

Supplementary material to:

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Sandor Marai: Hungarian Wine (1941)

Translated by [Gabor G. Gyukics](#) (published [online](#) in 2004). Reproduced with permission.

Wine is a man thing; one must talk about it softly. The best way to do that is with a glass of wine. When I'm old I want a wine cellar. I have strongly decided that. I do not want anything else from life. I have already found a place for my cellar not far from my home. I'll be walking a lot and will protect my city past from the people of the neighborhood; the wine growers, the owners of the orchards, and wine dressers. If blind fate will be on my side, by the time I turn seventy, honest people of their own world will take me as an honest man who knows where to die. Because there is no better place to die than under a walnut tree before a wine cellar in autumn time, right after harvest, when the young wine is dozing and being fermented in the wine casks, the walnuts have been beaten from the tree and the sun still has its faint strength the same way as old men's love does. I'll be sitting there on a bench with my back to the cellar where my wine is resting, leaning my elbow on the goat-legged table. I can see the island of Csepel in the depths with the lowland of my home country in the distance. During this time I'll read only thousand-year-old books while drinking five-year-old Somló wine. This is how I'm waiting for death.

Until it comes, sometimes I imagine how my cellar will look. There'll be twenty casks of wine lined up in the vaulted depth. I'll chalk up the vintage year and the name of every wine on the stave of every cask. What is already certain is that I'll surely have three casks of Riesling. The Riesling, among Hungarian wines, is like a cliché in the human mind: it ties the deep meaning of humanity together. Hungarian men, do not be afraid of clichés: it radiates a self-protecting power. So there will be Riesling, Italian, it won't be older than three-four years and its smoothness reflects its Latin culture and the Pannonian refinement of viniculture. Hungarian man rarely finds disappointment in Riesling. A lot of vile cheap wine is served all over the country, but the Italian named Hungarian Riesling has a certain homely intimacy; one drinks it the way one talks to one's relatives. It does have a type I have become familiar with in bottled state: it's a Rhine Riesling from the Dias winery of Prince Festetich.

It's not on the market, or if it is then it's bottled and available at rare places.

At one time it was the noblest Hungarian wine, only the Somló kept up with it. This Festetich kind of Rhine Riesling had an ashen-green color and its aroma was similar to a very old French Chablis. It had some kind of character that was the rarest in wine and man alike, and it slowly disappeared: it had a cachet, a sealed character. This phenomenon is nearly extinct. Fine model wines and model people take its place. What Riesling was in Hungary the French called white wine without closely referring to its type. That certain glass of wine which is placed before the guests in a restaurant, and which is this wine, is like bread the nourishment of the country's body, something universal and reliable. Should Riesling run into trouble in Hungary, then I do not want to live anymore.

The cellar will be deep. I'll get a string of spiced sausage from the butcher in Sopron who makes his own landjager in one of the side streets of the castle district. I'll keep ham and horseradish over here and, of course, a wine-taster gourd and a few pint bottles for the guests. The pint is an old measure; our grandfathers used it. It holds one and a half liters, and a Hungarian man, when he reaches manhood, places his portion of pint next to his supper every evening. Every honest man can take and wish for a pint of Homoki (sandy) or Badacsonyi wine every evening before his prime time. The situation was different around Kassa (Kosice), the place I come from, where the noble men drank Szamorodni, of course, and the workers of the markets drank the same in the wine-growers shop named "To The Golden Imagination". They drank Szamorodni by the glass; only the Poles guzzled it down to quench their thirst. Hungarian men wisely and cautiously lived with table wine. Every wine was called table wine, from Riesling to Sylvania, which allowed you to wake up with an easy head the next day. I have heard it from Géza Szüllő that the name "table wine" came from the table of the young Franz Joseph: he was the first among Hungarian kings and Austrian kaisers who - with a great knowledge of mankind - ordered that on the

occasions of more confidential luncheons a bottle of light wine must stand before the guests, from which the person could take sips as his mood allowed, pouring it himself. Only finer and more 'official' wines were handed out glass by glass by the pages. So it was "Table Wine" in the Monarchy, at the king's table which was consumed by every guest according to his/her own taste, measure and necessity. When Franz Joseph decided on this he probably didn't know much about wine, but he knew people well.

And because I loathe drunkards the same way I loathe dyspeptics who wryly mix wine with mineral water - how long and why do you want to live so cautiously my woeful friend? - I'll keep a superannuated German bartender who will teach my guests how to make spritzer. Because soda water is not mineral water, we should remember that. It is true that soda water is already civilization, but Hungarians needed the trickeries of generations and centuries to learn and invent spritzer, which is the secret of long life. It is very peculiar but true that private men cannot make spritzer. In vain you learn the lesson. In vain you buy the right glasses, yes, in vain you measure and mix two deciliters of wine with one deciliter of soda water with meticulous care: the spritzer's formula is known only to professional bartenders. When Hungarian man invented this marvellous, wise and careful formula, which is fairly concentrated to stimulate the imagination of wine-drinking men and tempered so as not to harm any noble organs, he proved to be experienced in the matters of life. Because every mineral water is a rueful thing, for it spoils the wine's character, but soda water doesn't change the aroma of the white wine from Eger and Badacsony, and a carefully proportionate spritzer, thanks to the century-long practice, protects Hungarian man from all kinds of intemperance. Private men cannot make a spritzer. Learning the mixing secret of the "Joke", the "Superintendent", the "Long Step" is easier than learning the professional secret of spritzer-making. The way a good bartender pours the wine in the three-deciliter glass with one hand while his other adds the right amount of soda water: this is a secret only professionals understand. In Hungary, many bar habitués would sit at home if private men could learn the secret of the spritzer. But unfortunately, this is impossible.

That is why I'll hire an old bartender and we'll examine the wine casks together in the spring. I shall have Bikavér (Bull's Blood) too, not in a cask though, but rather in straw roped bottles. I do respect Bikavér, but carefully and from a distance. I know two kinds of this dense, passionate wine: the more placable and sweetish; and the heavy, harsh kind. The second is the real one. The owner of the restaurant in Eger serves me the second kind when I chance to walk in. Though he doesn't serve it to strangers - mainly because there isn't much of it in the cellars of Eger. This harsh Bikavér digs itself frighteningly deep

into the nerves of man. It practically burrows the primary matter of the human soul. Sometimes, after drinking three deciliters of it, I can remember Portuguese words and Greek proverbs and some Chinese man teaches me how to be wise, as if in a whisper: everything is beautiful, but all will pass, so it's smarter to remain sober.

The Somló wine is a different story. For a starter, its name is a cause for confusion already: it's been pronounced as "Somlai" and "Somlyói", but all these are clumsy speech defects. Its honest name is "Somló" and like great, vanishing families this wine requires that its name is pronounced correctly and honestly. This is the prince of Hungarian wines. It is cultivated in limited areas and not for long: it is a tired wine, these kinds of grapes will disappear soon. Its aroma is similar to the white Burgundy but more noble. There is one kind of Somló named "Golden Fire" and this is what it is: the mixture of fire and gold. This wine is persuasive. It says: "Live". This is the only word it says, but with such confidential strength, as Latin verses talk about morality. How much this wine has sucked up in the shining sun, in the century-old aromas!

The spice and secret power of the soil, the fire of the sun, the wisdom of rainy autumns, the secretive formulas of nature's kitchen ennobled itself to golden wisdom in this curious wine which has, as far as I know, only one other wine that bears resemblance to it in the world: the Pouilly Fumée, a smoke-flavored white Burgundy. The spirit of these two wines is the same: they are not rivals, but rather brilliant brothers. Because wine not only has flavor, aroma and alcohol content but above all, soul, too. As if the people who cultivate and drink it had given something from their soul's secret content to the homemade wine. The most noble qualities of Hungarian men live in Somló wine: Eastern wisdom and Western culture. It has something in it from the tranquility of Asia and the curiosity of Europe. This is the most fortunate mixture of wine and man.

At harvest, I'll invite guests who don't like music, don't know much about politics and are able to sit under the walnut tree in silence. What should I give them? ... Ham with horseradish, they come naturally, potatoes baked on live coal and white Liptai cheese-curd, the famous Rozsnyai store curd in wooden tubs without paprika and anchovy. No life-long experiment and persuasiveness are enough to convince my contemporaries what a perfect wine snack the natural Liptai is, and what an improper fashion it is to complicate it with onion, mustard and paprika, something that nature created itself. Pure wine requires simple, pure food: even Chinese people know this, who do not drink wine, since they import grape wine from Turkestan next to their own rice wine, the poor devils! When my cellar is ready then the bakers of

Soroksár bake white bread again and Bácska sends steamed bacon for my harvest. This is how we will sit in a glittering autumn afternoon in front of the iron door of the cellar on the long bench. Eating with penknives or with our hands because a nobleman does not use foreign utensils for a private meal. Wine glasses are in front of us and, in the depth, the homeland is visible as if it separated itself from the golden bath of the autumn with hazy lines! We sit in silence.

Behind us, in the depth of the cellar, the casks are mumbling: the Riesling, the Somló, the Sýlvani, the Badacsonyi, the pale yellow wine for the mass from the benevolent teachers' clergy, and the tame vintage of the Hungarian land, the everlasting companion of more joyful summer evenings, the affable Kadarka which is not a true wine, but a mild, amusing drink. The wine lives and mumbles in the cellar and among the branches of the walnut tree fat wasps are buzzing, far in the distance a ship swims in the Danube, brings and takes goods to and fro on the eternal road among good-willing folks of the peaceful world. In the vine lands of Pannonia singing girls wash their feet and tread the clusters. We will all grow old, the owner of the cellar and his guests, only thousand-

year-old books are worth mentioning among us, wine must be at least five years old to talk about it: we do not want revenge and have already forgotten those whom we wanted to forgive. We watch the land, drink the wine, and continuously pronounce Hungarian words which are as old as the land. Wine cannot tolerate garrulous people. It is an ancient observation, the garrulous guest who is concerned about the vanity of the world cannot take wine.

I live for this moment; what I'm doing in the meantime is only preparation. I don't think highly about it. We'll be all-wise and spill a drop on the ground from the first glass according to a very old sacrificial tradition. When the first star appears we'll lock the iron door of the cellar and, leaning on short canes, we'll walk home. The night is cool already, the shadow figures of the companion are swallowed by the charm of the October evening. If we have lived or if we have not, is it important at all?... We'll be all wise like the wine we drank and chatter about the judgement of the generation yet to come. Because the foundation of every wisdom that a Hungarian man learnt from Hungarian wine and culture is this: one must live and ignore the judgement of the world. Everything else is vanity.