in the history of the region. The Communist era, which lasted from August 1947, when the Communists assumed power in a rigged ballot, to January 1989, when Hungary became the first country in the Eastern Bloc to agree to free elections, was not good for Tokaj, although some might argue that it gave peasants a greater say in the way their region was run.¹ This strange, even surreal period - a study in decline, if ever there was one - is considered from both a viticultural and an oenological point of view. Above all, this chapter seeks to answer a single question: did anything 'traditional' survive the depredations of a centralised command economy, and if so what?

The third chapter looks at the changes that have occurred in the Tokaj region since 1989, when the writer Hugh Johnson visited Hungary with the Danish-born oenologist Peter Vinding-Diers on a trip which resulted in the renaissance of Tokaji. It briefly describes the process by which many of the best Tokaj vineyards were sold to overseas investors such as GAN, AXA, GMF, Vega Sicilia and (as a partner in a joint venture) The Royal Tokaji Wine Company. It also considers the shock of the new: the impact that these outsiders have had upon the way Tokaji is made. Is the modern style (or rather styles since there are points of difference between the so-called modernisers) a betrayal of Tokaji's traditional precepts? Or is it, in some senses, a return to the way Tokaji was made before the Communist era? This chapter draws heavily on interviews with winemakers and tastings conducted during a study tour in October 2000 as well as on notes taken at a tutored seminar and tasting of aszú wines, organised by the Institute of Masters of Wine in December 2000.²

¹ Young, *Cold War and Détente, 1941-91*, p. 104

² A tutored seminar and tasting of the aszú wines of Tokaji, Hungary, 4 December 2000

In conclusion, this study attempts to predict what the future holds for Tokaj. Is there a place for dry wine styles? Is the region economically viable? Can Crown Estates of Hungary (the former Borkombinát) continue to perform its present function? And will the OBB (Wine Authorisation Board) take a more indulgent attitude towards modern styles in future? It argues that if tradition and innovation are uneasy bedfellows, the explanation lies, at least in part, in the region's incomplete understanding of its past.

1. Pre-Communist Tradition in Tokaj

a) The origins of Tokaji

The origins of Tokaji are unclear. No one knows when the first wines were made in the region, whether dry, medium or sweet. Phillips argues that the area was first planted in the early 1300s, while Johnson admits that 'the very early history of this singular region is little known'.³ Grapes could have been planted here by the Celts, the Greeks or the Romans, according to Johnson. Halász asserts that 'in all probability' the first vineyards were planted by indigenous Celts, but points to the part played by French settlers, who arrived in the mid-eleventh century, in the development of Tokaji.⁴

Equally uncertain is how Furmint, the best local variety, came to Tokaj-Hegyalja. Some say that the grape was brought to the region by Italian grape growers, invited to the district by King Béla IV after the devastation caused by the Tartar invasion in the 13th century.⁵ (The Italian connection goes further still. In 1358, King Louis the Great of Hungary received 30 barrels of 'raisined' wine from the island of Malvasia, which may have helped to create a taste for sweet wines at court.)⁶ Others say that Furmint may have originated from the Balkans or from Szerémség (in what is now Serbia), or may have been brought to the area by French-speaking Walloons.⁷

The date of the first aszú harvest of dried, naturally shrivelled grapes (sometimes but not always botrytis-affected) is a matter of conjecture too. One renowned cellar in Warsaw, assembled by the merchant house of Fukier, contained 328 bottles of 1606 Tokaji at the outbreak of World War II.⁸ This would appear to contradict the story of the serendipitous discovery of aszú wines. According to legend, the 1650 (or in some versions the 1647) harvest in the Oremus vineyard was interrupted by the threat of a Turkish invasion. The grapes were left on the vine and when pickers returned to the vineyards in November, the grapes had shrivelled and dried. The wines they produced, judiciously blended with wine from the previous vintage, were a revelation.

The first aszú wines may have been made at an even earlier date. Mate Szepesi Lackzó, chaplain to the noble Rákóczi family, was experimenting with Furmint (and aszú) at the turn of the seventeenth century.⁹ Given that he died in 1633, he could not have been alive (as legend would have it) for the 1650 vintage. More recently, the historian Itsván Zelanák has unearthed an inheritance document dated 15 May 1571, which mentions Tokaji aszú.¹⁰ Until the mid seventeenth century, the wines of Tokaj did not enjoy a particularly elevated reputation, even if Pope Pius IV had declared that 'Summum Pontificum talia vina decent' (The Supreme Pontiff prefers these special wines) at the Council of Trent in 1562. What were the wines that so impressed the

³ Phillips, *A Short History of Wine*, p. 85; Johnson, *The Story of Wine*, p. 246

⁴ Halász, *Hungarian wine through the ages*, p. 84

⁵ Gunyon, *The Wines of Central and South-Eastern Europe*, p.85

⁶ Howkins, *Tokaji*, p.5

⁷ Personal communication with Laszló Mészáros of Disznókő, 30 May 2001

⁸ Howkins, p. 3

⁹ Ibid, p.7

¹⁰ *Borborat Magazine*, Winter 2000, p.62

Supreme Pontiff? The most likely explanation is late harvest, or *szamorodni* (Polish for ‘as it comes’), styles.¹¹

In the Middle Ages, these wines were called *föbor* (literally, principal wine) and were clearly distinguished from other, probably dry, wines called *ordinarium*.¹² It is likely that these wines were made, as they are now, from shrivelled or botrytised bunches, or part bunches, picked in a single *tri* and fermented together. All the same, it is correct to say that the wines produced in the west and south of Hungary were far more famous than Tokaji at this time. This state of affairs did not last for long, however. Tokaji’s renown spread quickly, aided by the belief that it contained gold and, less fantastically, by royal and aristocratic patronage and the efforts of Polish and Greek merchants. Prince Ferenc Rákóczi II sent his beloved wines to Louis XIV and, in all probability, to Peter the Great, both of whom became great supporters of Tokaji wines. The latter even purchased vineyards in the area.¹³

b) The vineyard

The Tokaj vineyard, its soil types and meso-climate have changed very little since Prince Rákóczi’s day, although the extent of the area under vine has fluctuated over the centuries, owing to the various influences of fashion, phylloxera (1890), investment and state-owned production. The following facts are known: Tokaj is situated in the north-east of Hungary, 200 kilometres from Budapest in the southern foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. It lies close to the borders of Slovakia, Romania and the Ukraine and is located at 48° 15’ North and 21° 20’ East, roughly 1° North of Dijon and 30° South of the German Rhineland.¹⁴ It is a region of predominantly south and south-east facing slopes, dominated by the Tokaj hill (1372 feet) and abutting the Great Hungarian Plain. These slopes drain into the River Tisza and its warmer tributary, the River Bodrog. The Bodrog forms the region’s natural eastern boundary and is the main source of the mist that favours the development of *Botrytis cinerea*.

According to Gladstones, the average temperature in the hottest month (July) is 20.6°C, while annual rainfall is between 516 and 680mm.¹⁵ The summer and early autumn months tend to be warm and sunny, although there is a risk of thunderstorms. The harvest begins in late October and may continue, weather permitting, into mid-November or even later. The climate is Continental: dry and comparatively sunny. The region is sheltered by the Carpathian Mountains to the north and benefits from the warm air rising from the Great Plain. In the words of Halász, it is ‘one vast natural hothouse’.¹⁶ According to István Turoczi of The Royal Tokaji Wine Company, the average annual temperature is 6°C higher during the growing season than during the

¹¹ Personal communication with Laszlo Mészáros of Disznókő, 30 May 2001

¹² Ibid

¹³ Personal communication with Ben Howkins of The Royal Tokaji Wine Company, 15 September 2001

¹⁴ Due, ‘Technical Challenges in the Tokaj wine industry’, *The Australian Grapegrower & Winemaker*, September 1993, p.67

¹⁵ Gladstones, *Viticulture and Environment*, p.222

¹⁶ Halász, *Hungarian wine*, p.91

rest of the year. Similarly, there are 5.5 sunshine hours per day on average during the year, but 9.5 hours during the growing season.¹⁷

The soils of this volcanic region are varied, but the predominant types are clay, mixed with various minerals and rocks (rhyolite, tuffa and zeolite) and yellow loess (an accumulation of wind-blown sand).¹⁸ The latter are said to produce lighter, more aromatic wines, while the rockier, clay-based soils, with their high concentration of trace elements and heat retentiveness, produce denser, more concentrated wines that generally take longer to mature. The sandy soils are mainly to be found in the south-west of the region, especially in Mád and on and around the Tokaj hill, whereas the clay-based soils are mainly located in the north-east (around Tolcsva and Sárospatak), where the soils are much denser. They are harder to work, but also have better water retention. Different soil types contribute to vintage variation. 1999 was generally a better vintage than 2000 on the Tokaj hill because of heat stress, whereas the opposite was true in Sárospatak, owing to better water retention in a very hot, dry season.

The 1867 *Album of the Tokaj-Hegyalja*, published by the region's Vinicultural Society, distinguishes between three main soil types: red clay soils called Nyirok which retain water and form 'the best soils in the Hegyalja'; yellowish loess soil, 'inferior in goodness to the Nyirok'; and pumice tufa, a soil which is 'not retentive of water, and...causes the vine to perish from too great dryness, and also by a great frost'. The last, not unsurprisingly, was considered the 'least valuable' of the three.¹⁹

Tokaj's vineyards have been classified at various points in their history: 1641, 1700, 1770 and 1995. None of these classifications enjoys official status, but they do demonstrate that the region has always set great store by the differences between individual sites. The 1700 classification, which is the one used by The Royal Tokaji Wine Company, divided the vineyards into First, Second and Third Growths, 155 years before the classification of the Médoc. It identified 76 First Growths, of which two (Mézes Mály and Szarvas) were Great First Growths. Many of these vineyards remain highly prized to this day.

Historically, the best vineyards were on slopes. The *Album of the Tokaj-Hegyalja*, was adamant that: 'On the plain which extends in front of the mountains, only garden grapes thrive, from which no Ausbruch (aszú) can be obtained.' Szabó and Török go on to say that it is 'only the mountain slopes' which furnish aszú berries in 'sufficient quantity and quality. The lowest limit, beyond which no Ausbruch can be obtained, may be fixed at 400 feet above the level of the sea, and at 100 feet above that of the River Tisza, while the highest limit of the vineyards in general ascends to 1200 feet.'²⁰ Airflow, like a southern aspect, was felt to be of vital importance: 'the site must not be in a close (sic) valley, where a free and rapid change of air is impossible'. Vineyards that were held to possess all these qualities were Szarvas, Nagyszölő, Disnókő and Mézes Mály. Writing nearly a century earlier, in 1773, Douglass made a similar observation. 'The general rule,' he wrote in his *Account of the Tokay and*

¹⁷ Personal communication with István Turoczi, general manager, The Royal Tokaji Wine Company, 21 October 2000

¹⁸ Vinicultural Society of the Tokaj-Hegyalja, *Album of the Tokaj-Hegyalja*, p. 127

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.19

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 19

other wines of Hungary, is that ‘the exposures most inclining to the south, the steepest declivities, and the highest parts of those declivities, produce the best wine’.²¹

The varieties planted in Tokaj have changed over the centuries. According to Howkins, there were as many as 12 different grape varieties planted in the region in the sixteenth century, some, none or all of which may have yielded aszú berries.²² Neither Furmint nor Hárslevelü featured on a list in an account written by Balázs Szikszai Fabricius and quoted by Howkins, despite the fact that it had supposedly been brought from Italy in the thirteenth century. Howkins says that the main grape in those days was Porcins, of which nothing is known today.²³ Yellow Muscat, one of four permitted grape varieties in modern Tokaj, was not planted until the mid-nineteenth century at the earliest, by which time there were as many as 85 varieties in the region.²⁴

The arrival of phylloxera in 1890, and subsequent replanting following the devastation of the region’s vineyards, seems to have led to a period of ampelographical retrenchment. Local growers replanted only three grapes (Furmint, Hárslevelü and Muscat) on phylloxera-resistant *Riparia portalis* rootstocks. Still, by the time the Communists took over the country after World War II, the number of grape varieties had increased to more than 30 and included Góhér, Balafánt, Köverszölő and Mezesfehér, as well as a few red grapes.²⁵

The trellising systems employed in the past are a matter of conjecture, although bush vines are regarded as ‘traditional’ in the region. Tibor Kovács of Tokaj Hétszölő says that cordon systems were introduced after World War II, with a view to increasing production.²⁶ In his *Ampélographie Universelle* of 1859, Odart said that vines were trained close to the ground to protect them against winter frost and that the spurs were sometimes buried.²⁷

Late picking - performed, of necessity, by hand - has been a feature of Tokaji since the discovery of aszú. Douglass confirmed that the ‘vintage is always as late as possible...sometimes as late as St. Martin’s, November 11’. As a result, he continued, ‘when the vintage begins, a great many of the grapes are shrivelled, and have, in some measure, the appearance of dried raisins’.²⁸

c) The cellar

Writing in 1987, before the arrival of foreign investment and the creation of ‘modern’ Tokaji, Brook argued that, while the ‘process has been modified by technological developments, its essential characteristics...have scarcely altered in centuries’.²⁹ As will be demonstrated in a later chapter, he could not make a similar claim today.

²¹ Douglass, ‘An account of the Tokay and other wines of Hungary’, p.293

²² Howkins, *Tokaji*, p. 7

²³ *Ibid*, p.7

²⁴ Gunyon, *The Wines*, p. 85; personal communication with László Mészáros, 30 May 2001

²⁵ Interview with Tibor Kovács, general manager, Tokaj Hétszölő, 21 October 2000

²⁶ *Ibid*

²⁷ Cited by Due, ‘Technical Challenges’, p.73

²⁸ Douglass, ‘An account’, p.295

²⁹ Brook, *Liquid Gold*, p. 284

How was traditional Tokaji made? And, crucially, was it deliberately oxidised? David Bird MW, a quality assurance consultant for The Royal Tokaji Wine Company, believes that: ‘people claim all sorts of things, but the honest answer is that we don’t really know’. Bird’s educated guess is that the methods used were ‘much closer to what we do now than to what was done during the Communist period. People looked after the wines.’³⁰

One extant feature of the production process (used mainly, but not exclusively in Hungarian-owned cellars) is highly traditional: 136-litre gönci barrels. These distinctive casks were originally made by coopers in the village of Gönc to fit into the secret ‘rock holes’ cut into the mountains to protect the region’s wines from marauding soldiers, whether Poles, Hungarian separatists, Crusaders or Turks.³¹ They were used as a measure for aszú paste and to transport wine. Another traditional cask, called the szerednyei, which varied between 200 and 300 litres in size, was often used for ageing purposes.³²

The humidity and low temperatures in Tokaj’s single-vaulted cellars, coupled with the small size of the barrels they contain, have undoubtedly contributed to the character of Tokaji over the centuries. So too, according to at least one source, has the thick black mould (*Racodium cellare* and *Cladosporium cellare*) that grows on the walls in old wineries.³³

The essentials of the production process (late picking, the addition of varying quantities, or puttonyos, of aszú paste, ageing in gönci casks) are the same today as they were 200 years ago. Nevertheless, the traditional process, in so far as it can be determined, differed in several, significant ways. For example, aszú berries were ‘stamped by men’s feet’ rather than mechanically, as they are today.³⁴ Also, must was always blended with the aszú paste before fermentation, whereas today some producers use wine instead.³⁵

Another notable difference was the use of green stalks in the mixture of aszú paste and must. Gulyon says that the stalks, ‘still green and sappy’, were ‘crushed separately, added to the must and stirred in it for six hours to extract the juice from them’.³⁶ Due points out that this was done for a reason. ‘If Gulyon is correct,’ he writes, ‘then the modern wines would have less non-flavonoid phenolics and hence more protein than before; they would possibly be more prone to protein instability than formerly, and would be palatable sooner.’³⁷ He adds that modern Tokaji is ‘legally and actually saleable after three to six years in wood, whereas formerly it was not considered ready before six to ten years in wood’. (The legal minimum has since been reduced to two years in wood.)

Citing Viala’s book, *Ampélographie* (Masson, Paris, 1910), Due claims that, historically, Tokaji was generally more alcoholic (and therefore less sweet) than it is

³⁰ Interview with David Bird MW, 19 May 2001

³¹ Gulyon, *The Wines*, p. 90

³² Personal communication with László Mészáros, 30 May 2001

³³ Skelton, ‘Tokaj’, p.3

³⁴ *Album of the Tokaj-Hegyalja*, p.73

³⁵ Due, ‘Technical challenges’, p. 72

³⁶ Gulyon, *The Wines*, p.87

³⁷ Due, ‘Technical challenges’, p.72

today.³⁸ He says that wines of 17% alcohol by volume were not uncommon. In the past, wines were ranked according to pre-fermentation sugar levels, whereas today they are categorised by residual sugar levels at bottling. This meant that refermentation in cask did not lower a wine's puttonyos rating. Bird thinks that refermentation in cool cellars was 'part of the traditional process' and contributed complexity to the wines.³⁹

It is difficult to say with any certainty if the wines were deliberately oxidised in barrel. Douglass, writing in the late eighteenth century, says that at its best, aszú wine should have a colour which is neither 'reddish (which it often is), nor very pale, but a light silver'. In those days, Tokaji was generally shipped in cask, so reddish wines were presumably more common than light silver ones; the fact that the wine was prone to ferment 'three times every season when it is on the seas' and to 'refine itself by these repeated fermentations' may have prevented it from oxidising.⁴⁰ Szabó and Török also refer, somewhat obliquely, to refermentation. Tokaji wines, they say, do not 'form a definite, unalterable beverage, for they are in a perpetual state of development, and from time to time awake, as it were, to new life'.⁴¹ Refermentation, as we shall see, was deliberately prevented during the Communist period.

No one knows if barrels were topped in the pre-Communist past or not. It may well have been a decision left to the individual cellar master or winemaker. Due argues that, before the modernisers arrived, 'oxidative conditions' were encouraged by leaving the casks 'only two-thirds to four-fifths full and by occasional racking', but it is hard to determine if this was a traditional practice or one that was adopted after World War II out of neglect. The same goes for the Sherry-like film of yeast that used to form on the surface of the wine, giving Tokaji 'some similarities with the wines of Jura and Jerez'.⁴² Such a yeast would be regarded as anathema by most wineries in Tokaj today, except for certain dry Szamorodni styles.

Bird believes that pre- and post-Communist Tokaji have more in common than many people imagine.⁴³ The wines were almost certainly less stable, given the crude filtration equipment available at the time. (Heating could have been used, but may have produced cooked flavours.) Due wonders whether the 'apparently greater time the wines spent in wood' in the past may have contributed to 'protein stability and/or microbiological stability'.⁴⁴ Given the way that some old Tokaji have aged, this is a distinct possibility.⁴⁵

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Interview with David Bird MW, 19 May 2001

⁴⁰ Douglass, 'An account', p. 296

⁴¹ Album of the Tokaj-Hegyalja, p. 155

⁴² Due, 'Technical challenges', p. 72

⁴³ Interview with David Bird MW, 19 May 2001

⁴⁴ Due, 'Technical challenges', p. 72

⁴⁵ As evidenced by a tasting put on for the author at Crown Estates Museum Cellars, 20 October 2000

2. The Communist era

The period between 1947 and 1989 was a difficult one for Tokaj, marked by indifference, lack of investment and neglect. From 1948 onwards, following the nationalisation of the region's vineyards and producers, Tokaj was run by the State. The State monopoly went through a number of different incarnations between 1948 and 1989, but its role was essentially unchanged: to be responsible, in the words of a Crown Estates' press release, for the region's 'grape and wine production, viticulture and viniculture research and wine trade'.⁴⁶

Responsibility is one thing; fulfilling it something else. For all that, there are contrasting views of what happened under the Communist regime in Tokaj. Most commentators argue that the period represented 40 lost years for Tokaj. Massingham's (factually incorrect) arguments are typical of the prevailing view in the West. 'When buying Tokaji, those in the know steer clear of the high yield wines made by the Borkombinát from 1950 to 1988. They go for the low yield wines made by private companies from 1990 onwards.'⁴⁷

The idea that nothing good was produced under the Communists - and that they alone were responsible for a precipitous decline in the region's fortunes - is a caricature. Many factors contributed to that decline, some of which had nothing to do with the Communists. These included the demise of the Hapsburg Empire, the replanting which took place on lower, inferior slopes close to the Great Plain after phylloxera and the Nazis' deportation and extermination of many of the Hungarian Jewish merchants who had been the region's commercial driving force.⁴⁸

Rafael Alonso of Oremus argues that the Communist era can be divided into two distinct periods in Tokaj: 1947-1970 and 1970-1989.⁴⁹ The real decline, in his view, began in the 1970s, when yields increased to as much as ten tons per hectare and planting density dropped from the traditional 10,000 vines per hectare to a less labour-intensive 2,700 vines per hectare, which could accommodate the large tractors allocated to State farms.⁵⁰ István Szepsy, who was technical director of the co-operative in Mád for 17 years, confirms that yields were often as high as 80 hectolitres per hectare (compared with 2.5 hl/ha for his sweet wines and 7hl/ha for his dry wines today) and that he was told to promote quantity over quality by the State.⁵¹

It may be significant that the Borkombinát was formed in 1972. Until then, on the ground production remained in the hands of a series of local co-operatives. When these began to have problems, the government nationalised production. Viticulture remained fragmented in the 1970s and 1980s, much as it is today, but the Borkombinát oversaw vinification, maturation and bottling.

This, more than anything, is what promoted a laissez-faire attitude in Tokaj. 'The new generation lost their sense of responsibility to the past and started to work in a

⁴⁶ Crown Estates and the historical development of the Tokaj region, Pol Roger UK

⁴⁷ *Drinks International*, December 2000, p.25

⁴⁸ Schildnecht, 'Today's Tokaj', *Stephen Tanzer's International Wine Cellar*, p. 35

⁴⁹ Interview with Rafael Alonso, export director, Vega Sicilia, 4 December 2000

⁵⁰ Interview with András Egyedi, director, Tokaj Renaissance, 21 October 2000

⁵¹ Interview with István Szepsy, co-owner, Királyudvar, 20 October 2000

different way,' comments Alonso.⁵² With a ready-made (and captive) market of 300 million people in the Eastern Bloc, Tokaj's sole producer did not have to try very hard to sell its wines. Ninety per cent of what it produced was exported to the Soviet Union, mostly in exchange for natural gas and oil.⁵³

Two deleterious cellar techniques were adopted under the Communists. The first was pasteurisation, the second the addition of neutral alcohol to promote microbiological stability and to prevent refermentation in barrel. Thomas Laszlo of Châteaux Pajzos and Megyer says that both practices were widely used. 'It helped that the State was also a major distiller,' he says. 'The best wines weren't made like that, but alcohol was regarded as a substitute for sulphur dioxide. The wines were oxidised to start with, so as soon as you added sulphur dioxide, the aldehydes in the wine ate it. Adding alcohol stopped the wine from re-fermenting, but it fundamentally altered the balance of the wines as they aged.'⁵⁴

Brook has argued that adding alcohol 'had been permitted since the post-phylloxera replantings', but was 'exaggerated by the State Farm technicians'.⁵⁵ Mészáros confirms this, but Conibear takes a different view. She points out that most of the wines produced in the 1970s and 1980s have between 11 and 13% alcohol by volume. 'If alcohol was added as a matter of course,' she says, 'then alcohol levels would be higher, surely?'⁵⁶

Pasteurisation was deployed for a similar reason. It was sometimes used as many as four or five times during maturation, usually with 'simple equipment, rarely made from stainless steel'.⁵⁷ Due is convinced that this changed the flavour of the resulting wines as well as 'contributing' hydroxymethylfurfural. High concentrations of hydroxymethylfurfural led visiting American academics to the conclusion that the wines were made from concentrate.⁵⁸ This may well have been the case, according to Brook.⁵⁹

In other words, control and stability were more important than quality. In a sinister parallel with what was happening in Hungary at large, Tokaji was in danger of becoming a homogenised product, made for the undemanding tastes of the Soviet Union. Against all the odds some good and excellent wines were made during the Communist period, however. 1968, 1972, 1975 and 1988 were all great vintages and yielded a handful of superb wines. Indeed, on 15 November 2000 Sotheby's in London held an auction of historic Tokaji, which included wines from the Communist period, although, significantly, only one lot (the 1972 3 Puttonyos) was produced after 1970.

Two tastings of wines from the former Borkombinát, in November 1999 and October 2000, proved, at least to the author of the present study, that Communism did not

⁵² Interview with Rafael Alonso, export director, Vega Sicilia, 4 December 2000

⁵³ Howkins, *Tokaj*, p.17

⁵⁴ Interview with Thomas Laszlo, winemaker, Château Megyer and Pajzos, 20 October 2000

⁵⁵ Brook, 'Style wars in Tokaj', *Decanter*, March 2001, p.54

⁵⁶ Personal communication with László Mészáros, 30 May 2001; personal communication with Helena Conibear, UK representative, Crown Estates, 29 May 2001.

⁵⁷ Due, 'Technical challenges', p.72

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p.73

⁵⁹ Brook, 'Style wars', p. 52

entirely wipe out the desire to make good wines. Thanks to the influence of András Bacsó, who had handled the privatisation process on behalf of the State before joining Oremus, the Spanish-owned company was able to secure good quantities of some of the best old wines. The problem, given the fact that the Borkombinát was made up of a number of individual co-operatives, was one of inconsistency. If great wines were made, it was as much by accident as design. 'Quality depended on individual winemakers,' says Miklós Soltész, cellar master at Crown Estates, 'and we were all hampered by the fact that we had to produce big-volume wines for the Soviet Union.'⁶⁰

It is also true that, as Robinson writes, 'a surprising number of individual growers and winemakers continued to uphold traditions'.⁶¹ István Szepsy is the most famous example. The region's best producer continued to make wine, in secret, for himself. He sold 99 per cent of his grapes to the Mád co-operative and kept the rest for his own use, producing a series of clandestine wines in his garage.⁶² It was these wines that Hugh Johnson and Peter Vinding-Diers tasted when they visited the region in 1989 - a tasting which was to lead to the renaissance of Tokaji in the late twentieth century.

⁶⁰ Interview with Miklós Soltész, cellar master, Crown Estates, 21 October 2000

⁶¹ Robinson, *The Oxford Companion to Wine*, p.705

⁶² Interview with István Szepsy, co-owner and winemaker, Királyudvar, 20 October 2000

3. Modern Tokaji

a) The vineyard

The Tokaj region today consists of roughly 5,500 hectares of vineyards spread out between 28 named villages. The figure is an approximation, because nobody knows exactly how many grape growers, or vineyards, there are in Tokaj. The picture is clouded by the fact that, in some families, vineyards are registered under the names of one or more members. One intelligent estimate puts the number of growers at between 3,000 and 4,000, but it may be as high as 15,000.⁶³

Such fragmentation has important social, political and economic ramifications. Like Rioja and Champagne, both wine regions where small growers control most of the vineyards, Tokaj is constrained by the quality, availability and price of its supply base. Local growers or the State-owned Crown Estates own 92% of the region's vineyards.

This leaves only 8% in the hands of the foreign, or foreign-backed, companies that have done so much to revive Tokaj's fortunes.⁶⁴ The last decade has seen the creation (or, in some cases resurrection, since several of the estates existed long before World War II) of The Royal Tokaji Wine Company, Oremus (owned by Vega Sicilia), Disznókő (owned by AXA Millésimes), Châteaux Pajzos and Megyer (owned by Jean-Louis Laborde of Château Clinet), Hétszölő (owned by Grands Millésimes de France/Suntory), Királyudvar (owned by New York businessman, Anthony E Hwang, in a joint venture with István Szepsy), Bodrog Varhegy (owned by the d'Aulan family, former owners of Champagne Piper-Heidsieck) and Gróf Degenfeld (owned by a German industrialist).

Those 8% might seem insignificant but they represent the cream of the region's vineyards. When the Hungarian State part-privatised the vineyards of the Tokaj Trading House (now Crown Estates) in the early 1990s, most of the best parcels were sold to outsiders, although in most cases the State retained a 25% stake in the new companies. Crown Estates, for its part, still owns 80 hectares of vines, including the legendary Szarvas vineyard. Otherwise, nearly all of the foreign-backed wineries (Hétszölő is the exception) buy grapes of some sort from local growers. Nearly all of them would like to buy more vineyards, but since 1994 non-Hungarians have not been allowed to purchase land in the region.⁶⁵ Corporate entities, of whatever nationality, cannot buy vineyard land at present.⁶⁶

There are four permitted varieties in Tokaj today. These are Furmint (70% of the area under vine), Hárslevelü, 'Yellow' Muscat (à Petits Grains) and Zéta or Oremus, a crossing of Furmint and Bouvier. Of these, Furmint is by far the most important for the production of aszú wines. Its high levels of tartaric acid help to balance the residual sugar in the wines and contribute to their proven longevity. Hárslevelü is less prone to botrytis, but is valued for its perfume as well as for making dry table wines.

⁶³ Interview with András Egyedi, director, Tokaj Renaissance, 21 October 2000

⁶⁴ Interview with Laszlo Mészáros, 20 October 2000

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Personal communication with Laszlo Mészáros, 30 May 2001

The other two varieties are planted in small quantities (less than 5% of Muscat and less than 1% of Oremus) and, in most cases, are used as so-called ‘seasoning grapes’.⁶⁷ It is also possible to find patches of other grapes: a little Chardonnay at Château Megyer, some Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling and Gewürztraminer at Crown Estates and, at Hétszölő and Oremus, a few rows of Köverszölő, a pre-phylloxera grape that has been authorised for experimental purposes since the spring of 2000.⁶⁸

These grapes are trained in a number of different ways. As has already been discussed, the traditional trellising method is bush vines, often held upright by a single stake. This remains the case, but modern plantings (since 1992) have tended to favour a vertical *cordon de royat* system to favour the circulation of air and reduce the risk of disease in the vineyard.⁶⁹ Oidium is a ‘serious problem’, which is especially bad where ‘canopies are dense’.⁷⁰ Some locals argue that training the vines close to the ground helps to promote (desirable) botrytis infection. There are also many vineyards with Geneva Double Curtain or Lenz Moser trellising systems, both of which were employed to increase yields in the 1970s.

Planting densities are similarly diverse. Some vineyards, as already noted, were created with Soviet tractors rather than grape quality in mind. Plantings made under the Borkombinát commonly had a space of four metres between rows, giving a plant density of 2,500 per hectare or less. Traditionally, there were 10,000 or more vines to the hectare, a figure that is higher than most modern plantings. At a Master of Wine Institute seminar on Tokaji held in London in December 2000, figures discussed ranged between 5,000 (Oremus) to 7,500 (Royal Tokaji Wine Company). For the time being, however, planting distances, and therefore densities, are highly variable, although increasingly the modern norm is 5,000 vines per hectare.⁷¹

The same is true of clonal selection, which is in its infancy in Tokaj - and indeed of research in general. According to Kovács, there was a Research Station in the region before the Second World War, but ‘in the 1970s, the Borkombinát took over and slowly stopped doing any research’.⁷² He believes that massal selection is the best long-term solution for Tokaj, but accepts that it will take some time before the high-yielding clones planted under State control can be replaced.

For the time being, research (both viticultural and oenological) is carried out by individual companies, such as Disznókő, where winemaker Stéphanie Beresz is currently evaluating different vineyard parcels, a variety of maceration techniques and oak barrels from three different sources: France, Hungary and the United States. She argues that experimentation, and experience, are the key to quality. ‘Our 1999s were better than our 1993s, because we understand our grapes better.’⁷³

Tokaj’s vineyards are covered by Hungary’s 1997 Wine Law, which was based on existing legislation in other European countries. The rules are reasonably strict, but

⁶⁷ Interview with Ben Howkins, marketing director, The Royal Tokaji Wine Company, 20 February 2001

⁶⁸ Interview with Tibor Kovács, 21 October 2000

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ Due, ‘Technical challenges’, p. 68

⁷¹ A tutored seminar and tasting of the aszú wines of Tokaji, Hungary, 4 December 2000

⁷² Interview with Tibor Kovács, 21 October 2000

⁷³ Interview with Stéphanie Beresz, winemaker, Disznókő, 21 October 2000

they are not always rigorously applied. The Government's Wine Control Institute has a regional inspector, but the feeling among several leading producers is that more could be done to rid the region of the spectre of illegally blended vintages and spurious vineyard designations. 'Who checks yields?' is the rhetorical question of Thomas Laszlo. 'Who checks which vineyards grapes come from?'⁷⁴ With the growing fashion for vineyard designation, and the correspondingly higher prices, the question may become more pressing in future. For the time being there is no official classification of Tokaj's vineyards and no one willing to create (and police) one.

Perhaps this is a job for Tokaj Renaissance, a grouping of most of the best producers, formed in March 1995 to restore 'the noble image of one of the most prestigious wines in the world'. The association demands that its members adhere to a strict code of conduct, including respect for vineyard origin and authenticity. 'We have to find a way of regulating diversity,' says András Egyedi. 'Before 1990, things were a lot simpler, because there was only one producer in the region.'⁷⁵

b) The cellar

The years since 1990 have witnessed even greater changes in the cellars and wineries of Tokaj. The fundamental principles of Tokaji production may be unaltered, but the way most Tokaji is made today has little in common with the techniques that obtained under the Communists. Opinions differ as to whether these 'modern' techniques are part of an 'historic revival style', in the words of Christian Seely, managing director of AXA Millésimes, or something entirely new.⁷⁶

There is currently a great deal of debate about tradition and innovation in Tokaj, none of it clear cut. Tradition itself is an amorphous concept and so, in a way, is innovation. If nobody knows if pre-Communist Tokaji was deliberately oxidised, then how can traditionalists dismiss reductive styles as atypical? This debate has caused at least one scandal in Hungary. In 1999, the Budapest-based Országos Borbíráló Bizottság (Wine Authorisation Board) refused to recognise three wines from Hétszölő (a 6 Puttonyos from the 1995 vintage and a 5 and a 6 Puttonyos from 1996) as Tokaji. The wines were rejected seven times on the grounds that they were atypical. It was not until December of that year, following coverage in the international press, that the OBB relented.

The main difference between modernisers and traditionalists concerns their attitude to oxidation. The former group, which includes Hétszölő, Oremus, Disznókő and Châteaux Pajzos and Megyer, favours reductive handling (with a degree of controlled oxygenation in French or Hungarian barrels), while the latter, which includes Crown Estates, the Henkel-owned Hungarovin and other small producers, favours more oxidative techniques, with longer ageing in Hungarian barrels and little or no topping as a rule. 'As a rule', because it is extremely difficult to make generalisations in Tokaj. Even Crown Estates has started to top its barrels, according to Helena Conibear.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Interview with Thomas Laszlo, 20 October 2000

⁷⁵ Interview with András Egyedi, 21 October 2000

⁷⁶ Decanter Masterclass, London, 5 October 2000

⁷⁷ Personal communication with Helena Conibear, 29 May 2000

The table below provides an indication of the differences between the main wineries, drawn from interviews in Tokaj in October 2000. It shows that there is significant variation between one ‘modern’ style and another, as well as between ‘traditional’ Tokaji wines.

	Ferment in stainless steel	Ferment in wood	Use must to ferment aszú	Use base wine to ferment aszú	Use French oak	Use Hungarian Oak	New oak or old oak	Modern or oxidative style	Buy grapes or own vineyards
Disznókő	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Both	Modern	Both. Buy aszú Only
Oremus	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	New	Modern	Both. Buy aszú only
Royal Tokaji	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Old	Modern/oxidative crossover	Buy aszú only. Lease vineyards
Szepsy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Both	Modern and oxidative	Own vineyards
Hétszölő	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Old	Modern	Own vineyards
Crown Estates	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Old	Oxidative	Both
Pajzos/Megyer	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Both	Modern	Both

There are a number of possible areas of divergence. Does a winery macerate its aszú berries in wine (some of which, until the practice was outlawed in 1997, could have been from a previous vintage), fermenting wine or must? How much sulphur dioxide does it add and when? Does it ferment in stainless steel, oak or a combination of the two? Is that oak French or Hungarian, new or old, or a combination of the two?

What the table clearly demonstrates is that there are as many ways to make Tokaji as there are producers. As Schildknecht observed after a visit to the region in 1999: ‘Today, the simultaneous rethinking of tradition and the employment of tools and methods new to the region seem to have led each winemaker and each proprietor to his or her own interpretation of the classic categories. As a result, I often had the feeling of tasting in different wine regions, when in fact I was merely hopping from cellar to cellar.’⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Schildknecht, ‘Today’s Tokaji’, p. 35

Even single producers adopt different techniques depending on vintage conditions and the desired style of wine. At Disznókő, for example, Mészáros and his team use both types of maceration. ‘We use both techniques and they give us different wines. We taste the aszú berries before we decide how long to macerate and which technique to employ,’ he says. Mészáros generally prefers to use must because it gives better extraction. But if his aszú berries have a high percentage of botrytis (as opposed to shrivelling), he uses base wine for fermentation to minimise the risk of ‘a mouldy taste’ in the finished wine. It is possible to make a further distinction. If Disznókő uses must for the maceration, it is fermenting must, whereas Hétszölő uses must *tout court*.⁷⁹

The point to remember is that Tokaji, like any other wine, is not made to a recipe. As Szepsy comments: ‘It would be a shame to make Tokaji in only one way. After 40 years when we couldn’t experiment, I want to try new things.’ True to his word, Szepsy makes both traditional and, under his Cuvée label, modern-style wines. He argues that tradition is as much a question of degree as style. ‘If you age your wine in wood, it is traditional in one sense, but it will be more or less oxidised depending on how much sulphur dioxide you use.’⁸⁰

Even for his traditional wines, however, Szepsy is moving towards a fresher style based on 24 rather than 40 months in oak and the addition of more sulphur dioxide at bottling. He believes that the ‘less oxidised style ages better in bottle’. This reflects the changes in the 1997 Hungarian Wine Law, which reduced the statutory ageing period to two years in barrel and one in bottle, irrespective of the number of puttonyos.

c) Late Harvest wines

Szepsy is at the centre of a controversy in Tokaj at the moment, concerning the production of late harvest (Késői szüret) wines. Instead of making and selling these wines as lesser szamarodni, Szepsy uses some of his best aszú grapes to make a premium late harvest style. Howkins and Johnson have been openly critical of these wines, arguing at a Masters of Wine seminar and tasting that they are ‘untraditional’ and that, as the leading producer in the region, Szepsy should set a better example.⁸¹

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the matter, Howkins and Johnson appear to be swimming against the commercial tide. Most of the foreign-owned companies have begun to follow Szepsy’s lead. The reasons for this are simple. First, szamarodni has a poor image in Hungary and elsewhere, as millions of bottles were sold under this devalued appellation during the Communist era. Second, szamarodni has to be aged for two years in barrel and bottle, and must be tasted, pre-release, by the OBB. The rules for late harvest wines are much less restrictive. There is no minimum ageing period and the wines can be sold without the approbation of the OBB. ‘It is a pity that we might lose or degrade an historic appellation,’ comments Mészáros, ‘but late harvest is a well-known term worldwide and it gives us the possibility to make fruity, elegant wines that can be sold after one year, with or without barrel ageing.’⁸²

⁷⁹ Interview with Laszló Mészáros, 20 October 2000

⁸⁰ Interview with István Szepsy, 20 October 2000

⁸¹ A tutored seminar and tasting of the aszú wines of Tokaji, Hungary, 4 December 2000

⁸² Personal communication with Laszló Mészáros, 30 May 2001

d) Dry wines

The grapes that are not picked as aszú berries are used for base wines (or must) or bottled as dry or medium dry styles in Tokaj. According to Elizabeth Farkás of Crown Estates, the percentage of dry wines produced in the region varies from '20-30% in a good year, to 85% in a bad one'.⁸³ The problem with this state of affairs is that dry Furmint, or Hárslevelü, is not easy to sell, especially if it is badly made with little or no fruit and a degree of oxidation. No wonder Angela Muir MW has referred to them as the 'Cinderellas of Tokaj'.⁸⁴

As the foreign-backed companies are only really interested in buying aszú berries (Royal Tokaji and Oremus purchase nothing but), the region's growers are in a precarious economic position. According to Helena Conibear of Crown Estates, 1999 was the 'first profitable year for growers since 1993'.⁸⁵ Crown Estates, sometimes under pressure from local politicians, acts as an enormous receiving bin for these grapes, irrespective of any potential market for the wines.

Several of the modern-style companies make acceptable dry wines, among them Oremus, Disznókő, Hétszölő and Châteaux Megyer and Pajzos. They do so out of necessity, although improvements in vineyard techniques may help them to produce a higher percentage of aszú to non-aszú grapes in future. The company that has the largest quantity of dry wines to sell, however, is Crown Estates, mainly because of its social and economic responsibility to 2,800 local growers. This may explain why it has enlisted Muir's services to produce dry white wines under the Castle Island brand.

This particular piece of innovation could save the region's growers from ruin, particularly as, in Muir's words, the 'stuff was stacking up like planes over Heathrow'. Of her first vintage, Muir was positive, but essentially realistic. 'We tried to put a blend together and eliminate the more phenolic vats, and we looked at the fining. They were surprised at what they could do with the wines they had. They're in bottle now and the bottling process hasn't done them the power of good. If you drank them you wouldn't die, but in a supermarket my hand would not hover over them.'⁸⁶

e) The economy of Tokaj

The biggest handicap facing Tokaj is the infrequency of good aszú years. This stands at roughly three per decade in Tokaj, with 1993, 1995 and 1999 the pick of the 1990s, although 2000 may well surpass them all. Growing grapes can be a profitable business in such vintages, when aszú berries are in demand, but in poor or average vintages such as 1998, 1997 and 1996, viticulture is a breadline occupation for the region's smallholders. As Tibor Kovács comments: 'It's aszú wines that deliver profits. Dry Furmint is essentially a sub-product of aszú.'⁸⁷

⁸³ Interview with Elizabeth Farkás, export director, Crown Estates, 20 October 2000

⁸⁴ Speech at the Hungarian Embassy, 21 September 2000

⁸⁵ Personal communication with Helena Conibear, 16 October 2000

⁸⁶ 'Lateral Thinker', *Harpers*, 3 November 2000, p. 29

⁸⁷ Interview with Tibor Kovács, 21 October 2000

This raises serious questions about the medium- and long-term viability of the region in its current form. For the time being, the state-owned Crown Estates has a social, political and even moral obligation to buy grapes that have no ready market in the West, despite the best efforts of Angela Muir MW. Ben Howkins of The Royal Tokaj Wine Company expresses the problem succinctly: ‘The last thing people want is a dry white wine of fairly questionable quality. They want good red wine from Hungary, but that’s another issue. But as things stand, Tokaj has to make dry white wines. They don’t make sense from an economic point of view, but they do from a political one.’⁸⁸

The 2000 vintage, widely regarded as one of the best of the post-War period, may mark a change in fortune for Tokaj’s dry wines, but it seems more likely that the region will have to reduce the size of its plantings over the next decade or two and accept the social and political consequences, just as the Casa do Douro has had to do in Portugal. The other possibility is that, Hungarian law permitting, companies that can afford to take a more indulgent view of vintage variation (and the irregularity of aszú harvests) will acquire the unprofitable vineyards of small growers.

As things stand, the wines in demand are aszú wines, although Jasper Morris MW, the UK importer or Oremus, says that there is a market for dry styles in Hungary, as well as in Poland and Russia.⁸⁹ In common with other commentators, Morris believes that better viticulture (especially lower yields, more severe pruning and denser plantings) would increase the percentage of shrivelled or botrytis-affected grapes, enabling producers to make aszú wines more often. Even if that happens, there are some vineyards that will rarely, if ever, produce aszú berries.

The market for aszú wines is still comparatively small. Accurate figures do not exist, but Howkins estimates that worldwide sales amount to the equivalent of 50,000 nine litre cases.⁹⁰ The major markets are in the UK, the United States and, to a lesser extent, Canada, Norway, Sweden and Finland. Oremus also has a strong local market in Spain, thanks to its association with Vega Sicilia.

Assuming the region could make more aszú wines, how could it increase sales? Simplifying the range of styles is one possibility. Morris believes that Tokaj should put its energies into producing and marketing 5 Puttonyos wines. ‘Three and 4 Puttonyos styles aren’t sweet enough and anything above 5 Puttonyos is hugely sweet and hugely expensive. They should try to make 5 Puttonyos every year and then see what the vintage gives them, a bit like growers do in Vouvray.’⁹¹

Both Howkins and Morris say that the on-trade is the best place to sell Tokaji, particularly by the glass. Fine wine merchants such as Berry Brothers & Rudd have also had a certain amount of success with Tokaji, but the quantities involved are still small. It could be argued that an inexpensive Tokaji released recently by the Hilltop winery (retailing in the UK at £9.99) is bringing the region’s wines to a wider audience. But Howkins believes that its effect will be negative. ‘The wine does not

⁸⁸ Personal communication with Ben Howkins, 15 September 2001

⁸⁹ Personal communication with Jasper Morris MW, 16 September 2001

⁹⁰ Personal communication with Ben Howkins, 15 September 2001

⁹¹ Personal communication with Jasper Morris MW, 16 September 2001

have a quality seal, Hilltop own no vineyards in the area and the wine is sub-standard. It's legally Tokaji, but it's not good for the region's image.'⁹²

The next decade will be crucial for the region's economy. What is clear is that change is inevitable and arguably essential if Tokaj is to prosper. This will almost certainly involve the uprooting of some vineyards and the sale of others to foreign-backed or Hungarian wineries. The Hungarian government may lack the political courage to take such a tough decision, but demographics and social change may eventually take it for them. 'Most grape growers are rather old,' says András Egyedi, 'and their children don't generally want to go on farming. So there will be a natural shift in ownership. It's happening, but it's not happening fast enough.'⁹³

⁹² Personal communication with Ben Howkins, 15 September 2001

⁹³ Interview with András Egyedi, 21 October 2000

4. Conclusion

No one could deny that Tokaj has been through a period of enormous, even revolutionary change in the last decade. A region that had been in slow decline for over 40 years (and longer in the view of some) has been transformed by foreign investment and by the passion of such Hungarians as István Szespy, András Bacsó and Tibor Kovács, whose talents were suppressed or under-utilised by the old regime.

There are still some people who argue that the more extreme examples of new-style Tokaji, fermented in Sauternes barrels and produced in a reductive style, are ‘untraditional’. The representatives of the OBB, several of them former Communist functionaries, appear to be opposed to most of what has happened in the region since 1990. The country’s leading wine critic, Gábor Rohály, is a little more accepting, but only a little. ‘Although these wines are more rich in aroma and fragrance than the traditional ones, they miss the typical “Tokaji bouquet”.’⁹⁴

The writer of this thesis takes a different view. Namely, that no one really knows what a ‘typical Tokaji bouquet’ is, or was. As István Turoczi of The Royal Tokaji Wine Company argues: ‘Who knows what tradition means? There are so many ways to make aszú wines written down in texts.’⁹⁵ It is unlikely that anyone used Sauternes barrels in the nineteenth century, or had access to sophisticated temperature control, but the modernisers still have a point when they argue that their wines are part of an ‘historic revival’. Philosophically and even oenologically, they are much closer to the winemakers of the last century than to those who laboured under the Communists.

Tokaji is a legendary wine with a great history. But that does not mean that its present and future should be fossilised. Like any wine region, Tokaj should adapt to prevailing tastes, combining traditional techniques with modern technology to produce something that is true to the past, but continues to build on and embellish it. As Mészáros puts it: ‘We are still feeling our way in Tokaj. We are proud to honour the traditions of the past. But you have to ask yourself which past you are talking about? After all, the traditions of the 1960s and 1970s were not so interesting. With the advantages of modern technology on our side, we’re also trying out new things to improve the quality of our wines. That, above all, is our aim.’⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Rohály’s 2000 *Hungarian Wine Guide*, p. 173

⁹⁵ Interview with István Turoczi, 21 October 2000

⁹⁶ Interview with Laszlo Mészáros, 20 October 2000

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