9. Domesticating the Taste of Place
Post-Socialist Terroir and Policy Landscapes in Tokaj, Hungary

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[... ] wine tasters must draw objective conclusions about a wine from their subjective responses to it, and wine-makers must create conditions they hope will produce a certain taste for us.

Smith, 2013: 114

Terroir as Political Ecology
“For the People to Drink”: Bittersweet Change

As part of extended fieldwork in Hungary, I attended a formal wine tasting on the theme of indigenous furmint grape wines in the summer of 2017. At a cosy, English-language culinary centre, British wine writer Joseph¹ is leading the group (a mixture of about eighteen Hungarian locals and North American visitors) into the aszú portion of the wine list. Aszú wines are a traditional specialty of the Tokaj wine region, made from grapes that have been affected with the fungus Botrytis cinerea. The fungus, which arrives in late autumn (if at all), settles on the berries, then vampirically consumes the flesh from the outside, changing the composition of the juice as it reinjects the fruit with its waste products. The result of this “desirable meeting between a fruit and a fungus” (Magyar and Soos, 2016: 31) is irreproducible: a highly sugared,

¹ Names have been changed.
complexly flavoured, and deeply *concentrated* taste that showcases the wine’s unique growing conditions.

Joseph begins the *aszú* tasting with a caveat I had heard in similar settings: “You know, I’m not a sweet wine fan at all, but I—I don’t really consider Tokaji *aszú* a sweet wine, I just consider it a very *rich* wine”. He says the high acidity of the indigenous furmint grape in the wine balances the sweetness resulting from the botrytis affectation. Where it would otherwise taste “cloying”, it is—Joseph explains—instead something *else*. He asks a leading question, “Does it taste that sweet, or is it *complex*?”

The silence of the room is interrupted by a Hungarian woman: “I have an interesting question. Why is it that most people don’t like sweet wines? Why is it that—that you just *also* mentioned it?” Joseph raises his eyebrows and becomes jokingly defensive, “Ah, but I would drink *that*!” he insists, gesturing to the bottle of *aszú*. “I don’t know,” he replies, “because fashions change, I think. Earlier, sweet wines were, like, massively popular.” “Right!” The Hungarian woman urges him on. He continues, “Well, certainly, ehh—one or two generations ago it was seen as a kind of—you know—*luxurious* thing to sit there and absorb lots of sugar. I think now that people are like, you mention sugar and people freak out.” “But don’t people drink wine with soda water,” she asks, “because it can take the sweetness out of it?” She is referring to *fröccs*, a traditional spritzer made with soda water and wine.

Joseph acknowledges the popularity of the *fröccs*, and even that he likes them occasionally, and the woman returns to her original questioning: “But in Hungary, it was—people didn’t drink that expensive wine. They didn’t *make* expensive wine before. It was for the *people* to drink. When it’s made at home...that’s the history. It has changed now.” She thinks aloud of a time when her family used to purchase and drink wine regularly, when it was less expensive, and less formally produced and consumed. Contrasting the historic production of homemade wine (for local trade and consumption) with the new wave of internationalisation and formal exchange of taste knowledge, she explains, “They make something *better* now. We used to buy and drink wine, when we could make wine at home.”
Denaturalising the ‘Taste of Place’

The Hungarian attendee at the furmint tasting is emblematic of a rift I witnessed during my fieldwork in Budapest and Tokaj, Hungary. Like other ethnographic accounts of post-socialist transitions, I saw that changes were not merely structural, but involved reorientation to a new world of capitalism—a reorientation that encompasses everyday practice and experiences, and a realignment and valuation of ‘familiar’ tastes. In products like wine, ‘good tastes’ are associated with ‘good places’: the best terroirs. Because tasting terroir requires translational narratives that link ecologies to taste qualities, this has put the ‘unknown terroir’ of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) at a disadvantage against contemporary Western European and New World offerings (see Jung, 2014).

Until recently, taste in agri-food chains has been a “monolithic and largely externally defined evaluation of a product” (Demossier, 2018: 106) with little attention paid to the direct influence of aimed-for tastes on producer labour: how the logic of production systems, motivated by the tastes of the intended recipients, plays out on the material landscape. In Tokaj, however, it is not so far-fetched to imagine the direct link between the Russian ‘palate’ and mid-twentieth-century production practices. The conspicuous consumption of once-elite Tokaji wines, then aged for years in oak barrels, encouraged the Tokaji oak and coopering industry. It is no coincidence that the width of many (or most) Tokaji vineyard rows are the width of Russian tractors, having been replanted with French varietals in wide rows to allow for mechanisation and the mass market in the mid-twentieth century.

As Ulin (2013) convincingly explains, terroir must be denaturalised to be properly understood. In other words, while terroir has been employed to “unwittingly conceal and marginalize the historicity of social relations upon which the production and consumption of wine is based” (67), I use this chapter to make those connections explicit, connecting contemporary tensions in the wine world—often indexed through tastes and politics, as in the opening vignette—to the material environment: sites of ecologically embedded tastes (Krzywoszynska, 2015).

Originally catering to export markets and tastes abroad, twentieth-century communist production focused on a different audience—one
internal to the Eastern Bloc. Today, the revival of Tokaj as an exclusive terroir renders its ecologies as monopolies of ‘quality’, albeit by evolving and contested definitions. Tokaji wines are naturalised as products of unique ecosystems, their unique tastes emphasised to make them paradoxically more like their Western, international counterparts. To focus on one aspect of this change, I emphasise the shift from local production and preferences for sweet, *aszú* wines to the contemporary trend for ‘dry’ wine. Because these two styles require commitments to very different growing and production methods, they represent a clear example of the relationship between ecologically embedded tastes and material political ecologies.

The result is a wine region of historic contradictions: where once there were sweet wines, international grape varietals, long ageing times in Hungarian oak barrels (for ‘expensive’ and aged tastes), bulk quantities, and sloped hills suited to mechanisation, today there is a push for dry/‘mineral’ wines, a select few indigenous grape varietals, brief ageing periods (for ‘fresh’, everyday tastes) in stainless steel tanks, limited quantities, and the return of terraced vineyards alongside hand-picking. As political ecologies, I will argue, vineyards are themselves relics of previous policy regimes and norms—the material consequences of capitalism (Peet and Watts, 1986), socialism, and a long history of producing the ‘taste of place’ where places reflect constantly changing political terrains.

**Location, Location, Location**

Hungary is a key wine-producing country in the CEE region, often dubbed the ‘New Old World’. The first written record of wine production in Hungary dates to the fifth century CE. Perhaps because it is located on migration routes (situated between the origin of winemaking in the Southern Caucasus and continental Europe), Hungarian is one of only three languages in Europe in which the word for wine (*bor*) is not rooted in Latin (along with Greek and Turkish).

By the seventeenth century, winemakers in the Tokaj region of northeast Hungary determined that its best wines were derived somewhat consistently from a subset of special tracts; based on these patterns, they created the first vineyard classification system, put in
writing by the 1730s. This involved dividing each vineyard tract (dűlő) into three quality classes based on several environmental and economic variables, helping to standardise the production of its primarily sweet wines. The region was then enclosed by royal decree in 1737, making Tokaj the second-oldest enclosed wine region in the world (Chianti, Italy predated this decree by forty-one years). Once dubbed the “Wine of Kings, King of Wines” by French royalty, Tokaj’s international status all but vanished in the twentieth century following two world wars and four decades of communism (Liddell, 2003).

After a dynamic period of state-owned production during communism, Tokaji vineyards were systematically privatised through auction and voucher systems in the 1990s. Initially, old aristocratic estates were reformed (composed largely of first-class dűlő) and sold as units, many to foreign firms. The sale of agricultural land to foreigners was banned after 1994, and remains a point of contestation today (e.g. Brawner, 2021). Today, the official Tokaj region includes twenty-seven towns and villages in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county and their surroundings (including a town also called Tokaj), as well as a smaller tract of disputed land in contemporary Slovakia (Figure 1). In contemporary Tokaj, a new generation of local and international

![Fig. 1. Map of the wine regions of Hungary (purple), with the Tokaj wine region in red. Image by the author (2020).](image-url)
winemakers seek to revive the once-popular “Wine of Kings” according to new ideals.

This chapter draws from ethnographic fieldwork conducted across several periods. Having lived in Hungary for several years prior, I returned for fieldwork and in the summers of 2014 and 2015, followed by an extended stay from 2016 to 2017. Returning in 2016, I used extensive participant observation, shadowing in wine-making and tasting spaces, archival research, environmental surveys, and formal interviews to explore the political ecology of terroir.

Regimes of Change

Legacies of Communist Production and Privatisation

Communist production left its mark in the viticultural systems of Tokaj. Writing in 2007, Hungarian viticulturalists Sidlovitz and Kator explain of the need for assistance from the EU:

_The heritage of socialist viticulture is visible at the level of the vineyard management technique and the state of vineyard, where one part is obsolete, the other is old, and the conversion proportion is [too weak for quality] wine production and quality improvement. (15, emphasis added)._ 

The shift to ‘quality’ in winemaking implies not only higher prices fetched, but significantly higher costs of production due to the overwriting of communist ‘landscapes’ of production and the transformation of vineyards with wide, vertical rows into images of their historic predecessors. However, for Tokaji producers looking to maintain a living as winemakers, producing quantities of wine in the ‘communist style’ (which is, broadly speaking, created in accordance with local tastes) is a more guaranteed livelihood than reducing quantity and producing international styles that rarely reach the volumes or prices required for sustainable export. Beyond these markers, there is some evidence that regimes of over-fertilisation (intended to increase yield) have resulted in the presence of legacy nutrients in vineyard soils (Brawner, 2018).

The privatisation of Tokaj vineyards in the early 1990s was coupled with ecological consequences, such as “the fragmentation of vineyards designed and planted to be run as an integrated whole” (Liddell, 2003: 24). Former cooperative members might have received, for example,
eight rows of vines on a twenty-hectare plantation; attempts to [re] consolidate production for private individuals were largely (and perhaps unsurprisingly) unsuccessful. Some others had inherited parcels in vineyards due to their lineage but had no interest or knowledge and so abandoned them. By 2001, wine writer Liddell observed that this led to the ad hoc use of pesticide sprays and partial vineyard abandonment with detrimental consequences: “when part of a vineyard is not properly looked after, the rest can only suffer” (2003: 24). “Just as collectivization solved the impracticality of running uneconomic units resulting from the breakup of estates in the late 1940s,” he summarised, “the task now is to find a way of stitching broken-up vineyards back together again” (Liddell, 2003: 25). Integration contracts were introduced, renewable annually by the grower, to encourage producers to commit to harvest dates, sugar levels, volumes, etc., but with mixed results.

The serious costs associated with transforming a dűlő into operational vineyards of ‘quality’ terroir production has furthered the divide between locals with an interest in winemaking and entrepreneurs with capital, who are often foreign investors or members of the urban middle class. Many winemakers in the region are thus now located in Budapest or other centres, where they can afford a dűlő tract with their wages and a holiday home in one of the many near-empty village centres. For these producers, it is the love of the land and the hobby (often passed down from previous generations or inspired by mythologies of national heritage) that inspires their craft, which is rarely profitable in any conventional sense.

Impact of International Approaches

While multi-nationals bought large plantations in the early 1990s, some locals have more recently invested in the ‘cast-offs’ of these companies: adjacent areas that were too remote for large-scale production. Zoltán purchased one such tract in an original first-class dűlő:

The first parcel we acquired was a small, 0.58-hectare area, offered to us by a larger company. They wanted to get rid of it as it was too far out for them [...] The area was in rundown condition with a traditional vine-stock cultivation; no one wants that these days. Winemakers generally dislike that, as it requires lots of manual labor.
So the place was not appealing at all, riddled with fruit trees. However, when I saw the stone walls, saw this valley isolated from everything else, I knew inside that I must try and make this work.

He purchased these places with loans from friends and family, as well as some government aid. “Obviously, success wasn’t handed to us. It wasn’t like I just showed up, someone handed me four hectares of a dűlő and that was that. I had to establish relationships with local winemakers, slowly purchasing local areas”. His scheme to turn the dűlő terrain from one of mass-production mode to quality, terraced areas meant that they have “used construction machines to clean out the terraces one by one”. Because these areas are off-limits for tractors, they have also “managed to partner with an equestrian who is particularly handy with horses…. He also helps with horse-powered cultivator, plows, and hoes”. Zoltán quantifies the cost of commitment to quality in his dűlő, some of which have only “2300 vines per hectare,” while their “cultivation expenses are basically same as with 6250 vines per hectare”. Given the recent political history in the area, it is unsurprising that the “most Hungarian” wine region struggles to unify its image.

Veteran winemaker Árpád was eager to explain every side of the political situation in Tokaj, which he insisted is inseparable from the history of the region. This includes, especially, the contention between insiders and outsiders: the style of winemaking (and thus rules and regulations associated with production) as debated amongst the newcomers and old-timers in Tokaj. While he does not entirely disapprove of foreign wineries in the region, he resents the concessions made by locals and transcribed into law on the basis of western European influence, explaining, “The French modified the Hungarian law for wine in 1994. They wrote it, actually, not the Hungarians. Hungarians typed it, but they thought it out”.

Part of this new law, he explains, included the doing-away with wooden barrels. They “changed the old system, which entailed the following: as many puttony the wine had, plus two years extra for maturing. So, for example, a six puttony aszú was matured for eight years”. His disdain for outsider influence underlines his retelling of these early years of privatisation, when “the French” arrived with new, modern methodologies to overwrite communist-era styles:
Now the aszú’s maturing time is eighteen months [instead of two-to-eight years]. And I can’t completely accept this, because I told them at so many meetings that we didn’t become part of the [UNESCO] World Heritage because of the now-used, heated-cooled [stainless steel] tanks which generate ‘uniwine’ that they could make in Chile or France. What does this have to do with a Tokaji wine other than the raw material?

The past 400 years were about the aszú... the wooden barrels, the cellars, the noble rot—this was the process. [...] And here they re-wrote our 400-year-old tradition. So, this is my opinion but also a fact. [...] The aszú wine has only its name now and the fact that you need aszú berries to make it.

For producers like Árpád, there is a sense that the revival of tradition in Tokaj was more possible during socialism: there may have been bulk, falsely aged wines shipped to the Russian market, but at least the “old ways” were maintained by locals who still aged aszú wines in barrels underground for years at a time. Today, liberalised markets require an even faster turnaround: a big task for the original slow wine. His anxiety about the future of Tokaj is parallel to his political concerns around Hungary and EU directives to accept minimum numbers of refugees during the recent refugee ‘crisis’: “Here, they say we should let in 100,000, because we have ten million people,” he explains, “but I say that if this happens, Hungary disappears. Hungary is over. And they don’t drink wine! Let’s think this over: their kids won’t, grandchildren won’t, friends won’t... You didn’t think about this, did you?”

Today, Tokaji wine laws entail a common Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) label with standard production requirements. However, as producers like Árpád would argue, the heavy influence of foreign investors in the early 1990s led to entirely new rules—best practices that aim to create a product that is more suited to global taste trends: specifically, away from oxidation and “sweet” wines, and toward terroir-showcasing, dry wines (see also Brawner, 2019).

There are also broader political tensions at the European level. Hungary joined the EU in 2004, just as the EU was making strides toward draining the ‘wine lake’ that resulted from the consistent overproduction of wine in its member states in recent decades. In 2007, over 1.7 billion bottles were reported as surplus for several early-2000s

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2 This refers to the quota system proposed by the European Parliament for refugee resettlement. I was unable to find any source that supported this 100,000 number.
vintages (Frank and Macle, 2007: 15), and “emergency distillation” (into industrial alcohol) became the fate of hundreds of millions of bottles of European wine each year (Wyatt, 2006). The post-productivist EU era and its rural development schemes are “defined by the buzzwords of multifunctionality, rural development, heritage and environmental concern” (Demossier, 2018: 136). This paradigm drives the promotion of rural landscapes as beds of artisan production and traditional methods in ways that simultaneously enhance localised foodways and rural tourism, while encouraging environmental conservation and biological diversity through specialty products (and, arguably, new forms of dependency on EU funds [e.g. Fischer and Hartel, 2012; Kovacs, 2019]).

Efforts to drain the ‘wine lake’ include EU vineyard ‘grubbing-up’ or vine pull schemes, initiated in the EU in 1988. Through these policies, producers with unprofitable vineyards may pull up their vines in exchange for cash payments. Thus, joining the EU in the early 2000s as a wine-producing country entailed much debate in and around Hungary regarding the requirements of new member states to comply with the strict production caps in place, entering into a single market already super-saturated with wine and with little interest in the contested wines of post-communist Hungary. If the communist era provided a steady market with little room for capitalising on quality, the new era has not offered the hoped-for replacement.

For all the political influence on Tokaji vineyards, the role of taste as a barrier to success emerges in nearly every discussion with foreign wine professionals, whether living in the region or appraising it as a visitor. One expert, from the US and now living in Tokaj, explained that it is local taste which holds the region back, as the old generation still insists on producing and drinking “gutter water”. In another example, Liddell relates Hungary’s sub-optimal wine production directly to local tastes as he notes (48):

Finally—and sadly, because it continues to have a baleful influence on so much Hungarian winemaking—mention must be made of the Hungarian palate. Wine tastes are generally not at all sophisticated, and much wine is simply a vehicle for the alcohol it contains, as the small, dumpy glass usually used for drinking and tasting (filled to the brim) rather suggests. Your glass of wine is likely to be accompanied by a plate of pogácsa (small cheese scones).
Liddell’s undeniably classist observation invokes Bourdieu’s notion of taste (1984) as he observes that wine is merely a “vehicle” for local alcohol consumption. Indeed, the exclusivity of formal taste knowledge is obvious in these settings; perhaps a “good palate” is “proportional to the value and size of [their] wine cellar” (Teague, 2015). If terroir is undemocratically distributed geographically, so is the hierarchy of sensory knowledge required to appreciate it. While in previous eras, winemakers were considered the most knowledgeable judges of taste and quality in the production of their own foods, the formalisation of wine tasting externalised the judgment of taste, removing the production of sensory knowledge from producers to become embodied by a group of trained professionals with (almost always) costly education and international experience. Consider, for example, how taste courses I attended featured descriptive language around quality aszú wine, with emphasis on notes like “cherimoya” and “passionfruit”; these exotic imports are nearly impossible to locate even in Budapest today, and certainly remain untasted by the vast majority of Tokaji producers.

Liddell reflects on the carelessness with which he observes locals consume wine: without reflection or cognition, without analysis. But as he also notes (47):

> The proper understanding of Hungarian wine culture requires an insight into matters less tangible than laws and research institutes. Wine is in the soul of many Hungarians. It has, for some, an almost sacramental quality. Indeed, when tasting one day, I asked, because I was driving, if I might spit out the samples I was being offered. “Wine,” came the reply, “is the blood of God, and to spit it out is sacrilege.”

Spitting wine is not uncommon in today’s Tokaj, where formalised tastings (and the norms associated with them) are spreading. Nevertheless, many locals continue to consume wine in full, opaque glasses alongside traditional süti (baked goods). Dani, who owns a mid-sized winery and guesthouse in Tokaj, took me into his cellar. When I asked him to explain the signage on the door, he laughed, and said it was recovered from a factory nearby where people used to spit tobacco onto the ground. He uses it now to guard his wine cellar and to jokingly remind visitors: “Spitting on the floor is forbidden!”
Policy Landscapes

Simplification: Of Taste, of Terroir, of Biodiversity

The political ecology of Tokaj vineyards over the last century solidifies around a move toward simplicity: aiming for legibility (cf. Scott, 1998) in the name of translating taste. While labelling schemes such as Geographical Indications (GIs, which include Tokaj’s PDO status) are often touted as a way to enhance agrobiodiversity, in this case, it may exacerbate genetic erosion. This is because producers, especially since the 1990s, aim to create terroir wines using a single, idealised varietal that now makes up to 80% of new plantings. Such an erosion of agrobiodiversity (relative to archival evidence from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) is very likely a culprit in recent crop losses due to ‘sour’ or ‘gray’ rot.

The turn to furmint and dry winemaking was hinted at in local research of the early 1990s, when there was an expectation that “new market segments [would] appear soon aimed at special consumer habits” (Kecskés and Botos, 1990: 72). The assumption was that consumer habits—and market demands—were varied enough to inspire variations in production. However, the institutional trap of vineyard privatisation, foreign investment, and fragmentation of dűlő—coupled with the duality of tastes for ‘old’- and ‘new’-style, fresh wines—has prevented such direct transformation of the region from one of prescribed, uniform mass production to the variations associated with and prescribed by free enterprise.

Researchers in the early 1990s recognised the need to modernise and adopt a more rigorous controlled system of dűlő control to replace the central planning method of communism. In response, the Hungarian wine regions were organised into competitive areas of production and entailed the further simplification of products—and thus, of varietals and production methods—in part, to acquire GI labels. This included the waning of varietals: “So-called world varieties, traditional and recently bred Hungarian varieties are fighting for the leading position in every wine district...” where there is a “high number of varieties in certain districts. This number must be limited in accordance with the character and tradition of the region” (Kecskés and Botos, 1990: 71). Variations in technology and grape-growing within wine regions make
it “almost impossible to control them” (72). The same authors prioritise the GI label potential for Hungarian wines, as “wines of this category are more valuable than other wines because the origin, the grape variety, the technology and quality is guaranteed very thoroughly” (72). In Tokaj, quality standards continue to be questioned despite the waning of legal varietals to only six white types, where previously dozens of local red, white, and black types were used (Brawner, 2019). It should be reiterated that this is per official regulations; there remain many local and family producers who grow non-sanctioned types, primarily for local consumption and trade, and wild types occasionally appear at the margins of vineyards (but are normally pulled up); spontaneous crossings are not of concern because vines are reproduced through cloning (Brawner, 2019).

In this insistence that unique Tokaji tastes, along with endemic fungi and native germplasm (Brawner, 2019) have a rightful, place-based identity, it is worth considering the relevance of Vidal’s (2005: 48) discussion of agro-nationalism:

> Plenty of myths, all over the world, assume the existence of some sort of exclusive relationship between a particular place and the people who are supposed to have originated from it. But this does not prevent us from realising—whether we like it or not—that migration and displacements of all sorts are really the stuff that history is made of. It would seem however, that whenever it comes to the products of the soil, we seem to lose our sense of historicity.

Throughout history, European nation-crafting has occurred at various scales, including the naturalisation of borders and ethnic groups. A unified and ‘authentic’ France, for example, was reified as an organic entity through a nature-as-patrimony discourse, while the German nation was predicated on an ethnic ideal (Gangjee, 2012).

The Tokaj territoir discussion seems to be caught between the two: the language of the UNESCO HCL nomination cites Hungarian migration, settlement, and cultivation as influenced by “emigrants” and other peripheral outsiders (UNESCO, 2002). At the same time, it presents a unified concept of the Magyar nation as rooted in the Carpathian Basin by way of long-term human-environmental interactions like viticulture. This is nowhere more graphically evident than in the very recent Bormedence (‘Wine Basin’) festival that celebrates “wines, flavors, and
experiences from the Carpathian Basin”, featuring winemakers from the entire historic territory of Hungary (i.e. ‘Greater Hungary’) (Figures 2 and 3). Conceived by the 2015 Meeting of Carpathian Basin Winemakers and Musicians (Kárpát-medencei Borászok és Zenészek Találkozója), it evokes nostalgia for pre-World War I borders, before Hungary lost two thirds of its land area and a portion of the Tokaj region to Slovakia.

![Map of the territories showcased in the Bormedence wine festival; contemporary Hungary is in dark gray, while the lighter gray area represents pre-Trianon (1920) or “Greater Hungary”. Wine regions are located in contemporary Slovakia (green shades), Romania (yellow), Serbia (orange), Croatia (blue), Slovenia (red) and Austria (teal). Image by the author (2021).](image)

The delicate balance between native varietals, the famously fastidious botrytis fungus, and the skilled labour of local people becomes the history of the landscape. In short, through PDOs, claim-making becomes a more-than-human territorial endeavor: native varietals are the “planted flags” (Braverman, 2009) that have marked foreign territories for centuries and reified the Tokaj wine region as Hungarian. Meanwhile, policies themselves become constituent pieces of viticultural ecosystems, material legacies of past ideologies and taste ideals. The commodification of ecologically embedded, or place-based, tastes has
driven policies that, in turn, materialise in ecosystems through shifting cultivation practices. The legacies of political regimes are made material in the terroir itself, which is necessarily somewhat anthropogenic. This suggests the necessity of considering policies (such as the PDO that defines Tokaj) as a part of ecosystems.

Of course, policies emerge as tools of political regimes, requiring us to consider the ways in which political borders interface with terroir in this region (e.g. Brawner, 2021; Monterescu, 2017). This chapter focuses on mid-twentieth-century political shifts, however, these must also be put in context. Notably, in October 1918 the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy was dissolved, to be replaced by a series of (largely unrecognised) interwar republics. On 4 June, 1920, the Treaty of Trianon marked the formal end of World War I and regulated the new independent Hungarian state, including the demarcation of new borders that cost the pre-war Kingdom of Hungary two-thirds of its
landed territory. Today, 908.11 hectares of Tokaj terroir lies in present-day Slovakia, where Tokajski is bottled under the Tokaj PDO label using methods arguably as varied as what can be found in Hungarian Tokaj. While not discussed at length within this chapter, the territory of terroir in this context is ‘more-than-land’; it is a geography “saturated with national or regional pride, where land-brands are protected as collective intellectual property (e.g. Gangjee, 2012) and world heritage” (Brawner, 2021: 4).

Historic Taste Regimes: The Problem with ‘Quality’

Availability of Tokaji wines (and thus, their tastes) have always been politically and geographically contingent. It was “[p]roximity to [Tokaj-] Hegyalja and taste preferences in wine” that “determined the direction of exports of the Tokaji sweet wines during the 16th and 17th centuries” (Lambert-Gocs, 2010: 53). Towards the eighteenth century, mercantilism emerged as an obstacle to Tokaji export going into the nineteenth century as leadership prioritised domestic economies, viewing free trade as a potential threat. This philosophy also gained traction in Poland, perhaps Tokaj’s greatest long-standing customer, where “Polish statesmen began having serious doubts about the Polish predilection for Tokaji wine” and the resulting draining of money from domestic products. “This outlook went so far as to envision that Polish tastes could be switched away from grape wine altogether, to the advantage of producers of domestic wines from other fruits of honey” (Lambert-Gocs, 2010: 53).

The Vienna Trade Council convinced the Habsburgs (then under Maria Theresa) to outlaw Hungarian wine export along the Danube and to allow only as much Hungarian wine to be exported as Austrian wine—however, Austrian wine was not in demand, so Hungarian exports were severely limited. Simultaneously, Austria’s nationalistic stance promoted their refusal of Prussian goods, and Prussia in turn prohibited Tokaji wine imports. Russia added heavy duties to Hungarian wines in 1766 (with the exception of those purchased for the Russian Imperial Court), giving Tokaji wines in Russia an even more skewed status as the wine of elites.

A simplified story of Tokaji wine history is one in which traditional, sweet “quality” aszú wines that once reflected traditional harvesting
practices and local ecological circumstances (the endemic botrytis fungus, cellar conditions, etc.) were adulterated by the mode of socialist wine production that overwrote the region in the mid-twentieth century through pressures to produce quantities of artificially sweet wine (seen in opposition to ‘quality’). But today, the question of ‘quality’ wines where GI labels are concerned is simultaneously one of quality terroir, where the wines and geographies of western Europe are often cited as benchmarks. Yet, for all its association with communism and ‘backwardness’, the mid-twentieth-century, quantity-driven production was also simultaneously en vogue in post-war western Europe, where places like Burgundy suffered from quantity drives and the “disappointingly thin” wines of the 1970s when the fashion “was to plant clones for quantity and reliability rather than wine quality” (Demossier, 2018: 104). It is therefore important to question the objective “quality” turn that is so often associated with the advent of capitalism in Tokaj. Through these narratives, capitalism and its associated agricultural forms is naturalised through visceral experiences represented as objective through ‘good’ tastes—while, conversely, the obstinate palates of locals are associated with an equally backwards politics.

Communist producers were concerned with quality but were working with internal market demands and Russian tastes (which were, in turn, shaped by production). In fact, communist-era research reports suggest Tokaj had rebounded from an era of low quality following the Napoleonic Wars when exports dropped in the early-nineteenth century and producers resorted to ‘lower-quality’ production (Bartha, 1974). Additionally, ‘foreign’ investment (the political boundaries of Central Europe being so mobile) in the region has always played a role, even in the interwar period (the 1920s and early 1930s) when foreign capital, while small, led to the presence of foreign ownership, which incentivised innovation (Csató, 1984). Thus, the use of ‘quality’ as shorthand for being market-led, and thus associated with the post-1989 era, is oversimplified at best, and seems to stand, instead, alongside broader EU objectives to decrease wine production. The quality in winemaking here is, in other words, in the exclusivity. For wine regions that are globally unknown, such as Tokaj, small quantities may be limited and thus exclusive, but do not serve local objectives for export or the building of a place-brand.
Tasting Post-Communist Terroir

The socio-political life of taste described here cannot be separated from ecological ramifications. Aszú wines made before the industrialisation of communism included stake training (where shoots are tied to a single, often wooden, stake in the ground and shoots climb upward after being horn pruned). Horn pruning creates giant knobs of old, woody bases at the ground with antler-like spurs where new shoots emerge. They would have been originally densely planted (around 10,000 vines per hectare). In the 1970s, Tokaji vine training entailed the Lenz Moser method with five-foot high cordons to assist in the mechanisation of vineyard production; the density of these vineyards would have been determined by the wide rows necessitated by the large Russian tractors used at the time (Liddell, 2001 : 62, Figure 4). They were thus spaced three metres apart, with vines planted at one metre apart at a rate of about 3,330 vines per hectare. As of 2001, new plantations considered 5,000 per hectare to be optimal, with north-south alignment, but most remained closer to 3,330 because of the continued use of old tractors.
The Lenz Moser method is not ideal for varieties prone to rot and may in fact be exacerbating the Gray Rot problems faced in furmint monocultural plantations today, causing reported crop losses of up to 60% (Gabi, personal communication, 2017; corroborated by other respondents). It is typical to get three litres of must (grape juice with skins and stems) per vine if growth is restricted; this level of restriction is considered good quality, though some aim for only half of this. However, many locals now sell grapes on to larger corporations rather than making wine themselves. “Peasant growers,” writes English wine writer Liddell (2001), “are happy to take all the grapes that God sends, and over-cropping is the Hungarian grape-grower’s besetting sin” (62–63). The other “sin”, he explains, is “cash-shortage disease”, or premature harvesting that leads to underripe grapes being picked in order to sell them (54).

During communism, vines were planted for mass production and responded to cordon planting with vigour, producing as much as twenty tons per hectare; today’s top-tier terroir wines in Tokaj are harvested at two to four tons per hectare. The grapes were often harvested at marginal ripeness, encountered pasteurisation, fortification, added sugars, or the addition of old wines to hide flaws. These practices were prohibited in the 1991 Wine Act and continue to be associated with supply-side economics and lack of competition. As one journalist wrote of Tokaj in 1990:

> Perversely, the communist regime made life too easy, both for small farmers and the huge co-operative farms. Their crops were already sold, admittedly at low prices, before they were even gathered. Huge yields were therefore all that was required. Selectivity, the first fundamental for wine quality, was a luxury for which only the proudest and most dedicated growers were prepared to pay (Johnson, 1990).

Ironically, the “luxury” of selectivity continues to elude most Tokaj producers today—for lack of market (export) and lack of local demand for the new, fresh taste (and the higher price points associated with low-batch, high-tech production). The Soviet drive to produce bulk wines introduced mechanisation, yet preserved certain traditions, such as barrel ageing. However, it is ostensibly the residue of these steel and iron implements that wine journalists have considered akin to “tasting communism” (Signer, 2015). Reviews of the “unknown terroir” of CEE
(Jung, 2014) often cite a tinge of the industrial and are worth a critical eye; notably, and quite in contrast, the adoption of mechanisation in Tuscan vineyards in 2016 was recently lauded as modernisation (Ebhardt, 2016).

Fig. 5. Touring a mid-size Tokaji winery, June 2015. Traditional stake training (foreground) requires hefty manual labour (occasionally horse-drawn plows are used), as well as financial investment where terraces are not pre-existing. Photograph by the author (2015).

Today, hilltop vineyards are often viewed as top-tier, because (thanks to the erosion afforded by decades of wide rows during communism), poor soil conditions require the vine to ‘work’ to reach water and result in lower levels of production (and reportedly higher-quality berries). Communist production would have irrigated these areas or pulled them up entirely (as with many marginal plots). Where vineyards remained un-pulled, rows were cut, and the vines were trained to a high cordon. However, communist practices are to thank for the current conditions (although they rarely enter the terroir narrative of producers, and never positively). The ‘poor’ soil conditions are now thought to train the vine toward quality, while the over-fertilisation of first-class dülő appears
Domesticating the Taste of Place: The New ‘Authentic’

Tokaj terroir is made up of a unique assemblage of geology, ecology, and cultural practices of the region, essentialised and fetishised through endemic wines. As an irreproducible political ecology, the region is protected through international and local policies, including the internationally acknowledged GI. Perhaps the first GI of its kind (with vineyards ranked and enclosed by 1737), Tokaj wine nevertheless depends on a contemporary international reputation of quality rooted in its origin (Joslin, 2006). It also relies on the protection of monopoly rents,
and demonstrable, regulatable links between geographies and product attributes. Following centuries of political-economic and ecological change, renewed attention to terroir-led winemaking in Tokaj aims to restore the region’s international standing.

In this chapter, I have argued for the consideration of terroirs as political-ecological assemblages. While denaturalised through taste discourses, terroir is a site of political ideology and social norms made manifest. In Tokaj, wines have historically been made to suit the values of external markets and ‘palates’; what constitutes ‘local tradition’ may in fact be seen as local responses to external pressures. Further theorisation of these links is required in order to gain insight into the role of human experience and ‘ecologically embedded tastes’ in political-ecological change. As an ideological geography, terroir is an ideal case in which to contemplate the web of politics, social norms, and power relations that underpin coveted wine labels and cast a shadow over the ‘unknown’ terroir of post-socialist Europe (Jung, 2014).

References


