

Travel

Big trips, short breaks and going green

Boozy in Budapest



On the hunt for new ways to wine and dine, *Elysia Brenner* explores Budapest just in time for the city's biggest wine fest

For a European city, Budapest feels unusually foreign at first. The difficult-to-convert, zero-laden currency (the forint) makes us feel like we're buying Park Place whenever we pay a bill. The language barrier is worse, although entry-level words such as *köszönöm* (thank you) seem simple after we're asked to wrap our tongues around *egészségedre* (cheers).

This is part of the fun: it's just a two-hour flight to a new world of ancient bathhouses, labyrinthine caves, graffiti-strewn bars and – this is the most attractive part for us – wine lists promising exotic name puzzles such as Tokaji Hárslevelű and Szekszárdi Bikavér.

Going in, we've heard of Tokaji wine, which earned many a royal fan in the 17th century when the region stumbled upon *Botrytis cinerea*, a 'noble rot' used to make pricey, super-intense dessert wines. We've tasted the famous 'Bull's Blood' wine (see page 92), a victim of Communism's reputation-destroying mass-production practices. We've heard that a euro stretches a long way.

All in all, we're intrigued. The clincher is an obscenely affordable deal (€45/night, Jetsetter.com) for



Pride of place: Budapest's Széchenyi Chain Bridge

four-star Hotel Continental Zara (VII. Dohány utca 42-44, +361 815 1000/continentalhotelzara.com), an art deco former bathhouse smack in the middle of crumbling nightlife-centric District VII, also known as the Jewish Quarter.

Unlike the elegantly spiralling logic of Paris's numbered *arrondissements*, Budapest's districts look like they were numbered by a spider on methamphetamine. To get our bearings, we join a mostly younger crowd in a Free Walking Tour (+36 20 929 5760/riptobudapest.hu), a two and a half-hour stroll through Budapest pairing a peek at the city's gory history with an introduction to Hungarian humour and bathhouse etiquette, the latter

of which comes in handy on our visit to the city's least-Ottoman but most-famous baths, Széchenyi (XIV. Állatkerti körút 11, +361 363 3210/szechenyibath.com).

There, creeping through the over-sized concrete fortress of more than twenty baths, steam rooms, saunas and spaces for some rather down-to-earth massage treatments (no incense or Enya here), our indoor exploration is somewhat marred by the cloying mist carrying the scents of sulphur, body odour and, occasionally, urine. So we happily stick to the heated outdoor pools, enjoying the impressive architecture of Széchenyi's massive courtyard.

Budapest's International Wine Festival

Celebrating its 20th birthday this year, the Budapest International Wine Festival (+361 203 8507/aborfesztival.hu), the country's biggest, offers an excellent crash course in Hungarian wine 7-12 September, when more than 170 wine producers offer up thousands of wines and local street food. This year's event also places a special focus on sparkling wines (*pezsgő*), with the unique opportunity to directly compare the Hungarian wines with their Champagne muse, as the festival's special guest for 2011 is France.

In the words of Gizella Winery's Szilágyi, 'This is the only wine festival where we think: We must be there. Everyone is there.'

Wooden stands crowd the terraces of the former royal palace perched on top of Buda Castle hill; the panoramic views of flat, busy Pest a river away thankfully providing a sense of space when the crowds get to be too much (as they're wont to do come evening).

Tickets are 2,500 Ft/€9.50 for one day or 7,000 Ft/€26 for a five-day pass and include a souvenir crystal tasting glass and carrying bag, plus free entry to special exhibits and activities like folk dancing and wine-judging training. Related events such as a photo exhibition, gala concert, wine auction and lecture series continue all month.

Budapest is in fact full of grand turn-of-the-century (here called 'Secessionist') architecture, often falling into decay, but sometimes brilliantly remade into Budapest's famous 'ruin bars'. Granddaddy of them all, Szimpla Kert (VII. Kazinczy utca 14, szimpla.hu) is a carefully mismatched brick circus of atmospheric hideaways and quirky courtyards fostering at least five bars, plus a hookah bar and a pizza stand.

Although this local-friendly tourist hangout is no trap, we head out in search of a more authentic outdoor experience. We land in the rickety chairs of Kertem (XIV. Olof Palme sétány 3, +36 30 225 1399/kertemfesztival.hu;



Vinely balanced: the grounds of the Disznókő Winery

Wines to try

Keep an eye out for these favourites from beyond Tokaj:

BIKAVÉR ('BULL'S BLOOD')

The story goes that, during the great siege on Eger Castle in 1552, after a month holding off an Ottoman force with 20-30 times their numbers, the Hungarians broke open casks of the region's wines, spilling it down their beards, staining their faces and armour red as they drank. The superstitious Turks, convinced the Hungarians gained their ferocity from drinking the blood of bulls, retreated home. This last part may or may not be true, but the dark blend of Kadarka, Kékfrankos and mainly Bordeaux grapes known as BikaVér today was actually concocted in rival wine region Szekszárd in the 19th century, when it was popularised as a medicine to strengthen the stomach. Szekszárd's generally fuller-bodied blend (see, for example, Ferenc Takler) is the one to try.

KADARKA

Largely replaced by easier-growing varieties such as Kékfrankos and Portugieser in the Communist era, signature Hungarian grape Kadarka is making a comeback. Recognized by its intense leathery or petrol smell, this usually light-bodied red also makes an intriguing Siller (dark rosé), but still 'needs a lot more time to find its way,' according to our guide Gábor Bánfalvi.

OLASZRIZLING ('ROMAN RIESLING')

Riesling it is not, but it is not unlikely that this ancient variety, found throughout Central Europe, originated in Rome. Now the most widely planted white grape in Hungary, it was introduced here less than a century ago. This typically mineral souvenir of Communism stands out for its characteristic bitter-almond finish. Great examples are available from Somló, Hungary's smallest wine region, or Lake Balaton.

EZERJÓ ('1,000 TIMES GOOD')

A 19th-century legend that drinking Ezerjó wine on the wedding night guaranteed conception of a boy made this wine a popular wedding gift in Hapsburg Austria. The star of small, Austrian-influenced winemaking region Mór, the high acidity of this rare, fiery mineral white grape is generally rounded out by barrel aging. In the Ezerjós of Bozók Winery, perhaps the biggest producer in town, there is a distinct bubblegum flavour in the finish.

How to get there

Both KLM and Malev Hungarian Airlines offer direct flights to Budapest starting at €90 round-trip. A taxi from the airport to the city centre costs around 4,000 Ft/€15.

closed October-March), a vast, tree-filled space in City Park (*Városliget*), made festive with strings of coloured lights, a vinyl-covered bar and a stage for live music.

After some pointing and smiling at the in-house Serbian grill, we land the best-value meal deal of the trip: two succulent slabs of burger on bread plus alcoholic drinks for the equivalent of €6, while the friendly bartender spruces up our bottom-shelf wines with soda water, introducing us to local barfly favourite *fröcs* (sounds like 'fruhch').

For some serious wine orientation, though, we head to Buda Castle, host of the annual International Wine Festival (which takes place this year 7-12 September, see page 91), as well as several atmospheric cellars dedicated to initiating newcomers into the cult of Hungarian wine appreciation. Our pick is Faust Wine Cellar (I. Hess András tér 1-3, +361 889 6873/gbwine.eu; closed 6-14 September), tucked into the medieval Dominican Cloisters beneath the Hilton Hotel.

After presenting us with a scroll with artfully burned edges – our tasting menu, personalised based on our preferences – our host, Gábor Nagy, walks us through each wine's naming, region (including maps), grapes, makers and relevant history.

Armed with new knowledge, we're ready to take on the city's restaurant menus, where Hungarian wine reigns supreme, its mineral acidity almost crying out for food. The money saved on the Serbian grill is quickly put to use in an evening at newly Michelin-

starred Onyx (V. Vörösmarty tér 7-8, +36 30 508 0622/onyxrestaurant.hu), where a daring seven-course menu – with wine pairings, of course – comes at a high cost (28,000 Ft/€100; lunch specials starting at 3,490 Ft/€13). Enjoying these disassembled and creatively reassembled (mostly successfully) Hungarian classics in an

On restaurant menus, Hungarian wine reigns supreme, its mineral acidity almost crying out for food

opulent, white-glove setting nevertheless seems a bargain compared to similar restaurants here at home.

Looking for some traditional fare for comparison, we find that Fülemlé (VIII. Köfaragó utca 5, +361 266 7947/fulemlé.hu) complements its Jewish-Hungarian feasts with a varied and almost shockingly well-priced wine list.

As we see no reason to stay dry between meals either, on an afternoon shopping detour we pop by one-year-old wine bar DropShop (V. Balassi Bálint utca 27, +36 30 345 3739/dropshop.hu), whose minimalist modern decor does nothing to detract from its wall of wines, 60 of which are on offer by the glass at any given time.

We are told we can buy bottles of anything we like at wine-shop prices, but we're saving bottle space for wine-schilling stalwart Bortársaság (V. Vécsey utca 5, +361 269 3286/bortarsasag.hu; see website for more locations), where we are disappointed in our hopes of picking up some of their wine-filled chocolates.

Wine is clearly everywhere in Budapest, more than we'd expected. But to really get a handle on Hungarian wine, we need to get out of the city and go to the source. Luckily, Taste Hungary's tours (+36 30 298 0076/tastehungary.com), run by American foodie and writer Carolyn Bánfalvi and her husband Gábor, offer the opportunity to get up close and intimate with winemakers in a region of choice under Gábor's expert tutelage. As any discussion of the Hungarian wine industry begins in the gently rolling hills of Tokaj, France's Louis XIV's famed 'wine of kings, king of wines' seems a natural place for us to begin, too.

Entering Tokaj's eastern corner of Hungary, the landscape begins to softly undulate with vine-textured humps occasionally punctuated by the yellow of the ubiquitous sunflower fields. Three hours after leaving town, we're gawking at the Karádi-Berger Winery's (+36 70 615 4797/karadiesberger.hu) labyrinth of cellars in the village of Erdőbénye ('wine forest'), portions caked in fuzzy black clumps of *Cladosporium cellare* mould, considered important in regulating humidity and aging wines in this region.

Worrying about my bare shoulders

in the 16-degree air, our friendly yet humble host Zsolt Berger taps us glasses of his newest dry Furmint – to be bottled on Monday – directly from the steel drums. We are struck by the strong volcanic mineral tones, bringing a smile to his face.

Retiring to the courtyard of his ruin-in-restoration to sip in the sun with his family, we learn the difference between the region's three main grapes: acidic and mineral-rich Furmint (by far the most prolific); rich and nutty Hárslevelű (named 'linden leaf' for its smell); and fresh and floral Yellow Muscat.

Our small group is full of tipsy enthusiasm as we pull up

to Hudácskó Winery (+364 739 6168/hudacsco-pince.hu) in Bodrogkisfalud.

Our generous (if reserved) hostess, encouraged by our excitement, complements our four courses of traditional Hungarian catfish paprika, duck from the yard, fruitcake and more, with tastes of no less than 12 mostly sweet wines. These include both varietals, like the toffee-tasting Hárslevelű, and aszú (botrytis) blends of the three grapes – here with a more modern taste, like a pumped-up Sauternes, than the traditionally oxidative blends of fellow Tokaj-Bene Winery (+364 739 6017/tokajbor-bene.hu) we sipped at Faust the day before.

The day's pièce de résistance, though, is a once-in-a-lifetime taste of rare Aszú Esszencia (a half-bottle costs 31,000 Ft/€113), a nectar of such an intense sugar concentration (500g/litre) that, even after years of fermentation, it cannot reach an alcohol level higher than 5 per cent.

After a pit stop in Tokaj town's tiny center (missable if you've seen

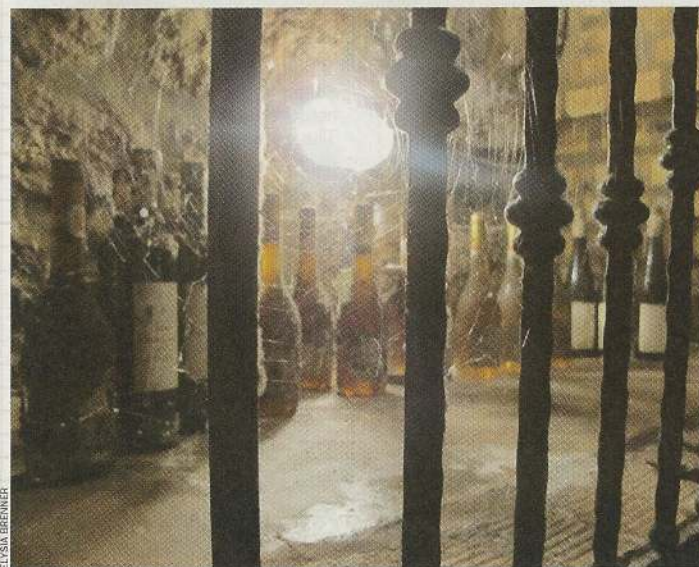
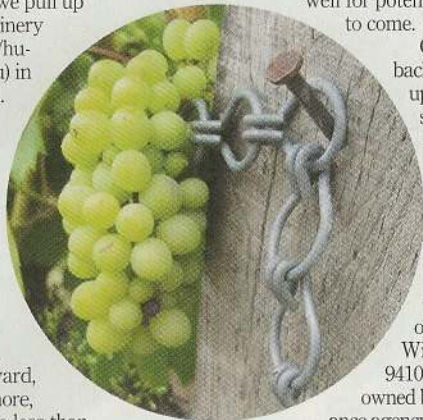
other cellars but for the charming Bachian fountain figure), our final wine stop is Gizella Winery (+364 735 3231/gizellapince.hu), a charming cottage-shaped building at the edge of town guarded by an exuberantly friendly Labrador.

Here, young winemaker László Szilágyi, eager as he is to experiment with terroir and winemaking methods, shows us promise that this wine region steeped in tradition is also moving forward. We bag a bottle of his 2005 aszú 5 puttonyos (the measure of the wine's sugar intensity, ranging from 3 to 6), which promises to age well for potentially decades to come.

On our way back west, we soak up the wine with some quite mild local cheeses at a hilltop table, pausing during a stroll through the cinematically sprawling vineyards of Disznókö Winery (+364 756 9410/diszno.hu; owned by French insurance agency AXA).

Back in Budapest after sundown, our overly ambitious plan is to end our night on the Buda side, letting the wine and weekend soak away at the Rudas Baths (I. Döbrentei tér 9, +361 356 1322/rudasbaths.com), universally recommended as the best of the Ottoman-style bathing joints, and conveniently open for mixed swim until 4am on weekends.

However, District VII's more immediate distractions derail us. Instead, we end our weekend with a break from the vino in favour of the overly strong vats of alcohol churned out by Szimpla Kert's deadly cocktail stand, our intensely debated bottle-packing strategies for the trip home slurring more and more with each sip.



Behind bars: the cellar at the Hudácskó Winery

debalie

PRESENTS

RESTREPO

10 years of journalism on the War on Terror in Afghanistan

15 September
20.30

"This utterly immersive documentary puts you on the Afghanistan frontline."
— Time Out New York Critics Pick

Award-winning documentary Restrepo will be shown, introduced by the director of World Press Photo, Michiel Munneke and a video-message by Sebastian Junger, one of the makers. Sadly, world-famous photographer Tim Hetherington, the other maker, died in a bombing in Libya earlier this year.

A discussion will be held afterwards on the role of the press in the formation of a public opinion concerning the Dutch mission in Afghanistan.

TimeOut
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The evening is a collaboration of De Balie and Human Rights Watch, tickets (€8,50 or €6) can be purchased at www.debalie.nl

Time Out Amsterdam and De Balie are offering you 2 tickets for this special event. Interested? Mail your name before the 8th of September to: stuff@timeoutamsterdam.nl

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