

In early December I was lucky enough to be invited along by my friends at Taste Hungary for a day of wine tasting in Eger. If you are like me, your first taste of Hungarian wine was a mass-produced Bikavér – which you picked off the supermarket shelf for the novelty of the name and region. Once I had relocated to Hungary I trekked up to Eger’s tourist-hungry Szépasszony-völgy, which left me curious, but not terribly impressed with Eger wines. But things have changed since the state-owned winery ruled the region’s production. These days Eger is dotted with small and mid-sized vineyards, three of which we got to sample on the day-long tour.

The first stop was St. Andrea Winery. This was a real treat, as the first Hungarian wine I fell in love with was the vineyard’s Nabor. St. Andrea, because of their adventurous blends and evocative labels, has gained a loyal following among expatriates and locals alike. Nobody was surprised when the vineyard’s owner György Lőrincz was named wine-maker of the year in 2010. Like his wines, Dr. Lőrincz is accessible: he personally guided our small group of 12 through their extensive cellars, which, like most great Hungarian wine cellars, are padded with a mushy layer of mold. Afterwards, we gathered in the tasting room to try nine varietals and cuvees, including two different vintages of Pinot Noir and three Bikavérs. That’s a lot of wine. My first lesson of the day was that it’s okay not to drink everything poured into your glass.

Onwards to Thummerer’s restaurant, Magtár, where we had multi-course lunch of home-made whey cheese, guinea fowl paté, catfish, venison, and a poppy dumpling, each dish paired with a Thummerer wine. Thummerer’s wines are far more straightforward than St. Andrea’s, and known more for their dependability than their spontaneity, a reputation which held true until we tried a semi-sweet Kadarka, which was the darling of my end of the table. More surprising was the high quality of the cooking: the kind of locally sourced fresh ingredients that are coveted by high-end restaurants world-wide. The Thummerer cellar, which we saw after lunch, is dug into the side of a hill, and gives the feeling of disappearing into the countryside itself. Kind of like caving for luses.

Finally, we paid a visit to the Nimród Kovács cellar. By then the crowd felt old hat at Eger wines, having already tasted close to twenty. This was good, because the winemakers there are starting to make inroads into the American market and were eager for feedback from the primarily American tour group. And feedback they got: from quiet nods of ambivalence for the Rhapsody Bikavér, to requests for top-offs when it came to their stunning Pinot Noir.

Regarding the tour itself, it was a seamless and delightful experience. In case you don’t know, Taste Hungary are Carolyn Bánfalvi, author of Food Wine Budapest (The Little Bookroom) and The Food and Wine Lover’s Guide to Hungary (Park Kidaó) and her husband Gábor. What sets their service apart is their laid-back professionalism and expertise in every aspect of the tour. Gábor, who interprets from Hungarian to English when necessary (as with the Thummerer cellar) is completing his Advanced Certificate at the Wine and Spirit Education Trust, and is an enthusiast who approaches wine without snobbery normally associated with wine tasting. Most participants on the tour were comfortable waxing poetic about the wines’ characteristics, but Gábor was able to provide real dramaturgy to some of the more elusive varietals and blends. The couple have been conducting bespoke and organized tours to Hungary’s major wine regions since 2008; their next stop will be Etyek, in January.

I did get to tag along for free, so I am desperately trying to apply some scepticism to prove that I can’t be bought with a day of sampling some of the most distinctive wines Hungary has to offer. In this I am doomed to fail: it was a fantastic day trip. Gábor and Carolyn are extremely gracious and capable guides. Taste Hungary can invite me along anytime.

By Matt Ellis for XpatLoop.com