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By Rima Szombat

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By Paul Yuhas

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By Toth Robert

A taste of victory

Written by Robert Smyth

Thursday, 11 December 2008

Winemaker of the Year puts South Balaton reds on map

János Konyári, who runs a family winery in Balatonboglár on the southern shores of Lake Balaton, saw off stiff competition from around the country last Friday to win the coveted Hungarian Winemaker of the Year award.



Konyári hopes that winning the Hungarian Wine Academy's most prestigious award will finally gain the Balatonboglár wine region the attention it deserves as a region for red wines and not just whites. "Despite our having won a number of prestigious awards in the past, nobody could understand and get it into their heads that we can do serious reds in South Balaton, but maybe they now will," Konyári told The Budapest Times. Many people still think that serious Hungarian reds are only made in regions such as Villány, Szekszárd and Eger.

In the final round of voting, Konyári was up against four other winemakers, including Balaton-boglár neighbour Ottó Légli. Also in the running were György Lőrincz from Eger's St. Andrea winery, Mihály Szöllösi from the Ászár-Neszmély region, and Péter Vida from Szekszárd.

The shortlist was drawn up after some 350 wine writers, wine makers, and members of the Hungarian Wine Academy (Bor Akadémia) submitted a list of their top five.

In the second round 104 of the 134 members voted with two abstainers in a closed envelope arrangement.

Among the 17 previous winners of the coveted title of "Hungarian Winemaker of the Year" are stars such as Ede Tiffán, Attila Gere, József Bock, István Szepsy, the late Tibor Gál, and Mihály Figula,

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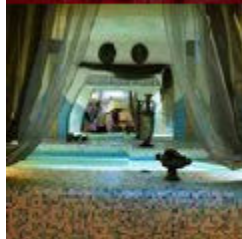


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who sadly died this year. Last year's winner was János Frittmann from the Kunság region, who has done a lot to repair that region's tarnished reputation.

Konyári, who works closely with his son Dániel, said it was too early to say what the award might mean for his business. He is clearly happy with being recognised as one of the country's leading winemakers, even if he appeared to view the level of commitment expected from winners with some trepidation.

At the presentation ceremony each winemaker presented a wine, not to be judged as such, but rather to liven up proceedings.



Loliense 2006

Konyári's red Loliense 2006, a blend of 40% Cabernet Sauvignon, 40% Merlot and 20% Cabernet Franc, marks a serious return to form after a less concentrated rain-affected 2005 version. On the nose there are chocolate and mocha aromas over delicious red and black fruit with the oak very well integrated and not at all clouding out the fruit. In the mouth it is full bodied, with plenty of spice on the aftertaste to add another dimension to the delicious fruit. However, it stops short of throwing too much alcohol at you, with no burn detectable. This one costs HUF 4,350 from Bortársaság.

The 2003 Loliense first made people sit up and take notice of Konyári, while his sumptuously concentrated Sessio, a 100% Merlot, made many realise that he was capable of making truly great wines.

One thing that marks out a great winemaker is the ability to make top wines in every vintage. However, the lack of adequate drainage in wet vintages can make it difficult to deliver great reds every year in South Balaton. Luckily, Konyári is also gaining significant ground with his less vintage-dependent white wines.

Szárhegy

Szárhegy, a barrel fermented blend of Hárslevelű, Olaszrizling and Sauvignon Blanc – of which the 2006 and 2007 versions are on the market for HUF 3,900 - both exude the richness that Hárslevelű and Olaszrizling grapes can provide when they are barrel fermented, balanced by the freshness and lively flavours of the more familiar Sauvignon Blanc.

Konyári also showed his 2008 Rosé (HUF 1,350) at the ceremony. Raspberry or salmon pink in colour, with boiled sweet and raspberry aromas on the nose with strawberry notes on the palate, it appears a bit more elegant than last year's upfront but fun fruit bomb.

Besides working on his own 30 hectares of vineyard, Konyári is also winemaker and managing director of the Ikon winery nearby at Rádpusztá, very close to Balatonlelle, which was established in 2004 and has 50 hectares of grapes. We can expect big wines from Ikon in the coming years, Konyári promises. The winery's basic range of single variety whites and reds, as well as a rosé, which is already available at Bortársaság represent good value for money at HUF 1,140 per bottle.

Of the other wines on show on Friday, runner-up Szöllősi's Olaszrizling 2007 also stood out with its distinctive nutty and oily nose featuring almond and Brazil nuts, plus a floral scent resembling lilies with a sour fruit feel of rhubarb on the palate. Nice stuff and very Hungarian.

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