

Unicum

A Drink with a Past

MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH UNICUM—a shot glass filled to the brim with dark, potent-smelling liquor—was not successful. On this, my first trip to Hungary, I sensed that my future father-in-law would be offended if I didn't take the glass he offered me. After all, he sometimes gave the stuff to his patients as a cure-all for upset stomachs. But unlike the Hungarians in the room, I couldn't gulp down the thick, bitter drink. Instead, I sipped it slowly until it finally, thankfully, disappeared.

Like other bitters, Unicum is an acquired taste. The trick to drinking it is to try it twice, claims Péter Zwack, heir to Zwack Unicum, the company that has been producing Unicum for more than two centuries. The drink becomes addictive after the second try, he assured me, even though “fifty percent of the people who try it hate it. We don't try to change their minds, because you either like it or you don't.” This anticipated response is reflected in Unicum's American marketing campaign, which once used the slogan “Force Yourself.”

I didn't develop a taste for Unicum on that first trip to Hungary. But I did acquire a fascination for the drink, if only because it is so important to Hungarians. The round green bottles featuring a golden cross on a red label are ubiquitous, and there's hardly a Hungarian home without a bottle stashed away to be ceremoniously pulled out when visitors arrive. Unicum has such a hold over Hungarian drinkers that they tend not to drink any other brands of bitters, unlike in Italy, another bitters-loving nation, where it's common to see up to half a dozen types of Italian bitters (plus Unicum) on bar shelves. In Hungary, Unicum sits alone.

So what is Unicum? And what makes it different from the world's other bitters? This thick, nearly black, concoction is made from over forty herbs, roots, and spices, more than are found in competitors' products. The precise formula is a carefully guarded family secret, which during the Communist era was stored in a safety deposit box in New York. The Zwacks won't reveal any details about the proportions of herbs and spices they use, or even the names of all

the ingredients that go into a bottle. But they eagerly explain the rest of the process. The herbs, spices, and roots used in Unicum come from trusted suppliers around the globe, many of whom have been selling to the company for decades. “They have to send us samples first, and then we decide if we want to buy them,” explains Péter Zwack. “The choice of suppliers is essential. Herbs have good vintages and bad ones.” Unicum is also produced differently from other bitters, most of which are made by diffusion, a process that involves soaking the herbs in alcohol to extract their flavor. But for Unicum many of the herbs are distilled because, as Zwack explains, they respond only to the process of steam, not to diffusion.

Part of Unicum's mystique lies in the secrecy surrounding the original formula. Even the workers who make the drink work with premixed herbs, notes Péter Kerényi, Zwack Unicum's communications director; they know only the percentages of the mixtures they need to combine. Some of the herbs are macerated in water for thirty days; the rest are distilled. Then, in a process that has remained almost unchanged for over two hundred years, the two parts are blended and aged in oak casks for six months. Distillation gives Unicum its distinctive aroma and bitter bouquet, while the aging process contributes mellowness and body. “Ninety-nine percent of our competitors use only cement tanks, but we use oak barrels,” says Zwack. “We also age the mixture, which helps it develop tannins and body, just like wine.”

As a national symbol, Unicum has a long history that in many ways mirrors the history of modern Hungary itself. It all began with Dr. Zwack, a physician for the Habsburg imperial court, who, at the end of the eighteenth century, created the drink to alleviate the royal family's indigestion. “Das ist ein Unikum!” (This is unique!), Emperor Joseph II is said to have cried, giving the drink a name that has stuck. Only in 1840, when Dr. Zwack's descendant József Zwack opened a shop in Budapest, was Unicum sold to the general public. The company came to produce more than two hundred liqueurs and brandies. As one of the first commercial distilleries to use all-natural ingredients, Unicum was the sole

