Essencia

By BEN NARASIN

dessert by the spoonful

Essencia is treated by its Royal Tokaji maker with reverence, as indicated by its protective, velvet-lined wood box and accompanying crystal spoon, as well as its $500+ price tag.
We pure gold fermented into wine, the result would be Essencia — a rare, hard
to-find, expensive nectar of exceptional purity and quality. Its name references
the most elite classification of Tokaji Azsú, sweet wines whose provenance is
the Tokaj region of Hungary. Azsú wines are made from shriveled grapes
afflicted by botrytis cinerea, the same noble rot that spawners Sauveterne, Bordeaux’s signature sweet wine, and other
late harvest wines like Germany’s Beerenauslese and Trockenbeerenauslese.

To collect what is, even from the largest plots, a small yield of grapes,
weathered human hands take pass after pass through the vine rows, calling
only the most perfectly botrytised berries. Traditionally the botrytised grapes
were mashed in a puttung (a wood basket, also known as a hod), into which
grapes were collected holding approximately 25 liters (or 6.5 gallons), and
added to a cask of still dry wine. The more puttungen added, the sweeter the
resulting Azsú, whose sweetness level correlates to a six-tier classification
system from the base-line three puttungen up to the pinnacle Essencia,
sometimes known as Essencia or simply Essencia.

When the original classification system was established, Tokaji Azsú was
simply measured by the number of hodas added to a barrel. Hence the
number of hods used in the production of the Azsú created the familiar
numeric puttungen designations.

To drink the wine in the traditional manner
would be a disservice to its rarity and to the
unique temporal experience it delivers

While the process of adding whole clusters of botrytised grapes continues,
and sweetness levels are still indicated by puttungen, a more precise method of
modern measurement has been enlisted: the number of grams of sugar per
liter in the finished wine. The higher the sugar, the higher the puttungen
number noted on the label.

A three puttungen Azsú must contain at least 60 grams of sugar per liter,
but no more than 90; for each ranking thereafter, another 30 grams of sugar
are added to the range, so that five puttungen (the sweetest Azsú made by
many houses) measures between 120 and 150 grams and a six puttungen
between 150 and 180 grams. As a point of comparison, a lightly sweet
Riesling will have a sugar measurement in the single-digit grams per liter,
while a German Beerenauslese will clock in as high as 128.

Essencia stands above all other Tokaji wines in sugar content (280 grams
per liter minimum), complexity and just about every other metric. It bears no
puttungen on its label because it is never blended with a dry base wine.

This ultra-rare elixir is made from the most rot-fell buff of juice, known as
free-run, emitted from the botrytised grapes as they rest after harvest. The weight of
the grapes alone provides the delicate pressure to extract small tears of juice.

“You need about 200 pounds of healthy grapes shriveled to Azsú berries to
make one bottle of Essencia,” notes Ian Howkins, managing director of Royal
Tokaji, one of Hungary’s most distinguished Tokaji producers.

Once gathered, the free-run juice is barely touched other than to store it in
glass demijohns wherein it develops uninterrupted. “The process is exactly as
its always has been. Nothing is added. It’s as genuine and true as it possibly
can be,” Howkins says.

Because of the high-sugar content in the grapes, the process of
fermentation is glacially slow and resulting alcohol levels as low as two to
three percent. Howkins says that with their first vintage in 1993, Royal Tokaji
found “to our astonishment it took over seven years to finish fermenting.”
The sugar content also ensures a very low level of alcohol.

In addition to taking a seeming eternity to ferment, the quantities of wine
the process yields are minuscule. Many producers blend their free-run with
their very best Azsú to elevate the sugars and classification of the wine. For
this purpose, it’s typically used in creating five or six puttungen wines or the
distinct Azsú Essencia, which is the bridge between the traditional Azsú
wines and the most rare Essencia. To be classified aszú Essencia, the wine
must contain more than 180 grams of sugar per liter, more than six puttungen,
but below Essencia.

What little Azsú Essencia is made is about to come to an end. Due to
concerns of market confusion, the body that governs the Tokaji wine
classification has moved to eliminate the largely exceptional category. Its fate
has not yet been formally adopted, but because the category is so in need of
varnish, Royal Tokaji produced its last Azsú Essencia vintage in 1996.

As for the true and pure Essencia, it is produced in such small quantities
that very little ever makes it to market. Some producers merely bottle it for
family and friends (good friends at that). Others allocate it solely for their
special guests. “I'd rather pour a taste for 2,000 visitors than sell a handful
of bottles,” says Domokos Attilla, managing director of Dobogo, a producer in
Tokaj. Attilla keeps a small, square-cut, crystal bottle of the maple-syrup-
colored amberina in his office for the occasional guest who is given a
thimbleful taste. Licking the glass is not uncommon.

Only a handful of producers actually create enough Essencia to bottle it for
sale, which makes it extremely expensive. Small bottles, often 375-mls,
routinely sell for $500 on release, assuming any can be found for purchase. (A
recent search of Northern California retailers revealed the wine is only
available in that area through special order.)

Most of the best Tokaji houses today are owned by non-natives. Château
Pajzos, which was privatized by the Hungarian government in 1992,
acquired French owners. The estate is owned by the same owner as that of
Château Clinet in Pomerol, and produces excellent Tokaji with a focus on
the higher puttungen wines. Pajzos even employs Michel Rolland as a
consulting enologist. >
Tasting BAR

The wines that follow were tasted open by the author in December. Scores are based on the 100-Point rating system.

Royal Tokaji, 2000 Eszencia, Miskolci Hegyalja, Hungary (Bottle Number 6/09855) — 2071: Dark amber color fading to gold at the rim. Fresh nose of honey and free-run juice complemented by faint floral qualities. Medium-thick entry imparts a lusciousness of bright fruit — from sweet, free-run gewürztraminer to dried, honeyed and fresh nectarine and apricot with a touch of butterscotch. Light acidity brightens any clinging aspect or suggestion of thickness. Finishes in the throat and memory longer than in the mouth. Score: 96

Château Pétrus, 1995, Eszencia, Tokaji, Hungary (Bottle Number CX288) — 6500: Bright grade-B maple syrup color fading to amber at the rim. Rich honey and caramel aromas with complexities of dried nectarine, apricot and plum. Luscious flavors of brown sugar, caramelized white and yellow stone fruit (both dried and fresh), ranging from peach and nectarine to apricot. Butterscotch notes drive the vanilla- and nutmeg-scented finish. Score: 96 — BN

Arguably the best-known and most attainable Eszencia is bottled by Royal Tokaji. While Hungary was under communist control, the quality of wine effectively evaporated. When the nation “sorprised” to trade in the early 1990s, producers and entrepreneurs lured by Tokaji’s fabled past returned to recreate the legendary liquid. Royal Tokaji, founded by a syndicate headed by British wine writer Hugh Johnson, was one of the first.

“We wanted to produce an Eszencia that was genuine, as produced in the pre-Communist era,” Howkins says, “which meant literally the free-run juice of the Azúl berries. You can argue it’s the closest expression of terroir of any wine. It’s the least-interfered-with wine that we have available.” Each individual producer decides which vintages warrant making an Eszencia style wine. Royal Tokaji deemed the 1993, 1999 and 2000 vintages ultra-Eszencia-caliber. Howkins says 2003 and 2007 will “probably” follow, and that “It’s a bit like vintage Port; these things have a habit of coming around every three, four, five years.”

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Every facet of Eszencia’s production is treated with reverence by Royal Tokaji. The bottle is packaged in a protective, velvet-lined wood box and accompanied by a crystal spoon. “It’s an extraordinary liquid,” Howkins says with typical British reserve. “It shows viscosity, and is not easily poured into a glass.”

For many, the spoon is the most appropriate vessel because to actually drink the liquid in the traditional manner would be a disservice, not just to its rarity, but to the unique temporal experience it delivers. Eszencia’s rich, dense luxury is best sipped and savored, and savored some more. A whiff with sweet, luxurious, regal flavors present themselves on entry, in the mid-palate and in the finish, and are often followed by a latent surprise in the form of a brief fireworks of flavor. After each tiny sip, a long, reflective pause is suggested before dipping into another.

Stories abound of European royals devoted to Eszencia. Among the most recollected, when Louis XIV of France gave a bottle of it to Madame Pompadour, he purportedly proclaimed, “This is the wine of kings, and the king of wines.” Yet while it’s always been a nectar worthy of a royal banquet, Eszencia is an attainable modern luxury. When sipped by the spoonful, it’s a sweet pleasure that will add luster to any special meal. W