

# Out of the Rubble

## The Hungarian Wine Industry Rebuilds After Communism w/ a Focus on Reds

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When giving tours of their hometown, natives of Budapest take a special pleasure in pointing out how much of the city has been destroyed. By most accounts, 75 percent of Budapest was leveled during the Nazi occupation and the subsequent siege by the Russian army.

What wasn't reduced to rubble was brought low by the occupying Soviets during the years after the war — drop ceilings hid colorful mosaics, rickety elevators defaced grand staircases — the architecture of Budapest was made common in pursuit of communist practicality.

Yet over several generations, Hungarians had acquired a knack for rebuilding, having already been conquered by the Turks and the Hapsburgs before WWI. Several of the graceful bridges that cross the Danube, for instance, are exact replicas of bridges that the German army destroyed during its retreat in 1944.

Budapest is still uncompromisingly beautiful even when compared to other European capitals and is just getting more so as the city scrubs the Cold War grime off its secessionist palaces.

Perhaps weary of the persistent destruction of their past, the citizens of Budapest have even preserved the populist statues of the communist era — albeit in a park 15 km from the city center.

Of course, some things take more time to recover from decades of neglect. During the Cold War, the communist government effectively put a drop ceiling on the Hungarian wine industry. A slavish faith in mechanization and standardization hobbled a tradition of viniculture dating back to the Romans.

With each new harvest, a new generation of Hungarian winemakers, too young to have bottled wine before the war, is rediscovering the country's incredible enological potential. Wine drinkers in America should be pleased to know that the Hungarian wine industry is once again standing tall.

Egri Bikavér is still the most famous Hungarian wine blend. This "Bull's Blood" that flooded American shelves during the Cold War had all the charm of a battleship-gray Lada, but its low price kept it on the tables of bohemians and college students in this country and in Europe.

Although Bikavér is produced in several regions of Hungary, the wine has become almost synonymous with Eger (Egri means "from Eger"), one of Hungary's most productive wine regions.

The rich volcanic soil on the steep southern slopes of the Mátra and Bükk ranges and a warm, dry climate provide ideal growing conditions for many red grapes, both indigenous

Hungarian varieties such as Kekoporto, Kékfrankos, and Kadarka as well as Cabernet Franc and Zweigelt.

All contemporary Hungarian winemakers understand that the Bikavér name has been devalued; they differ over whether the Bikavér reputation is salvageable and if it is worth saving at all. Regardless, excellent red-wine blends from Eger — some bearing the Bikavér name, some not — are hitting American shores in record numbers.

István Tóth worked as an agricultural planner during the Cold War years and watched his communist bosses abandon vineyards on Eger's most prized slopes because their tractors couldn't operate on the steep grade.

When the communist grip started to loosen in the mid-1980s, Tóth plotted in secret to restore these vineyards to their former glory. His Egri Bikavér is a result of that planning.

Jeff Connell, buyer at Astor Wines & Spirits, calls Tóth's wine "very elegant."

As a winemaker, Tóth tries to spotlight the goût de terroir of Eger present in the grapes rather than covering the flavors with heavy oak, as in the bad old days.

"Tóth's Bikavér really has a nice pure fruit expression and fine tannins," Connell said. Tóth's bottles are



**Tóth in His Vineyard:** Reviving Hungary's wine

brought to the U.S. by Monarchia Wines ([monarchiawines.com](http://monarchiawines.com)), Hungary's first wine negotiant/producer. Monarchia's wine director, Tamas Pók, is one of the most prominent winemakers in Hungary today.

Although Pók experiments with some single-varietal bottles, his Eger blends are solidifying Monarchia's reputation in the international wine world.

The 2000 Monarchia Egri Cuvee is a Merlot/Cabernet Franc blend with a touch of oak to balance its lively acidity and ripe berry and plum flavors.

Pók's potential as a winemaker is even more evident in the 1999 Rhapsody in Red, a medium/full-bodied masterpiece suitable for aging with plum, cherry, and vanilla flavors and a long, full finish. ■

*Monarchia wines will be featured at Michael's Restaurant (24 W. 55th St., 212-767-0555) on Dec. 3 for "A Winter's Eve" feast.*