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Egri Bikaver

# Rural Changes In Hungary Dim Wine Outlook

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EGER, Hungary, Oct. 31—To help pay for Western technology needed to modernize this country, Hungarians of many walks of life have taken to the vineyards to pick grapes.

Students are in the fields along with factory workers, many of whom have been given a few weeks of leave by the state enterprises where they work to bring in the grapes.

Throughout the rolling hills of the Eger district, in northeast Hungary, roads are jammed with tractors pulling loads of the dark blue grapes used in making Egri Bikaver, or Eger Bull's Blood, a full-bodied red wine increasingly fancied abroad.

Hungarians have been making and drinking the wine since at least the 14th century but it has only lately become a serious international competitor to the more famous wines of France and Italy. Grapes made into wine constitute Hungary's third most important export crop, after wheat and corn.

## Value Up but Production Down

Hungarian wine exports are a major source of the hard currencies needed by Budapest to buy new machines and industrial knowledge from the West. But, paradoxically, as the world value of Hungarian wine increases, production is falling.

Hungary's chronic labor shortage, a declining population in the countryside, mismanagement of the vineyards by Communist leaders and several years of drought have combined to reduce wine production sharply.

Hungarian winemakers reminisce nostalgically about the 1965 and 1968 vintages of Egri Bikaver, the two best recent years. Relatively few bottles of either year can still be found.

But problems today are much more serious than the quality of one vintage or another. When the Communists seized power in this country in 1948, harsh measures were taken to eliminate private ownership of vineyards along with other forms of private agriculture.

Despite the general collectivization of agriculture, private production of grapes has continued to be an important component of the wine industry. The main reason is that a great deal of manual labor is needed for growing and picking grapes, the kind of labor easily provided by farmers in their small private gardens.

## Not a Crop for Machine Picking

The picking of grapes cannot be mechanized and therefore large collective-farm fields devoted to grapes are less efficient than fields planted to wheat or corn. Thus, the small vineyards continue to represent 52 percent of the country's wine-growing area.

Meanwhile, however, many families that had grown grapes for centuries on ancestral plots have become discouraged by Government restrictions and have abandoned their vineyards. This has been especially true as old farmers retired, their sons having migrated to the cities in search of more modern ways of life.

Hungarian newspapers reported last summer that in the period of several weeks about 50 small privately owned vineyards were put on sale and not one found a buyer, despite extremely low asking prices.

The vines in the producing vineyards are said to be old and badly in need of replacement with new stock. Experts say that much of the current stock was planted more than 30 years ago.

But Csaba Szabo, production chief of the 35 workers at the Egri Bikaver plant here, is optimistic that new state subsidies will solve the most serious problems and will put more fallow land into grape production.

"After all, we earn the country a lot of foreign exchange—30 percent of our production is exported," he said. "The six miles of aging caves we have under this installation stay naturally at the ideal temperature for maturing wine—53.6 to 55 degrees Fahrenheit, all year round. We have rich volcanic soil, plenty of sun, a thousand years of tradition and our grapes and methods are wonderful. There will always be Egri Bikaver."

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