

THIRSTY FOR HUNGARY

HUNGARIAN WINES MIGHT BE A TAD DIFFICULT TO FIND, BUT THEIR ALLURE PACKS A PUNCH THAT'S WORTH THE EFFORT.

Wandering the aisles of your local wine shop, scanning the shelves of familiar favorites from Italy, France and Spain, you decide it's time to branch out and find a different appetite-whetting wine. Head towards the back of the shop, and if you're lucky you'll discover wine from a country even some of the best sommeliers have overlooked — Hungary.

The country produces 600 million bottles of wine annually, most notably from the region of Tokaj (also spelled Tokaji), which produces mostly white grape varieties. "Tokaj is Hungary's most precious wine — it is one of the most expensive wines in the world," says Jil Child, a sommelier with Wine Tours of the World, a company specializing in wine experiences across the U.S. and Europe, including Hungary.

Yet, the majority of Hungarian wines remain in the grape-leaved shadow of neighboring European countries, and that's for several reasons. For starters, Communist-era Hungarian winemakers focused on quantity, not quality, says Carolyn Bánfalvi, author of the book *Food Wine Budapest* (Little Bookroom). "Those cheap, bad wines are what formed people's opinions of Hungarian wine," says Bánfalvi, a native of Washington, D.C. who currently lives in Hungary. "Now [Hungarians] are making some excellent wines, but even people who are serious about wine often do not know that and are surprised when they happen to taste some good Hungarian wine."

Another complication is that Hungarian vineyards don't produce enough supply for the American market, and even some of the country's largest vintners would fall in the boutique category by international standards. What's more, Bánfalvi says some Hungarian winemakers don't show a strong interest in breaking into the American market (largely because of supply or marketing constraints), although many have pinpointed the States as part of future expansion plans — so tracking down a good Hungarian wine shouldn't be as hard as getting your hands on the latest Birkin; you just need to know where to look.

Bánfalvi says Hungarian wines can be found in most wine shops on the East and West coasts, and she advises everyone in between

to visit the Monarchia Matt website (MonarchiaMatt.com), a part-Hungarian-owned company making and exporting wine from the Eger region. Child also suggests scouring Wine Spectator's online store. When all else fails, try wandering into various wine shops. "There is a limited amount [of Hungarian wines] you can find," Child says, "but you'll have to look very hard for them."

For the taste test, Child recommends exploring whites from Tokaj, particularly the dessert wines, which owe their sweetness to *Botrytis Cinerea*, a beneficial fungus that penetrates the grape, dehydrating it and turning the grape into a raisin. The grapes are then so delicate they have to be hand picked. But the extra effort is well worth it, as the flavors are intensely concentrated, and the juice is delightfully sweet and highly praised among wine connoisseurs. For reds, Bánfalvi says the regions of Villány

and Szekszárd are top notch; another must is Bull's Blood, a red wine that was made famous when, in a 13th-century fight against a Turkish invasion, Hungarians drank red wine, spilling it over their beards and armor, leading the Turks to believe the Hungarians were drinking the blood of bulls for strength.

Should you be lucky enough to find yourself in Budapest, Hungary's capital, good

selections are to be had at Bortársaság wine shop, which has several locations throughout the city, and at In Vino Veritas, located in district 7 on Dohány Utca. "You can't go wrong with whatever you buy at these two shops," Bánfalvi says. "Wine is well priced, and the staff makes great recommendations."

Another option is to visit the Hungarian vineyards. "The country is small, so nearly any region won't be very difficult to get to," says Bánfalvi. Child's favorites are Ede Tiffán, Vesztergombi, Jozsef Bock, Istran Szepy, Royal Tokaj, Tibor Gal, Oremus, Disznókö and Atilla Gere.

So go ahead and explore those back shelves of your local wine shop. A well-chosen Hungarian selection might make guests at your next dinner party wonder whether you've been moonlighting as a sommelier. **JENNIFER MERRITT**



