

The history of viticulture and viniculture in Eger

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Abstract: **Az egri szőlő- és borkultúra története.** A cikk a sok évszázados egri borkultúra történetének rövid összefoglalását adja. Ismerteti a máig legismertebb, emblematiszmitus itteni borfajta, az egri bikavér nevének eredetét és minőségének alakulását a kezdetektől máig. A borvidék viharos története magában foglalja a török idők alatti hosszú tetszhalott állapotot, majd az újjáéledést, a diktatúra alatti hanyatlást és a rendszerváltás utáni megújulás, a magas igényű, minőségi borkultúra időszakát.

„Eger is the town of grapes and wine” – that is what can be read when approaching the town from the direction of Budapest. The town of historical past, baroque monuments is famous for not only its fortress, churches, medicinal thermal bath, but also for its wines, mostly Egri Bikavér (Bull’s Blood of Eger) as a result of its inhabitants’ conscious, industrious activity. The one thousand year old town – a bishop’s centre established by St. Stephen, the first Hungarian king in 1004 – has always been connected to grape growing to some extent and way. Although during the ninety-year long Turkish occupation (from Oct. 1596 to Dec. 1687) the region declined a lot mostly due to the emigration of the inhabitants, lack of industrious hands in the Middle ages Eger and its surroundings mostly produced white wine.

Since the 18th century it has been unambiguous that the main activity of Eger has become grape growing. From the Turkish occupation to the end of the 19th century grapes giving red wines were dominant but since the middle of the 19th century the area planted with white grapes has gradually become bigger.

In the first part of the 20th century the most widespread varieties giving red wines were kadarka, oportó, nagyburgundi and medoc noir. From among white varieties riesling, mézes fehér, ezerjő, sasza, muscatel and leányka originating from Transylvania can be mentioned [1, 2].

The wine area surrounding the town makes the core of the Eger historic wine region. Viticulture was formed by peculiar natural features, century-long traditions of human work making Egri Bikavér world famous.

Vineyards surrounding the town dominated not only the slopes but they climbed a large part of the 500 meter high Eged hill. Red wine produced from grapes here represents a special value.

The world famous viticulture including the nicest, most valuable region on Eged hill was destroyed in 1880-85 by filoxera pest disaster. Re-plantation supported by an effective government started in 1890 by using grape buds. Kékfrankos, merlot, zweigelt, blauburger, kadarka, cabernet sauvignon- and franc, kékoportó and pinot noir can be named among buds giving red wine even today.

They are the ones giving the base of the famous red wine of Eger, Egri Bikavér (Bull's Blood of Eger), the cuvee wine. It can be stated that Egri Bikavér is the flagship wine of Eger.

The fiery, volcanic wine of Eger wine region

The shape, rocks and soil of Eger wine region was born as a result of volcanic activity in the Bükk mountains. The volcanic ash spread in Eger and its surroundings as "tufa" (limestone) gave favorable conditions not only for grapes, but also for wine kept in the numerous cellars carved in this rock.



Eger hill is a dominant feature near Eger giving the basic material of excellent Bikavér. It is also proven by archive data that the slopes were planted by grapes by Serbians from the south looking for refuge in the 16th century.

Grape is a simple plant, can survive, grow, give good fruit well in rocky soil and its wine is above everything. The southern slopes of Eged hill are climatically protected from northern winds, with extra amount of sunrays, even fig bushes can survive. So it cannot be bad, unfavorable for grape plantations either. Concerning altitude above sea level the upper plantations on Eged hill are the highest situated ones in Hungary. This way it provides favorable conditions for full ripening, while soil improves and keeps acid and aroma content of the grapes.

This is what dr. György Lőrincz, the famous enologist of Eger says:

„by 2007 Lord gave me the chance to grow grapes on Eged hill. I do not know it yet, but I feel, that there is the possibility to make great wine... very rich, long life, unrepeatable wine wonders! Wine wonders which will be acknowledged by the world once... making the wine of Eger great.”

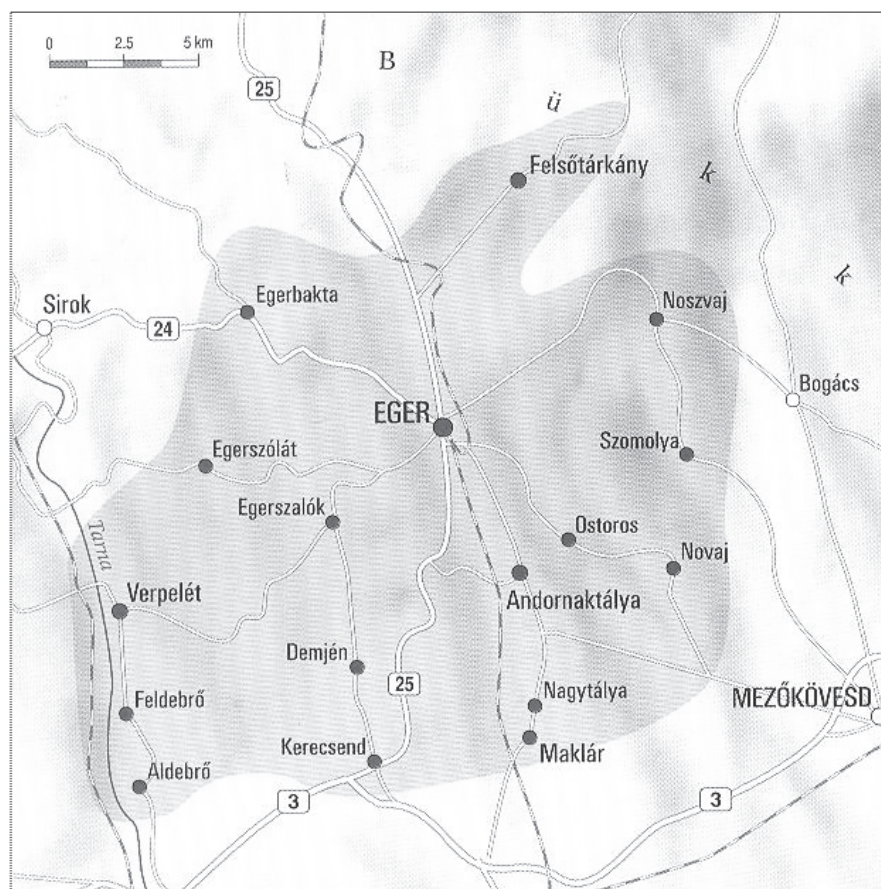
Our wine regions

In Hungary there are 22 wine regions very different in size, features, production and fame. The total area of the wine regions is 90 thousand hectares, 1% of the total of Hungary. The biggest one is Kunság wine region with its 30 thousand hectares. Mátraalja, Tokaj and Eger wine regions are the only ones which are more than 3000 hectares. Eger wine region is situated between Mátraalja and Bükkalja wine regions. Its area is 6000 hectares. It includes 17 settlements, 14 of which belongs to Eger region and 3 to Debrői region. 60% of the grapes are blue ones and 40% are white grapes [3].



„Where I sense good wine, I visit the place. Of course I will visit Eger. If I avoided it, I would be punished by Lord.” (poem by Sándor Petőfi, famous Hungarian poet in 19th c.)

The rank of Eger has not changed since the times of Sándor Petőfi, still considered to be one of the most famous wine regions.



History of Egri Bikavér

Egri Bikavér (Bull's Blood of Eger) is one of the best known Hungarian red wines, made from several blue grapes, a cuvee wine. The origin of the name, the first conditions, varieties are still unknown. István Sugár, historian of Eger dates back the name „bikavér” (bull's blood) to 1851, he found it in a book of Hungarian proverbs published in that year: „Bikavér (Bull's Blood) – that is what a strong red wine is named, for instance the one in Eger. Bikavér is also used in

another Hungarian region, in Szekszárd, it was first used there in 1846 in a poem written by János Garay.

Archive data say that red wine production in Eger in large volume started in the 15-16th centuries with kadarka variety brought to Hungary by Serbians. Later other red varieties also got to Eger region in different ways. Till the end of the 1800s grapes were grown in mixed plantations. Majority of blue grapes was made up by different types of kadarka. Grapes were harvested together and that is how red wine was made. It was Jenő Gröber who first planted pure plantations. He harvested and processed the varieties separately and created Egri Bikavér by blending them. Thanks for plantations in Bikavér Program in 1970 proportion of blue grapes significantly increased in Eger wine region. However, terroir, dominant varieties, cultivation, pruning, the viticultural technology of the time mostly was aimed at mass production of Egri Bikavér. This way quality of Bikavér was set to Soviet, Polish, East German market, undemanding, but requiring large quantities. They were fix markets, but the quality was not always first priority. Production – mostly enologic and marketing activity – was focused at Egervin company and its predecessors and also Hungarovin and Monimpex state firms. It is true, that majority of consumers learnt name Egri Bikavér at that time, but unfortunately it is also true that the name was connected to a cheap mass quality. This way Egri Bikavér ended up among low price wines. After the changes in the regimes in the 1990ies there was an approach – which unfortunately still exists for some producers and traders – that wine which is red and produced in Eger must be Egri Bikavér [4, 5].

Since 1990 it has become evident for the producers that Egri Bikavér must be a dry red wine, but quality expectations are still of a wide scope, ranging from simple „red wine of Eger” to the top wine of Eger wine region. It is market to determine the trend.

Regulations for the production of Egri Bikavér were made by the Union of Grape-growers and Wine-makers of Eger in 1993, however, they were only suggestions since they were not supported by any legal background. In 1994-95 a system was made to insure origin protection of Hungarian wines, so the Research Institute of Viticulture and Viniculture of Eger started to measure plantations and cellars in Eger wine region and forwarded a suggestion to make regulations for Egri Bikavér as wine of protected origin. Egri Bikavér Regulations were accepted by the Winemakers' Association of Eger Wine Region on 27. June 1997. The method was based on the origin protection systems used in the Western and Southern parts of Europe and the material of wine-rights of the European Union. The regulations have proved a significant modification and improvement in the conditions of grape growing, wine making, maturing and qualification as opposed to the previous ones. The sugar content of grapes was fixed 2-4 Hungarian must degrees higher, yield restriction was

maximized in 12 tons per hectare, start of the harvest is determined by the Head of the Winemakers' Association. They are the most important changes. In 2002 legislation concerning Egri Bikavér became even stricter, Egri Bikavér Superior regulation was accepted, making production and sale of a better quality Egri Bikavér possible.

At present three different quality categories are distinguished at Eger Wine Region:

1. Egri Bikavér
2. Egri Bikavér Superior
3. Egri Bikavér Grand Superior (harvested at a specific field)

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