



The Tradition of Tokaj

An Interview with Arno von Wimpffen,
Patricius Fine Wines Managing Partner, Patricius Winery



Arno von Wimpffen at the gates of Patricius Winery

EDITORS' NOTE Arno von Wimpffen has held his current post since February 2007. Prior to this, he was a key account director for Fareva, and before that, a group key account manager for SCA Hygiene Products. He received his M.Sc. in forestry from the University of Vienna (Austria) and received his M.B.A. in International Management from the United Business Institute in Brussels.

WINERY BRIEF The Patricius Winery (patricius.hu and patriciustokaj.com) is found in the Tokaj region of Hungary and was established by the Kékessy family. The winery is a reconstructed winepress house of the vineyard Várhegy. The building was previously owned by Jesuits and various aristocratic families. The characteristics of this old building have been preserved while also being integrated into a modern center of an estate. The Tokaj winery, the famous Aszú, and other Tokaj wines, such as the Furmint, represent the finest achievements of Hungarian wines all over the world. Patricius is a classified First Growth Estate.

How has the business evolved?

The oldest vineyard classification in the world dates back to the 1770s, long before Bordeaux, because Tokaj was important for international trade. It was the main wine consumed by all emperors and kings – the most famous wine in the 18th century. It was traded by Polish, Jewish, and Greek traders out of Tokaj into Poland and Russia, and all over Europe.

Tokaj is an UNESCO World Heritage site so it's the most important wine region of Hungary in terms of history, foreign investment, and quality.

My in-laws are a Hungarian noble family from the countryside – they were landowners and had vineyards, and had to escape in 1956 when communists took over. In the 1990s, they came back and were able to acquire some of the land and they bought a vineyard again.

My wife had been studying medicine in Budapest at the time and she was assigned the task of looking into wine, and she fell in love with the product and the region of Tokaj. She did an internship in Tokaj and got to know the current general manager for our winery, and they looked into possibilities. In the end, she bought 140 hectares of vineyards, 85 of which are in production today.

We are one of the few major investments of a Hungarian family in the region of Tokaj. My father-in-law is a proud Hungarian and it is part of our mission to put the country back on the map, especially in terms of winemaking.

My father-in-law decided to only step into the market when everything was ready: packaging, wines with gold medals, state-of-the-art facilities. We chose the name Patricius because we wanted a Latin name that could be pronounced, spelled, and remembered around the world. Patricius also has the connotation of the noble citizen of Rome and stands for a noble product.

When we started our wine business in 2007, we had zero sales. Today, we are in 22 markets from Brazil to Indonesia, so we are covering almost every continent in the world, but mostly in smaller quantities. Last year, Patricius was also selected as the most beautiful winery in Hungary.

In early 2014, we started with the U.S., and we think it will be the key market for us. America is the biggest wine market in the world with the highest average prices and with consumers that are most open-minded to new products. In the past few months, we have rolled out in seven northeastern states and we're available in leading restaurants, such as Bouley. More recently, we have started to gain excellent wine reviews and media coverage as well.

You mentioned the sweet wines but have you moved outside of that area?

In the beginning, Tokaj stood for sweet wines. In 2005, a lot of wineries were also putting dry wines on the market. Going back in history, Tokaj always produced dry wines as table wines for daily consumption by the locals.

In mid-2000, we were able to expand our consumer base by pushing dry wines because only a small niche drink sweet wines. Price-wise, they are more accessible as well and bring the virtues of Tokaj to a wider public.

We are working with grape varieties that are unknown to the rest of the world, which is exciting in a world where wine lovers want to experiment and taste new things.

Patricius offers a dry Furmint, which is the main grape variety of the region.

We have another wine called Hárslevelű, which means "linden leaf," and people are in love with this grape. We have an excellent product backed by a rich history, and we have the faces of our family standing in front of this product.

How broad is the market reach for the product?

A lot of markets are still small for us. We had placed a lot of hope in Asia, particularly the Chinese market. However, over the past two to three years, the economy has changed and the government has introduced a spending cap for wine, as about

70 percent of wine consumption, particularly fine wines, is linked to government spending, entertainment, and dining. So this is having a strong negative impact on distributors.

Most of the serious dealers are sitting on stocks but do not have enough liquidity in their pockets, so it's difficult to attract buyers at the moment. We attract buyers that are new to the market, and they are exporting other products and want to take some wine into China.

So we decided to shift the focus from Asia to the U.S.

How challenging has it been to spread the message of Hungary's heritage as a great wine producer?

Many are aware of Tokaj, but most have never tried a wine from the region and they don't know anything about its history.

So it's not just selling our wine but also selling the region of Tokaj and putting Hungary back on the world map.

Hungary has a strong agricultural base and government officials are going to subsidize the export of agricultural products, but their focus used to be on products like meat because that is where the volume is; it's not with wine.

They have, however, realized that wine is linked to tourism and regional development, and that's why we're seeing the first signs of a shift in government thinking.

Is sustainability a focus for you?

At the winery, we're not yet working with biodynamic, but we will start this soon in a newly planted plot that is perfect for this focus. But we follow the rules of winemaking, which have been established centuries ago; therefore, we are naturally adhering to principles of sustainability.

We are not talking about mass production – everything is handmade. There is no mechanized harvesting; everything is done by hand.

Isn't this more than just business for you?

A winery is not a massive cash-generating machine; it's something into which you have to put a lot of love, passion, and patience.

Also, everything is based on the tradition of Tokaj and it's very strictly regulated. If you want to produce one of the classic wines, the rules say the wine has to be matured in a barrel for a minimum of two years, has to mature in a bottle for a minimum of one year, and has to be in a standardized bottle – and only then can you market it. So you need time. ●