



Europe's largest lake, Lake Balaton, is home to some of Hungary's most interesting wines and terroirs. Anton Moiseenko pays a visit.

When it comes to soil, the wine region located around the biggest lake in Europe is a mix of two worlds — volcanic and sedimentary marine soils. The grapes that grow here are predominantly white and the regional styles largely a work in progress: winemakers around Lake Balaton are seeking to find their identity on the world wine map.

Lake Balaton is a one-and-a-half hour drive from Budapest. The region, which a few million years ago was covered by a great Pannonian Sea, now boasts a shallow water area that stretches over 70km, which reflects light into the nearby rows of vines. Balaton is a traditional destination for Hungarians looking for a summer escape — a period that can be short, but hot.

Long history

Vineyards have been a familiar sight in the region since the Romans, but life hasn't always

been easy for winemakers. The Austrians made wine here during the Austro-Hungarian Empire, only for the region to be hit by phylloxera in the 1870s. The Empire collapsed after World War I, then came World War II and, after that, Soviet hegemony and land deprivation. The state-run farms so familiar to those in Soviet Russia were set up throughout Hungary. While some families could produce wine for themselves, most grapes were used for standardised, dull wines meant for mass consumption. Vineyards were planted for machine harvesting and quantity production. "You wouldn't want to taste those wines," as István Jásdi, a north Balaton winemaker, puts it.

Balaton's vineyards fall naturally into two large areas, on the northern and the southern sides. The first sub-zone that visitors from Budapest will reach is Balatonfüred-Csopak, then Balaton-Felvidék and, finally, Badacsony on the northern shore, which is full of old and inactive volcanoes. Around the western side of the lake there's another, little-known

subregion called Zala. On the southern shore, the appellation's name is Balatonboglár. There is another Balaton region — Nagy-Somló — on the northern side. It is the only wine area that doesn't offer views of the lake, as it lies some 40km away.

Visitors may find the language confusing when choosing local wines or talking to the winemakers. Fortunately, it's not hard to get used to: pincészet or borászat instead of "winery" or "cellar"; birtok for "estate"; bor instead of "wine". Szőlőbirtok is "vineyard". Hungarian wine appellations are often referred to as OFJs and OEMs, which are the equivalent of the EU's PGIs and PDOs.

As for the wines themselves, local winemakers say that, pre-phylloxera, the red grape Kadarka was as important as Furmint, the white grape. Kadarka gives a light, spicy wine, as long as it's not over-extracted, and it is recapturing attention with winemakers. Not only that, but there is substantial local demand. Both Kadarka and Furmint can be

a challenge for vignerons, as the proximity of the lake encourages botrytis growth on the Furmint — which is good for producing sweet wines, but not so good for the dry styles sought by many Balaton winemakers, who see it as a better expression of terroir.

But while winemakers may be going back to their roots, it's not so easy to know how the area's wines tasted before phylloxera. Winemakers believe they were heavier, more alcoholic and oaky. Today, Balaton's top wineries are very experimental, with bold blends of local and international varieties being key features of white winemaking. Varietal wines are also on the rise, as are wines from single vineyards, ageing on lees, wild fermentation, alcohol control and less oak all on the menu. Balaton's winemakers are going organic, too, and there are a few biodynamic producers, although these wines are mostly for export.

Modern focus

Today's Balaton appellations are particularly known for the white grape Welschriesling (Italian Riesling), known here as Olaszrizling. Most wineries offer several versions of these striking whites; Olaszrizling is also used as a base for many of the entry-level wines producing by the big wineries on the southern shore. As with many varieties, this grape can be turned into a simple, aromatic wine destined for supermarket shelves. There is now also a local initiative that aims to raise the profile of Olaszrizling and to market it as a regional brand. Created by three separate associations, the brand is called BalatonBor and the wines that use it are 100 percent Olaszrizling. There is a second-tier community wine called Hegybor — "hill wine" — whose grapes must come from a historic winemaking hill. Not all producers participate in these initiatives, preferring to save grapes for their better wines.

The terroir seekers from the eight wineries around the village of Csopak in the north decided to create an appellation called the Csopaki Kódex, which is a strict origin protection system. In order to get the Csopaki Kódex seal, the wines have to be submitted to an annual blind tasting. Some of the wines are very far indeed from being commercial products; Tamás Kovács of the Szent Donat



winery uses only indigenous yeast, with no oak and no filtration and longer than usual skin contact. He and other winemakers often blend Olaszrizling with Furmint to give it brighter acidity during hot vintages.

There are also other local varieties for which Balaton appellations are well known — among the locals, at least. The rare white Kéknyelű, which produces full-bodied, smoky wines, shines in Badacsony in particular but is also found in other sub-zones. Bottlings of the spicy white Juhfark — which means "sheep's tail", for the grape's cylindrical cluster — are found in Somló and Káli. Winemakers either vinify these grapes as specialties or bottle cheaper versions for easy-drinking in the summer period when tourists flood the area. It's the elevation and the climate that can make these wines stand out.

There are also plenty of international varieties to be found that were widely planted after phylloxera. Given the strong historic connection to Germany and Austria, it's not surprising to find Riesling among them. Some Balaton wineries, such as Sandahl, are Riesling specialists, while others



see Rajnai Rizling — as it's called locally, to distinguish it from the unrelated Olaszrizling — as an essential part of their production. Riesling does well, or not, depending on where it's planted. While the dead volcano of Badacsony offers breathtaking views of Balaton's striking milky-green waters, its position can be bad for Riesling; the sunlight reflections off the lake are so intense they can cause the grape to lose acidity, or even burn. It's not unusual to see Riesling blended with Olaszrizling to add body.

Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Gris — known locally as Szürkebarát — and Chardonnay do particularly well at Lake Balaton. Not only are they considered a safe choice by winemakers, because consumers in export markets are comfortable with them, but they also offer a route by which Balaton terroir can be compared with other regions, particularly Austrian, German and French. Lake Balaton's wines are mostly consumed within Hungary but some are sold to countries with historic and geographic ties, including Austria, Germany and the Czech Republic.

Lake Balaton also boasts some rare indigenous grapes, such as the Piros Bakator and Kék Bakator, both of which are cultivated by the Bencze winery in Badacsony. István Bencze — also known for opening the first natural wine bar in the area — is a Demeter-certified biodynamic producer.

The range of wines found in the Lake Balaton area is wide. There are also sparkling wines, like those of Kreinbacher, who has used Furmint with the addition of Chardonnay. The estate is at the foot of Somló Hill, whose basaltic terroirs manifest as salty, intense wines. The Burgundy bottles and classic label designs complete the statement.

AREA UNDER VINE

- *Badacsony 1,400 ha (north shore)*
- *Balaton-Felvidék 1,031 ha (north shore)*
- *Balatonfüred-Csopak 1,640 ha (north shore)*
- *Nagy-Somló 442 ha (north shore)*
- *Balatonboglár 2,800 ha (south shore)*
- *Zala 671 ha (west shore)*

Source: hungarianwines.eu

Looking forward

Then there are the future stars: Pinot Noir from Badacsony, Syrah from Somló, Kékfrankos from Tihany, Cabernet Franc from Csupak, Cabernet Sauvignon from Balatonboglár and even a tiny bit of Sangiovese and Piros Bakator from Szent György-hegy. Given climate change, the future for these wines may be bright.

At present, it's the Tihany peninsula, near the Balatonfüred and Csupak villages on the north shore, that is most dedicated to red wine. "The peninsula is a very special place. It's very hot during the day, but at night it gets really cold. That's the most temperature difference in the area," says Tamás Kovács, whose family is lucky to have three different vineyards of Kékfrankos — a grape also known as Blaufränkisch — in the peninsula's volcanic soils. "They are also different clones of Kék, planted at different times."

And, of course, there's Kadarka, which used to be the red king of the Balaton area. It's likely that it, too, has a bright future.

As for the region itself, the constant influx of tourists from Budapest is a double-edged sword. The same wealthy people who are drawn to visit the wineries have also been buying up land and farms to convert them into weekend homes, with no thoughts of wine production in mind. While Szabó Gyula, a winemaker in the appellation of Káli on the north shore, is pleased to sell his wines, he also worries that "wine culture might disappear in long-term".



Szabó Gyula, winemaker, Káli Kövek

Other winemakers such as Péter Váli at VáliBor, Badacsony, are making tourism to work for them, from running B&Bs to selling most of their wines to tourists. The same goes for wineries on the southern shore, like Kristinus Wine Estate which has a 10-room, dog-friendly wine hotel, Vinotel.



Robert Gilvesy, winemaker

While it's clear that Balaton's wineries have plenty to offer, marketing is not yet their strong point. International markets aren't easy to conquer without an established name, not to mention the language barrier; English-language labels are still uncommon. For some wineries, the way forward is to support local varieties, while others play the volcanic card. "Our US importer sells our wines as volcanic," says Robert Gilvesy of the eponymous winery on the slope of former volcano St George.

Whatever makes these Balaton wineries cut through the noise of the crowded wine world is a good thing. And, regardless, there will always be Budapest, the major consumer of Balaton's wines.

WINERIES OF NOTE

2HA Vineyard, Éliás Estate, Gilvesy, Káli Kövek, Váli, Bencze, Sandahl, Szászi, Pálffy, PAP Wines, Laposa, Szent Donát, Jásdi Cellar, Nyári Cellar, Homola, Kreinbacher, Meinklang, Kolonics, Villa Tolnay, Légl, Kristinus Wine Estate, Garamvári, Konyári, Ikon, Killer

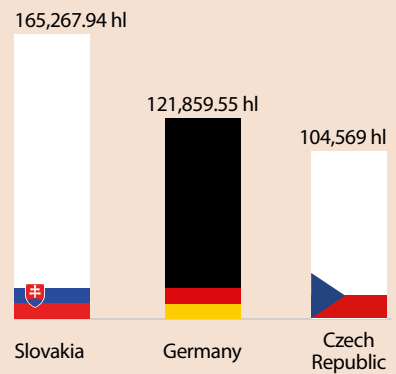
HUNGARIAN STATISTICS

Export volume in hectolitres

January-August 2019, All Hungarian wine regions



Top three markets by volume

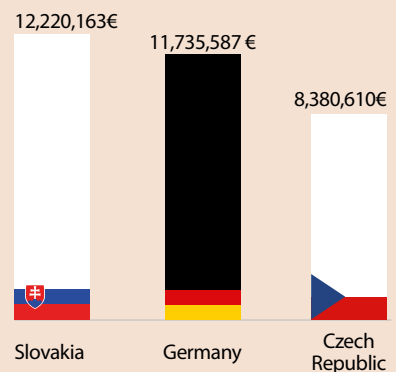


Export value in euros

January-August 2019, All Hungarian wine regions



Top three markets by volume



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