

Abstract: Sparkling wines in Tokaj - the new gamechanger?

Brigitta Stumpf, Candidate number: 200014, December 2023

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Abstract

Motivation

Tokaj is known as a wine region that produces quality sweet and dry wines, while sparklings have only recently entered the portfolio of local producers. As being born and raised in the region, my motivation for addressing the sparkling wine revolution is threefold. On one hand, it is a new development to which the region itself, and the market as well, struggles to adapt. By presenting the roots of the current trends, adaption could naturally evolve. On the other hand, there are very few sources available in English (or German) that can support a background analysis and induce a professional discourse at an international level. I aim to fill this gap with my research paper. Last but not least, sparklings, either traditional or non-traditional, can potentially shape the future of the region once placed into the relevant legal and economic framework.

Objectives

This research paper attempts to analyse the roots of the current upswing in the field of sparkling wine production in the Tokaj wine region. The recent trends, although have not evolved overnight, have various implications for the producers. Opinions clash in the local wine legislative while little attention is given to the present market trends and their impact. Questions related to whether the current revolution is good for the region at all or whether the current wine regulation is capable of tackling current and future market challenges posed by sparklings produced in Tokaj should be raised and discussed.

Method

Extensive research was conducted to highlight the significance of how production was organised in the 1900s, during and after the communist era. Sources used are almost exclusively primary and unfortunately available only in Hungarian. To understand the philosophy of the individual producers and their attitude towards the current developments on the sparkling front, several unofficial interviews were conducted in Hungarian. The interviews were accompanied by a tasting of the producer's traditional sparkling portfolio. Based on the interviews, the

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thorough analysis of the past and current wine legislation, the empirical evidence of tastings is used to define the next steps towards a new, refined wine law.

Content and Structure

Research findings are divided into four main sections. After a concise introduction, the paper describes the historical background of the region and the roots of traditional sparkling wine production in Hungary. Wine legislation in Tokaj, especially after the fall of communism, has been a productive yet controversial topic. The third section of this paper highlights significant legislative milestones. Amendments to the wine law seem to be committed to preserve heritage, a reflection of market trends and a reaction to local economic concerns. Finding equilibrium between those three has its inherent challenges resulting in heated debates once sparklings enter the game.

Chapter four examines the five widespread and often quoted reasons for why this revolution is now and includes a detailed discussion on the new infrastructure, under the aegis of the Tokaj Council for Wine Communities. The following section focuses on a short tasting experiment showcasing the current styles and categories of traditional sparklings produced in the region. Tasting evidence confirms that the length of aging on the lees correlates to the quality level. A refined categorisation of traditional sparklings seems to be the only solution for the future. Opening one door with the available infrastructure and closing another with a tighter regulation appears to be the only way forward. The process should rest on consensus as opposed to alienation.

Conclusions

Tokaj is the oldest legally defined wine region of the world, however, it struggles to thrive in the changing consumer market where there is a declining demand for sweet wines and an increasing one for dry and sparklings. Essentially all current challenges of the region are linked to its history and the proposed solutions, mainly top-down, to overcome those. The legacy of communism shaped the current structure of wineries but a grassroots approach necessary to redefine the region lacks a strong and common market positioning in the international wine world. The recurring clash on the home front weakens the common objectives.