

Royal Tokaji

The first golden decade

Peter Richards MW relished the earliest and latest releases of a producer that led the post-1990 revival of the great and historic Hungarian wine



The *moment critique* in this historic tasting came late on, just before the final flight of new-release 2013s were poured. Zoltán Kovács, Royal Tokaji's general manager in Mád, insisted we assembled tasters rinse our glasses assiduously, something we hadn't done before previous flights. It had the feel of a symbolic act. "These new wines are very different," he explained, simply. "I don't want to have the reminiscence of the previous wines in the glass."

Reminiscence, memory, history, tragedy, bounty—such are just some of the key themes in what is the dense, intricate, poignant narrative of Tokaj. It's quite some story—one in which frequent conflict, invaders, and strife mingle with

royal patronage, a historic vineyard classification, and dubious medicinal potency. But this is not the place to rehash this most majestic of wine tales. The salient point here is that Tokaj's history moves on: Blink and you miss it. Or rather, in wine terms: Be sure to rinse the glass so you can savor the subtleties.

The title for this tasting was Royal Tokaji First Decade. As those who are familiar with the region will know, Royal Tokaji was formed in 1990 in a pioneering collective attempt to revive the region's wine fortunes after communist rule had, in the words of legendary local grower István Szepsy, "been worse than phylloxera, the Turks and Mongols: It destroyed the concept

of great wine in Tokaj, so much so I no longer know how many beautiful faces Tokaji has." Szepsy—who had managed to preserve some of the pre-communist knowledge and traditions by making a small amount of wine under the communists—was involved with the establishment of Royal Tokaji, as were foreign investors including Peter Vinding-Diers from Denmark and British writer Hugh Johnson. The latter was present at this tasting, lending an effortless authority and personal touch to proceedings.

The rationale for the tasting was partly to explore this history in liquid form and also to look to the future, in the guise of the newly released 2013s. It made for a fascinating insight not just into Royal Tokaji but also the different vineyards, vintages, and the region's evolution as a whole. There is a commercial angle, too: Royal Tokaji is releasing 1,746 bottles of library wines from its first decade into major markets. Kovács and winemaker Fruzsina Osvath tasted every single *aszú* wine from 1990 to 1999 (more than 2,000 of them). Some 15 percent of wines were eliminated—for taint, aromatic spoilage, seepage, and so on. The rest were lightly filtered, rebottled, and recorked.

Given the damage wrought by communist control, Tokaj was never going to bounce back with magical wines in 1990. But they are valued as historic pieces in a broader narrative: miraculous survivors in their own right, the foundations on which great things are being built. As Johnson exclaimed, "These wines were selected not for their outstanding quality but because they exist!" Royal Tokaji managing director Charlie Mount carried on the theme. "Tokaj didn't emerge glistening in the post-communist dawn. It's taken a huge amount of work getting where we are today. Vineyards existed, but decades of state control meant the knowledge required to manage them and make great *aszú* wines had been lost. This tasting, this story, is our journey bringing Royal Tokaji back to the top table of fine wine."

When I tasted with Szepsy back in 2005, he said the following: "To prove it deserves a place among the great wines of the world, Tokaji must express its

Above: Zoltán Kovács, Royal Tokaji's general manager. Opposite: A golden glass of the first growth Nyulászó.

terroir. We have to find our own way—we must experiment to know the possibility of our terroirs. The best wine regions of the world have innovative producers who are free to analyze the bases of greatness.” For Kovács, those bases are vintage, terroir, and variety, aspects of the wines that are very much to the fore in 2013. This marks a new era for Royal Tokaji—an innovative producer with a keen sense not only of history but of the future.

The vineyards

Right from the start, Royal Tokaji has emphasized the concept of terroir with its single-vineyard bottlings. Vinding-Diers had noted the region’s long history of vineyard classification, which began around 1700, and was keen to revive it. “We quietly caused a revolution,” muses Johnson, noting how the norm was to label by producer not vineyard. “When we tasted, we saw the character of the individual vineyards, so we labeled by vineyard name. It confused everyone—and many a sommelier has struggled trying to get their tongue around those syllables—but now lots of people are doing it.”

The original vineyard classification features first, second, and third growths, with a special category of great first growth for two vineyards: Mézes Mály and Szarvas. The following single vineyards were featured in this tasting:

Birsalmás [*beersh-al-mash*], second growth. A tiny 0.7ha (1.7-acre) holding on a slope above Royal Tokaji’s cellars in Mád, where other plantings form part of villagers’ gardens. The name translates as “quince orchard,” and the vineyard has rich volcanic topsoil with loess pockets. Plantings are dominated by Hárslevelű, which according to Kovács means that the wines “have a fruity touch, with notes of quince and also coffee and smoke.”

Betsek [*bet-chek*], first growth. On a south-facing hill at the heart of the Mád

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basin comprising many small parcels. Royal Tokaji owns 15.5ha (38.5 acres). Soils are rich black clays with good drainage. “The wines tend to be aromatic, with a spiciness and almost pepper on the palate,” says Kovács.

Nyulászó [*niew-laz-oh*], first growth. Adjacent to Szt Tamás on the south-facing slopes above Mád. Royal Tokaji has 18.5ha (46 acres) here. The wines tend to be rich, complex, and long-lived, with “a real elegance.”

Szt Tamás [*sent tom-ash*], first growth. Some of the most expensive vineyard land in the region. Royal Tokaji owns 11ha (27 acres) of south-facing vines. Rich, red clay. The wines are fruity, spicy, and mineral, with lively acidity.

NB: Blue Label is a 5-puttonyos *aszú* blend, while Gold Label is a blend of declassified *aszú* wines from Royal Tokaji’s first-growth vineyards.

The vintages

- **1990:** A small, classic vintage, the first for Royal Tokaji. Dry warm summer, cool rainy autumn. Wines were sold as 5 puttonyos rather than 6, to allow for an earlier release.
- **1991:** A very good vintage. Indian summer, warm humid autumn, sugar and acid levels “just right.”
- **1992:** Late rains at harvest made for patchy quality.
- **1993:** Outstanding—the vintage of the decade, “unbelievable complexity and structure.” Ideal summer, warm autumn. Hugh Johnson says, “I remember 1993 distinctly. Wonderful weather, huge amounts of *aszú* berries, you could walk past estate yards where

there were huge piles of the things like builders’ rubble, so dry they didn’t need a container, with flies buzzing around and dust rising off them.”

But these were still early days in the renaissance of the region, so quality isn’t necessarily all it might be.

- **1994:** Eminently forgettable, very few *aszú* wines made.
- **1995:** An early year, thanks to the warm summer. Concentrated wines, good sugar/acid balance.
- **1996:** A classic vintage. Good quality. Some rains, but also autumn winds. High levels of botrytis. The wines have “a truffle character” according to Kovács.
- **1999:** Comparable to 1993 in quality, outstanding wines of great longevity. High acid, intense fruit, great concentration and structure.

The newly released 2013s

“It’s been a long way to 2013,” deliberates Kovács, who characterizes the wines as having plenty of fruit richness, a creamy/silky texture, lively if not high acidity, and an elegant expression of variety, terroir, and vintage. Winter was mild, budding was late, and the summer was warm and dry. Some vineyards suffered from the heat and lack of water—for example, Birszalmás and Mézes Mály. Botrytis, where it occurred, was good quality if not abundant. There was a fine yield of *aszú* berries. “We continue to improve,” notes Kovács, who speculates that 2013 “is the best vintage we’ve made to date.”

The wines are certainly a departure from the first decade. The pale hues contrast starkly with the much darker colors of the previous wines (even allowing for bottle age). There is a purity and cleanliness to the young wines—a focus, albeit in a broad, rich style in 2013—with an emphasis on clarity of fruit and vibrancy. This is the result of improved vineyard work and changes in winemaking—for example, shorter macerations, using reductive presses, better control of fermentation temperatures, and avoiding oxidation during maturation by topping up and using SO₂. “We want to let the evolution in bottle be the real maturation for these wines,” explains Kovács, who is “convinced” that these wines will age even better than their predecessors. “Everything must start from the fruit,” he affirms.

TASTING

Betsek 1990 Aszú 5 Puttonyos

(12.6% ABV; RS 140g/l; TA 9.4g/l)

Tasting this wine, you feel like you're watching a majestic sea bird caught in an oil slick, struggling to fly but weighed down. There's an aerial, aromatic ambition here, with hints of quince jam, malt, and hay. But it's also oxidative and drying so lacks vibrancy as a result. | 88

Birsalmás 1990 Aszú 5 Puttonyos

(11.6% ABV; RS 183g/l; TA 9.5g/l)

Deep hue. Rainy aromas, with disconcerting hints of cheese rind. A touch more density and harmony than the Betsek. | 89

Betsek 1991 Aszú 5 Puttonyos

(12.7% ABV; RS 146g/l; TA 9.2g/l)

One of the least impressive wines in the flight. Aromas somewhat flat and muted, with oxidative notes. Pinched on the finish. | 86

Birsalmás 1991 Aszú 5 Puttonyos

(11.5% ABV; RS 185g/l; TA 9.4g/l)

Deep amber/brown hue. Slightly more classic aromas of dried orange rind. Juicy palate that is surprisingly vibrant and lucid. | 90

Nyulászó 1991 Aszú 5 Puttonyos

(10.8% ABV; RS 194g/l; TA 9.4g/l)

What this wine might lack in profundity, it more than makes up for in wizened charm. Malty, almost Amontillado-esque aromas, with hints of orange marmalade. Lively on the palate, with good tangy acidity. | 91

Szt Tamás 1991 Aszú 6 Puttonyos

(10.5% ABV; RS 206g/l; TA 9.7g/l)

The best of the early days. Impressive energy and ambition. Alluring aromas of baked cream and burned orange. Tangy, spicy palate profile full of energy. There is a sense here of potential and transition. | 92

Betsek 1992 Aszú 5 Puttonyos

(11.1% ABV; RS 176g/l; TA 9.3g/l)

Notably paler in hue, though still amber. Slightly oxidative, marmalade aromas. The acidity is fresh, and the flavors are relatively clean, but it's limited in scope and lean. | 88

Blue Label 1993 Aszú 5 Puttonyos

(10.3% ABV; RS 177g/l; TA 10.9g/l)

A really impressive wine at the level. Expressive and elegant aromatics, with hints of freshly baked biscuits and orange peel. (Perish the thought of Jaffa Cakes...) Lovely tangy precision on the palate. Lively and satisfying. | 91

Nyulászó 1993 Aszú 6 Puttonyos

(10.7% ABV; RS 218g/l; TA 10.3g/l)

The initial impression on the nose is discreet and

subdued. But then the palate explodes in a burst of vigor and juicy energy, full of tangy acidity and bittersweet candied fruit. This comes across as somewhat old school but with plenty of life and swagger in the bones. | 91

Betsek 1993 Aszú 6 Puttonyos

(8.8% ABV; RS 231g/l; TA 11g/l)

Cogent and seamless. And yet... You get the sense that it could have been so much more. Reticent nose of dried herbs and fruits. The palate is altogether more engaging, with intense acidity and gorgeous harmony between sweetness, acid, and alcohol. This is gripping, in its way, and lush, too. | 92

Betsek 1995 Aszú 6 Puttonyos

(11.1% ABV; RS 152g/l; TA 11.9g/l)

An intriguing wine that wears its rough edges proudly and is all the more engaging for it. The deep amber hue and faint oxidative, dried-grass notes do not initially augur well. But the palate is rich, intense, and vigorous, the acidity marked. Somewhat angular, volcanic, an edgy feel, slightly lean on the finish—an unpolished gem. | 92

Birsalmás 1995 Aszú 6 Puttonyos

(11% ABV; RS 156g/l; TA 11.9g/l)

A big brown bear of a wine. Deep amber in the glass. Familiar, comforting aromas of worn leather and dried fruit. Underlying it all is a vigorous, spicy, mineral-inflected growl that crescendos into a roar on the finish, which is intense, almost exponential, in feel. | 91

Nyulászó 1995 Aszú 6 Puttonyos

(10% ABV; RS 169g/l; TA 13.1g/l)

Full of sensual intrigue: burnished amber in the glass, with nostalgic aromas of polished wood floors and the dried-fruit bouquets of winter. A juicy, spicy, impressive mid-palate betrays a touch of leanness on the finish. | 91

Blue Label 1996 Aszú 5 Puttonyos

(10.7% ABV; RS 137g/l; TA 10.8g/l)

Amber-brown hue. Not the most convincing of styles but nonetheless pleasantly rendered. Scents of butterscotch, hay, and orange marmalade. Tails off at the end—lacks real intensity—needs drinking up. | 88

Betsek 1996 Aszú 6 Puttonyos

(9.8% ABV; RS 157g/l; TA 10.9g/l)

Punchy, energetic, almost bullying style. Distinctive hay-like aromas together with notes of dried orange and malt. Juicy and vibrant, albeit slightly lean on the finish. | 91

Szt Tamás 1996 Aszú 6 Puttonyos

(10.1% ABV; RS 162g/l; TA 10.6g/l)

Brownish amber hue. Somewhat half-hearted in feel, a wine going through the motions, with aromas of malt and dried oranges, then a palate that's dutifully tangy and rounded but dusty on the finish and resolute in its reticence. May yet mellow... | 90

Nyulászó 1996 Aszú 6 Puttonyos

(10.4% ABV; RS 164g/l; TA 10.8g/l)

Haunting aromas of dried orange rind and Fino. Gently aldehydic in feel, with hints of apple stores. A touch of bitterness (overextraction?) intrudes on the finish. But a decent rendition of the year. | 92

Gold Label 1999 Aszú 6 Puttonyos

(8.7% ABV; RS 226g/l; TA 14.4g/l)

A tremendous wine, fueled by monumental acidity (look at that number!) and intense, viscous richness. The dynamism and energy of this wine are a delight to experience—especially since the balance is exquisite, too. A thing of beauty. | 95

NEW-RELEASE 2013 ASZÚ WINES

Blue Label 2013 Aszú 5 Puttonyos

(11% ABV; RS 156g/l; TA 7.9g/l)

The color of this—and all the 2013s—is a notable departure from the 1990s. Rather than deep gold or amber, the gilt here is at best fleeting, only ever a vanishing hint in an otherwise pallid lemon/hay hue. Aromas of dried hay and smoke. Succulent flavors of orange marmalade and barley sugar. Easygoing and toothsome but limited in scope and appeal. | 89

Gold Label 2013 Aszú 6 Puttonyos

(10.5% ABV; RS 188g/l; TA 8.1g/l)

Classic barley-sugar aromas mingle with notes of cumin and dried peach. Grippy acidity, but the palate as a whole delivers an almost airy, ethereal feel. Enjoyable, fine, decent, clean, engaging—but not the most profound. | 90

Nyulászó 2013 Aszú 6 Puttonyos

(11% ABV; RS 172g/l; TA 7.8g/l)

Engaging aromas of bitter orange and plump peach. A touch of wild mint also intrudes on the nose. The palate is impressive: juicy, dense, and pleasantly cogent. Not the deepest or longest but rubs along very pleasantly. | 92

Betsek 2013 Aszú 6 Puttonyos

(11% ABV; RS 183g/l; TA 8.7g/l)

Evocative aromas of wood smoke, dried hay, and warm autumnal earth. The palate is layered, spicy, and intense. Lovely juicy acidity, really long and profound. Great aging potential here: shades of the coiled, poised tension of a long-distance athlete on the starting line. The palate is currently more impressive than the nose—but there is real potential here. | 94

Szt Tamás 2013 Aszú 6 Puttonyos

(10% ABV; RS 176g/l; TA 11.1g/l)

Pale lemon hue. Aromatically, it's vivid, pure, and clean—almost like a dry Furmint at first take, with up-front notes of apples, pears, and quince. Very fresh and clearly defined, though with a dusty honeyed edge. Slightly lighter than Betsek on the palate, and more accessible as a result. An open style: lovely drinking wine, great balance and fine potential. | 94-96