



SIX OF THE BEST



The new generation of Hungarian winemakers now coming of age are unburdened by the restraints of the past. **PENNY BOOTHMAN** profiles six of today's leading lights who are drawing on experience gained overseas to bring a fresh perspective to Hungarian wines

IT USED TO be the case that flying winemakers came from the southern hemisphere, and went to work in assorted outcrops across Eastern Europe. But the new generation of Hungarian winemakers have done just as much globe-trotting as any of their Antipodean counterparts.

It is this international outlook more than anything else that sets today's young Hungarian wine producers apart from the older generation. Never having had to make wine from behind the iron curtain, their production and business philosophies are unconstrained by previous policy, and they bring this freedom to their work.

This does not mean, though, that the new kids on the block have forgotten where they came from. They have a very healthy and profound respect for

their cultural and winemaking roots. Most have been brought up surrounded by winemaking and viticulture, but they are brave enough to introduce new ideas and inspiration from their travels and work in other countries – experiences which their fathers would not have been able to enjoy at their age. These new winemakers have broader experience than ever before, and their creativity and enthusiasm are set to raise Hungary's profile on the world wine stage.

Perhaps unsurprisingly for such a widely travelled generation, there is a pronounced shift towards growing and making wine from international varieties. The local, but well regarded, Kékfrankos grape is still the most widely planted in Hungary, but other grape varieties are gaining popularity –

and not just the usual suspects, Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon. Some growers are even experimenting with Malbec and Tempranillo. Even so, the area under vine is in decline – from 85,000ha in 2000 to 79,000 ha in 2001. Producers are pulling out unprofitable vineyards planted with unfashionable varieties to make room for more high-quality vines.

All of this is influencing wine styles. These young winemakers have a clear understanding of today's wine drinker, so they are making more easy-drinking wines, with softer tannins and gentler acidity than many Hungarian wines of previous generations. They also have knowledge of, and access to, a wealth of modern winemaking techniques and equipment. Simply using stainless steel tanks and small oak barriques rather

than the open concrete vats and large oak casks of old produces a markedly different style of wine.

As many as 150 of Hungary's 440 wineries export their wines. Even though red wines from regions such as Villány and Szekszárd are gaining more international acclaim each year, there is still far more white wine made in Hungary – 63% of total production. The fresh white wines of the Balaton region, particularly Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Gris and Chardonnay, are gaining ground in the UK, viewed as affordable wines in very approachable styles, that can offer excellent value for money.

ISTVAN KISS, TOKAJ

István Kiss has been involved in the family business since his childhood. His parents started in the wine industry during the 1970s, and Kiss remembers going out to the vineyard with them. 'At first I just played there,' he remembers. 'But later, when I was about 12, I started

working.' Kiss finished his studies in Budapest, and went on to work for the Tokaji Wine Trade House as a trainee.

Now 29, Kiss makes this very traditional wine himself, and his approach is faithful to the history of Tokaj. 'I search for descriptions of the old methods and I try to follow them,' he says. Kiss recognises that Tokaj is unique within the wine world, and his aim is to preserve its character.

'This is the only chance for the Tokaj wine region,' he says. 'When I sell a bottle, I sell a piece of Tokaj and its history. This is very important for us.' His careful observation of tradition clearly pays off as the winery has won more than 60 medals in national and international competitions, and exports to several other European countries as well as to Japan and the US.

SAROLTA BARDOS

Sarolta Bárdos was also born in Tokaj, and even her early memories are connected to wine. Like many of her contemporaries, she studied at the University of Horticulture and Food Industry in Budapest, and went on to train abroad in France, Spain and Italy.

Although Bárdos discovered much

about different wine styles during her travels, she takes real inspiration from the terroir of her vineyards in the misty hills of Tokaj. 'Tokaj is very colourful,' she explains. 'You can find four different terroirs in two hectares. We have to show this in the wine, and let the fine differences appear.'

Bárdos acknowledges that her winemaking skill brings out these subtle characters, but she sees herself as a guardian of the wines as they age and develop their full personality. She believes that the quality of a wine depends on a perfect equilibrium between sweetness, acidity, and alcohol.

'The key words of my work are harmony and balance,' she says. At 30, Bárdos has recently started a new company, Béres Winery, where she crushed the first vintage in 2003. Although the wines are currently available only in Hungary, we could soon see them throughout Europe.

AKOS KAMOCSEY JR

Akós Kamocsay Jr, 28, also started at a young age, helping his father on the small family plot and in the winery. 'I liked the atmosphere in the cellar,' he remembers.



IN THE BOTTLE

■ **Bock, Capella Cuvée Barrique, Villány 2000**
Deep ruby colour with cassis fruit and subtle oak on the nose. Medium- to full-bodied with ripe blackcurrant fruit, firm tannic structure and a velvety finish. Elegant style with rich fruit intensity and judicious use of oak, well balanced even at 14% alcohol. Now to 2007.

■ **Konyári, Sigillum Loliense Cabernet Sauvignon 2003**
Deep, bright, ruby colour. Restrained fruit aromas and subtle cedary oak, some vanilla. Firmly tannic but with ripe blackcurrant fruit on a medium-full-bodied palate. Elegant alcohol/acidity balance. Showing finesse over punch. Best in 2-4 yrs.

■ **Vesztergombi, Szekszárdi Cabernet Sauvignon Barrique 2000**
Opaque ruby colour, full bodied powerful style, richly fruity and with lots of flavour freshened by characteristically crisp acidity. Smooth yet structured tannins, superb concentration, with barrique ageing adding a layer of complexity to the palate. Will mature another 3-6 years.

Kamocsay followed in his father's footsteps and trained at Hilltop winery in Neszmély, in the north of the country near the Slovak border, where his father is head winemaker. He has also worked in wineries in South Africa and California, and he cites the friends and colleagues he met on these travels as some of his greatest influences.

Throughout his career, Kamocsay has been involved in making wines from a huge array of varieties, both Hungarian and international, and in many different styles. He describes this as part of a learning experience, and says he has yet to choose the varieties that will be the focus of his future work. His personal preference, however, is for fresh, fruity, crisp white wines and rich, strong, full-bodied reds.

The Hilltop winery has a global outlook, as have all the overseas wineries where Kamocsay has worked. This influence is reflected in his own winemaking style, which is modern and international with a focus on high quality and approachability. He plans to

continue travelling and broadening his experience, with a view to eventually running his own winery.

DANIEL KONYARI

Dániel Konyári's father, János, has been involved in wine since the 1970s, working as a winemaker for various companies. However, the Konyári family has always owned vineyards in the sunny Balaton region, on the shores of Lake Balaton, where it built its own winery in 2001.

'Wine has always played an important role in our life,' says Dániel. The family's 25ha (hectare) estate now produces close on 150,000 bottles a year. In the past three years, a further 20ha of vineyard has been replanted, partly with the local red Kékfrankos vine, and partly with international varieties such as Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc.

Konyári, 27, studied winemaking at university in Budapest, but also spent a period in Udine, in Italy's Veneto region.



Left: Dániel Konyári has made wine in Portugal, South Africa, California and New Zealand
Above: Valér Bock, also based in Villány, has a 'no compromise' approach to winemaking

From there his travels continued, and he has made wine as far afield as Portugal, South Africa, California and New Zealand.

Konyári cites his father as one of his major influences, but the winemakers he worked with abroad have also greatly influenced his style and winemaking philosophy. He has brought this international experience home, and it has earned him trophies at competitions in Bordeaux, Brussels and London, as well as at the VinAgora show in Budapest.

VALER BOCK

József Bock may be a hard act to follow – the celebrated winemaker has won many national and international awards. Slowly but surely, however, his son Valér is starting to win medals and gain recognition of his own.

Valér, 24, grew up around wine, taking part in the annual harvest work

from a young age. He says that this is how he gained most of his winemaking skill. 'I acquired practical knowledge simply from learning by doing,' he says. It is quickly apparent on meeting Bock that it is the winemaking stage that is his particular passion, and he leaves the viticulture to his sister. Together, they work with international varieties, but also local varieties such as Kékfrankos and Hárslevelű.

Villány already has a well-developed regional style, but Bock is interested in experimenting with new wines. 'Man is always trying something new, always reaching for something better and so creating something long-lasting,' he says.

The Bock estate produces some white and rosé wines, but 85% of the production from the 50ha estate is red. The Bocks already have a high-profile (for Hungary) international presence, exporting as far away as Japan.

CSABA VESZTERGOMBI

The Vesztergombi family has been growing vines and making wine since the 18th century. Csaba Vesztergombi's father, Ferenc, is himself a respected producer. Like many Hungarian families, it did not have private control of its winery under the communist regime, only buying it back in 1992 following the change in government.

Csaba, 31, has a winemaking philosophy based on a 'no compromise' approach to their 20ha of vineyards in the wide, low hills of Szekszárd, and yields are strictly limited. In the winery, he is exploring new approaches to international styles. He uses a mix of traditional large wooden barrels and small barriques alongside modern stainless steel tanks.

In a region already well known for Cabernet Sauvignon, Vesztergombi has also been experimenting with plantings of Pinot Noir. Shiraz may also be on the cards for the future, but his main goal is to sustain production of the traditional Szekszárd Kadarka variety. His reds are medium- to full-bodied and tannic enough to ensure a long life in bottle, but he also produces fresh, aromatic whites and a fruity rosé.

'Good wine can only be made with sufficient vocation and with respect to the grape and to nature,' he believes. 'Good wine can come only from high quality grapes.'

Vesztergombi's talents have been recognised at competitions in Hungary as well as in France and Switzerland. He has worked in Australia and travelled to wineries in France, Germany, Italy and Austria. His global perspective has led him to export across Europe as well as to Canada and Hong Kong.

Exports are a clear aim for the future. 'I want to extend our market and find new possibilities,' he says. 'Our main goal is to develop and control our family enterprise and also to produce internationally accepted wines.' It is a far-reaching view shared by many of his contemporaries. **D**

Penny Boothman is the current Circle of Wine Writers/Websters Publishers Young Wine Writer of the Year, and an expert on Eastern Europe.

