

2020 Fekete Juhfark

Somló, Hungary

Somló is Hungary's smallest appellation and once an underwater volcano. Now dormant, its slopes of ancient sea sediment, hardened lava, and basalt are home to some of Hungary's steepest, most densely planted vineyards. Driving up to Somló from Lake Balaton, it's like seeing an island rise up from the ocean's horizon – nothing else around survived the retreating ocean. The oldest writings mentioning the wine of Somló date back to 1093 and viticulture all the way back to the Romans. Hungarian Kings bought vineyards here, Maria Theresa and Queen Victoria both praised the wines, and insurgent Hungarian troops fighting against the Hapsburgs would sulate the vineyards as they marched past at the end of the 17th century. Perhaps most well known is that belief that drinking the wines of Somló before copulation would guarantee a boy. Today, "The Grand Old Man" of Somló is Fekete Béla. 32 years ago, while on a trip to buy grapes for his garage production, a farmer offered to sell his vineyards on the southern slopes. Fekete accepted and approaching 90 years old, still tends his 4 hectares of beloved Fehérvári-cru. Everything is done by hand, and much like the man, his wines are honest, engaging and highly expressive of the region. Focusing on Hárslevelű, Furmint, Olaszrizling, and Juhfark, Uncle Béla, and his wife, Aunt Bori decided that 2013 would be their final vintage.



VINEYARDS

Béla was engaged in a private dialog with his land that's only possible after decades of working it. The vineyards are not as postcard perfect nor are they planted to the newest clones but having listened to the old farmers and the council of others when we started, Béla's vines have achieved balance. With 4 hectares dry farmed on the southern slopes, the basalt soil retains heat and a mixture of alluvial and loam soils give just enough nutrients. The vineyards have a secret garden appeal that's far from a monoculture. Organic certification is underway and more an issue of paperwork than changes to the farming. Equally important, and also according to Béla, the vineyard access to the mineral spring water of Somló is the magic, not simply rocks touching vines. In tandem with botrytis and 3 years minimum of élevage, there's a perfect storm for making something truly unique and delicious.

WINE MAKING

The wines of Somló tend to be high in alcohol, very acidic, and chock-full of smoky volcanic minerality. All wines are meant to be aged and can be fairly aggressive when young. Much like Tokaj, this is an all white appellation so winemaking is geared for structure and strength. All of the wines are picked on the later side, have a couple of hours of maceration, spontaneously fermented in 1000L oak, aged another 10-12 months in said oak, and then 2 years minimum in stainless steel/plastic tank. The grapes do of course bring something to the table, but with time, Somló eventually takes over. That said Furmint has a little more acidity up front, Hárslevelű more aromatics, and Juhfark channels the volcanic funk.

NOTES & PAIRINGS

Juhfark (Sheep's tail) is a distinctive white grape variety found almost exclusively in Somló. The clusters are long, tightly packed and curve a little at the end hence the sheep's tail moniker. Naturally very high in acidity, it's also fairly neutral on its own and instead absorbs and shows fidelity to the mineral spring water that flows from inside the extinct volcano. With only 4 hours of skin maceration, it's then fermented in 1000L Hungarian Oak barrels followed by 10 months on the lees in the same vessels. It's then moved to 500 and 1500 liter tanks for reductive aging for a minimum of two years before bottling. No racking and no stirring. According to Bay Area restaurateur Jeff Berlin, "it's the ultimate yin and yang wine in that it is at once rich, opulent and elegant but has such prominent veins of volcanic ash and minerality running through it at the same time. Like a Caligulan feast in a glass." For those seeking cool climate intensely volcanic whites, this is a benchmark.

ANALYTICS & PRONUNCIATION

APPELLATION: Somló (Shoam-low)

GRAPE COMPOSITION: %100 Juhfark (you - fark)

CLIMATE: Cool Continental

SOILS: Basalt and ancient seabed

EXPOSURE: Southern

MACERATION & AGING: 4 hours of skin maceration, fermented in 1000L Hungarian Oak barrels then aged 10 months on the lees.

ALCOHOL: 13.2%



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