

**Note: This extensive chronicle was written by one of our guests following a three-day wine tour to southern Hungary in September 2009.**

### **Wine Tour of south west Hungary September 2009**

My brother Steve and I having visited Hungarian relations many times over the last forty years felt it was time to venture beyond Budapest and Gyor and see what else was on offer in this small country. Steve dutifully trawled through the internet and came across [taste.hungary.com](http://taste.hungary.com) which offered a personalised travel experience based on local contacts and inside knowledge specialising in food, market, wine and palinka tours. Always having enjoyed wine but not knowing much about its production this seemed to tick all the boxes, although, we weren't too sure about the palinka tour.

Gabor, our guide, picked us up from our apartment in Budapest at the appointed hour and drove us down to the Villany-Siklos, the southernmost wine region, noted for its reds. We were now a party of three tucked into Gabor's car, Brian having joined us from Guernsey the previous day.

On the way Gabor told us about himself. He had been working in New York for three years, returned to Hungary in 1999 with his American wife Carolyn, and recently set up the tour company with her while still lecturing in linguistics in Budapest. Carolyn is a journalist and mother of two young girls, who has contributed to various travel guides to Hungary, as well as to publications like *Gastronomica* and the *Wall Street Journal*. She had just had her *Food and Wine Lover's Guide to Hungary* published the previous year.

We arrived in Szekszard just in time for lunch where we enjoyed a Kekfrancos 2006 produced by Tamas Duzsi with our food. After lunch we went off to the Peter Vida vineyard on the outskirts of the



town. Peter awaits us on the gentle slope of his vineyard. He told us that this was the first slope the sun rises on after the Matra mountains in the east. You could see the Great Plain or Alföld stretch off into the distance from here. He explained that the region had produced wine for over two thousand years and had a unique micro climate with valleys running north to south with the north sides enclosed. Wine production here

substantially decreased after the Great War and was almost wiped out under communism. Peter had re-established the vineyard in 1989 from almost nothing.

During the tasting we drank a wonderful selection of red wines Kardarka, Kekfrankos, Cabernet Frankos, Merlots and Cuvees all the while Peter spoke about his philosophy of winemaking. Things like harmony, something he couldn't define but described by recalling a visit from a wine expert who was asked three times what she thought of the wine, each time she didn't reply and collapsed into a deep sleep, that was harmony. He showed us how to taste wine and do a dry taste as well as describe the winemaking process, the different grapes and soils necessary for good wines. He also told us a little about himself. During the Yugoslav wars in the 90s UN troops were stationed nearby, as the Croatian border is very



close. An American general was a frequent visitor to his vineyard. Peter told him about his family. They originally came from the west of Hungary near Gyor. One day communist officials arrived and told them they had two hours to get out of the house, it was no longer theirs. As they were leaving the official shouted at his father, "you are still wearing boots, take them off!" The general was appalled by this behaviour and said, "why didn't you call the police?" Peter couldn't believe there was so little knowledge of what they had been through.

With the tasting over, we were told it would be with four wines, we had eight! We made our way merrily down to the cellars. A very impressive sight greeted us. Peter had built the cellars himself. They were eight metres below ground, the temperature was very cool and this was maintained



naturally throughout the summer. In winter the temperature was slightly warmer than outside.

The vast bricked vaults contained numerous oak barrels of different diameter as well as storage for 60.000 bottles. The cellars are dedicated to St Marta. From outside you couldn't gauge the scale of what lay below ground. The fermentation tanks were kept in adjoining rooms closer to the surface.

Peter's wines have won numerous awards both at home and abroad, something he says is not important to him. His best compliment came one Christmas Eve when an unknown customer phoned and said she was having dinner with her family and they just wanted to say how much they were enjoying his wine.

The Vida vineyards created from almost nothing have, in twenty years, established a well deserved reputation. Peter is such an enthusiast about what he produces and still feels it can be improved. He regrets the lack of financial support from the government. The funding that is available tends to be frittered away before it gets to the winemakers and this prevents them from effectively marketing their wines abroad, an area they find very difficult to break into.

Our first visit to a vineyard had been immensely enjoyable and we still had two days to go! We asked Gabor how he was feeling having to watch us quaff lovely wine all afternoon and provide the translation, he replied, good-humouredly, "I am only human". There is zero tolerance for drink driving in Hungary.



We now made our way to the pretty town of Villany with its neat rows of whitewashed wine cellars on the main street. We were booked into the Gere Crocus hotel, owned by the winemaker Attila Gere. This provided modern, spacious, light and airy rooms with a beautiful spa below, containing a decent sized pool, steam room, sauna and wine therapy treatments.

Fortunately, the winemaking season hadn't quite started so the hotel was having a quiet period. Early September seemed an ideal time to be here, the weather was great and we had the place to ourselves.



No sooner had we settled in than Gabor arrived and whisked us off for dinner at the Bock Pince nearby. We had a traditional Hungarian three course meal starting with huselevesh, duck for the main course and madartej to finish with. It was accompanied by a bottle of Bock Merlot and another of their Portugieser. We finished with a glass of Bock Tortolyalinka. A fabulous meal in traditional surroundings and we even had a Karl Marx lookalike dining at an adjoining table! The first day had been very busy, informative and great fun, we returned to the hotel and died.

We were all up early the following day, swimming in the empty pool, having a sauna followed by a hearty breakfast before Gabor collected us for a tour of the Sauska vineyard. This has only been established in the last three years and was now harvesting its first crop of grapes for wine. They had smaller vineyards close by, which were already producing wine. The vineyard had a very modern steel and glass structure at its heart with all the latest technology inside to control the production. The Hungarian owner lives in America where he made his fortune in lighting. He has clearly invested a great deal of finance and time into this project, although, certain projects have been put on hold due to the recession.



Laci, the chief winemaker, provided a very detailed guide around the complex showing us the different stages of the process from sorting the grapes to the fermentation tanks to the storage in oak barrels in temperature controlled cellars. Winemaking appears to be a simple process but requires great skill by the maker at critical stages. Laci emphasised the need for quality control right the way through fermentation as well as the need for utmost

cleanliness. He said he could smell an infected fermentation plant straight away. He showed us the different types of grape in the field and discussed the problems certain grapes presented like Kadarka. This grape grows in thick bunches and has to be thinned out periodically to allow the sun to ripen each berry, causing a great deal of wastage and making it very labour intensive and very expensive. He expected the vineyard to produce 250.000 bottles of different wines in their first year and their target is to achieve 400.000 bottles annually.

During the wine tasting we sampled Rose, a Chardonnay, very unusual to have white wine in this region and limited to only a thousand bottles, Kadarka and two cuvees, all very delicious. Again the discussion that went with the tasting was very informative. We were told about the Crocus symbol on the wine labels. This signifies premium quality Villany wine associated with wine grown in one hectare from only six thousand kilos of grapes to produce a limited number of bottles. Sauska wines have achieved this status.



Our visit to Sauska was followed by lunch at the Gere hotel. Another feast with lentil soup, beef and duck followed by cheese and washed down with excellent bottles of Cuvee Phoenix and Dry

Classicus Vorosbor produced by Weninger and Gere, the first joint Hungarian Austrian wine making venture.

After lunch we leave in something of a daze and Gabor drives us out to Harkany to spend the afternoon in the enormous thermal pool there. Although it is very busy its very relaxing in the warm waters. No holiday to Hungary is complete without a visit to a thermal. We take part in a mass exercise in the pool, nothing too strenuous but greatly enjoyed by the people there who welcome the instructor with rapturous applause. You can move around from pool to pool as temperatures vary in each. The pools are populated mainly by middle-aged, retired folk speaking a variety of central European languages – German, Austrian, Croatian and languages I don't recognise.



Feeling thoroughly relaxed we return to Villany in preparation for our visit to the Polgar winery. The winery is approached down a quiet street and looks like any other medium sized detached house in the town from the outside. Once inside, the scale of the operation is soon evident. Zoltan Polgar is a very famous winemaker in Hungary. He takes us straight down to his cellars, ten metres underground, and they are vast bricked arches. They go under his neighbours out into the back of his house and the land beyond. There is even a chapel down there with a balcony where a concert took place with a choir performing for a bishop to celebrate a thousand years of Christianity in the region. This is where the tasting is held, under candle light, wooden arches, balustrades, decorative panels and illuminated windows, it is spell-binding.

We taste two Merlots from a nearby barrel, one fruity the other heavier as well as a Shiraz. Zoltan developed his interest in winemaking from his grandparents, who were winemakers but had everything confiscated by the communist authorities. His parents were teachers and owned a smallholding with vines. In 1986, Zoltan sensed change was coming and bought the present property, which was much smaller, from a winemaker who worked for the local state co-operative. These co-operatives believed in producing quantity over quality for export, a reputation the new generation of winemakers still have to overcome. He had tremendous difficulty in re-equipping the plant and had to go abroad to do so. There were stringent foreign currency restrictions in place under communism. On one occasion he got the entire family allowance in Deutsche marks to go to Austria. He took the family with him as far as the first village, dropped them there and went onto Austria on his own. He bought a filter tank in Vienna, using all the allowance, strapped it to the roof of his Trabant and returned to Hungary only to be stopped at the border by the Hungarians guards who thought he wanted it for distilling palinka.



After the tasting in the cellar we go upstairs to the restaurant for dinner. Gabor has told us to expect a four course meal with eight wines! On any other occasion we may have found this demanding, but we are already in training and prepared. We start with a Rose. The first course is a delicious soup, torna



krem leves piritott mangalica sonkaval, with pumpkin seeds inside accompanied by a Haslevelu white wine. The main course is vorosboros vaddiszno, porkolt szalveta, gomboccal, and hasi savanyusaggal, yet another delicious plate of game, vegetables and homemade pickles washed down with Kadarka, Rubin Cuvee Portugeiser Kekfrancos and another Kekfrancos to accompany the spectacular cheese dish. We follow this with a rich, full-bodied six year old Cabernet Sauvignon and one of Zoltan's favourites a 2005 Pinot Noir. He finds the Pinot grape a great challenge, it must not have too much light on the vine and he is still looking for the right valley to grow it in. It also has its own character and changes in the barrel for no reason. It

has the highest decanter grade in Hungary and wine experts come from all round the world to judge it.

Zoltan has travelled the world studying wine. He says he can't compete with the mass produced wines of South America and the New World and why should he? He is producing unique wines, locally produced to a very high standard, similar to the way the French do with their Chateau wines. The European market is saturated, some wines are so quickly processed they never see a barrel and have smoked woodchips added to give an oak barrel flavour. He was most impressed by the Californian vineyards especially their Chardonnays.

We now move on to a dessert and are provided with prunes and cheese to eat before tasting a 2006 Syrah with a distinct oak bouquet. This is made from a French vine grafted to local stock. Our next tasting is a 2003 Polgar Elixir Cuvee, which is very smooth and not made every year, only when the grapes are exceptional. We next savour a 1997 Elixir Cuvee, one of Zoltan's best vintages. He believes it has another eight years to mature and has saved a few hundred bottles to show experts how this will happen. It is fruity, smooth and delicious. Zoltan attributes the maturity of wine to the chemical changes taking place within it and relies on his own instincts to see how it will behave rather than on modern day technology.

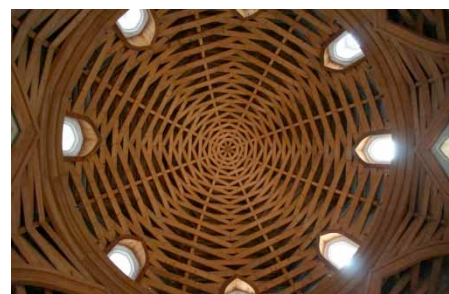
So the evening carries on with another Cuvee followed by dessert wine, Aranyhars (Harslevelu), eaten with a sweet pastry and a 2005 Kadarka Aszu eaten with a poppyseed pastry and finally a digestiv, a forty per cent proof Szolopalinka. Zoltan's hospitality knows no bounds, we carry on into the evening drinking more palinka and chatting. He discovers that it is our birthday, Steve and I are twins, and insists we return the following day for a bottle of 2005 Pearl Polgar Cremant Rose! We eventually part, exhausted but feeling wonderful, what an evening!

The next day, after a swim and good breakfast, we take up Zoltan's offer and return for the Rose,



which is very smooth and pleasant. We have lunch at a local hostelry where Gabor has been staying eating beef and pork stew on the porch with the sun blazing outside. Our next excursion takes us to Siklos where we visit a Mosque left over from the Turkish occupation. The building is well preserved and has a dome supported inside by ever increasing

octagonal beams. The floor is covered in decorative and



colourful rugs. The mosque is still in use for worship. The next stop is Siklos Castle, which is very well preserved and displays numerous exhibits linked to its past. There is an interesting wine museum where I am invited to join the curator in a glass of Kekfrankos. She offers advice about drinking wine by saying always have a small glass of olive oil before drinking a few glasses of wine, it won't taste very nice but lines the stomach.

Our final stop, before going back to Budapest is the Brill palinka distillery in Harcs. We were a little apprehensive about doing this tasting knowing the power this firewater has and not always having a good experience with it. Again we approached a normal looking detached house in the town to find a thriving cottage industry inside with sophisticated equipment and a huge cellar. The tasting was wonderful, we tried seven types which were all delicious. After all these years where had we been going wrong with palinka? Edit, the wife of the owner, brought out a bottle someone had given her as a present. She asked us to smell it, this smelt familiar, like glue. She said this was only partly processed and was what we had probably experienced in the past.



The cellars had been built three years previously and the barrels smelt of fresh oak, apple and cherry wood. They can only be used three times as they lose their flavour and are then turned into furniture. We were given a very informative guide about the process of palinka making and were also told about the strict regulations governing distilleries. Licences are easy to obtain but very expensive to maintain. Authorities carry out regular checks and certain

parts of the equipment are sealed and numbered so only they can have access to them. Locals can bring their fruit along to be distilled but they are not allowed to sell it.

Among the palinkas we tried were Torkoly 2007 and 2006, made from Cserzegii Fuserez grapes, very fruity. A very smooth 2006 Sargabarack palinka and a 2006 Megye. We also tasted a Szlivapalinka Aszalt, being unusual as it still had the sediment at the bottom. This was considered to be the Rose of palinka. We also tried Piros vilmos and a Cseresznye, the former being a Gold medal winner.



This visit certainly changed our view of palinka, the bottles we bought went down a treat with friends at a szalonnasutes we attended later in the week in the Budapest hills. With the tasting over we said our farewells and drove to a local restaurant for dinner and eventually made our way back to Budapest arriving late in the evening.

This was a wonderful tour. Gabor had organised everything perfectly. It was busy but relaxed at the same time. He had a wonderful sense of humour and we enjoyed his company tremendously. His command of English is excellent. The food and wine was first class. At the start of the tour, Gabor had said, even though we would be eating and drinking more than usual, we wouldn't put on any weight as a consequence, which was to be the case.

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