

Oak-scented World

THE KOH-I-NOORS OF BARRELS HAVE BEEN CREATED

KÁDÁR HUNGARY has always played in the highest league, but now it has revealed two **BARREL TYPES** the world has never seen. Their quality is suggested by the fact they are decorated with **SEMI-PRECIOUS STONES**: the devil is in the tiniest of details.

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Photo: Róbert László Bácsi



The design and making of the Petraea Obsidian and the Larus Opal was so surrounded by secrecy that the first two winemakers knew only that they were going to receive something very special and the price. The answer they gave was typical of the relationship between Kádár Hungary and their partners: “Of course. I’m looking forward to it!” Actually, the jeweller we commissioned didn’t know if the several-centimetre obsidian and opal he had to set into the side walls where they will shine would decorate a wall or a chandelier. A barrel? I think that would have been his last guess.

When a child first looks into the microscope

That’s the feeling I had when we came to the twentieth minute of my talk with András Kalydy, manager of Kádár Hungary. We had long forgotten the coffee steaming on the table, we hadn’t stepped out of the office at the cooperage on Helsinki Road. We had only just started to mention the barrels, not yet stroking them but already starting to be sucked into the magic of a totally different oak-scented world. Because, for the lay person to understand the uniqueness of these two barrels at the

top of their cream of premium barrels, we have to begin the story very far back. Let’s say, in the forest. “*The terroir is almost as important for us as for the winemakers. I could compare these forests to the Tokaj Wine Region: there are a few similar areas in the world but none are the same. We buy wood from the North Hungarian Mountains – not because it isn’t good elsewhere, but because we are looking for this character. The climate is strongly continental, the land is not too high, but the angles of the slopes are very steep. These lands are infants in terms of geological history: they were created in the Miocene Period, so they are just six to ten million years old. There was not time for erosion to destroy them. The water runs off them very quickly and the layer of humus is just 60–100 centimetres thick, so the trees have to really struggle to hold on and gain access to the right nutrients – and we’re talking about an area that is very rich in silicon.*”

Of course, the sizes are different: oak suitable for making staves are 120- to 150-year-old trees that are carefully selected, just as other luxury items in the world, like precious gems or bluefin tuna. Each is thoroughly





examined and priced, and in some cases the wood is auctioned.

“That’s why we don’t have our own forest, one that we planted. Our great-grandfathers did that. Actually, it’s lucky that the trees don’t consider who, when and where the lines are drawn on a map. We decided that we would also buy from the southeast of Slovakia where the mountains reach from Hungary into that which was once treated as one area. The first forest management law in the country was introduced in this area by Empress Maria Theresa. You know, even if we were to have access to all the trees that are suitable for stave-making in the Mátra, Bükk and Zemplén Hills, we would still not have enough wood.”

“Suitable for stave-making...”, we slow down a little here. I’m devastated that, because of lack of space, I am unable to record word-for-word András Kalydy’s explanation, but for that we would have to dedicate a special VinCE edition to oak species.

Pedunculate oak or sessile oak – or when does the great-grandfather wander?

When talking about oak, the species is key. The sessile oak is regarded as more valuable for barrel-making due to the structure of the wood. (We are talking about wine barrels here. For spirits, in many cases pedunculate oak is more advantageous.) But the experts don’t simply look at the trees and select them: oaks really like to interbreed. Let me explain: the vine is one genus – but within it we know how many variations exist. The oaks behave in exactly the same way. Let there be a taxonomy expert on site who can identify which is which. Of course, it is possible but, in addition to the external features, you also have to examine chemical properties which, on hearing András Kalydy listing them, made my hitherto sparkling eyes start to glaze over. But the forests Kádár Hungary buys the oak from are uniquely homogenous in terms of European oak for: there are no pedunculate oaks in the interior of the mountains so no hybridisation has happened. Purchasing the wood is not simply a question of phoning someone and saying how many cubic metres we would like.

WINEMAKERS ON KÁDÁR BARRELS

Attila Gere is the first in the world to try Petraea Obsidian: *“I don’t put any store on appearance; the wine in it just has to be good. And naturally I’m very curious about it as we have been using only Petraea barrels for a while now as they give more subtle flavours. We have been working together since 1992, so I totally trust them.”*

Attila Domokos, manager of Dobogó, was the first to try Larus Opal: *“When András called I knew this was the experiment we had to be involved in. We first bought barrels from them in 2011. They make barrels that greatly contribute to emphasising the effect of the vintage in a very professional and innovative way with great attention to the details. It speaks volumes that our 6 puttonyos Aszú 2013 was the first to go into Kádár barrels and this year we won Decanter Platinum Award with it. The Opal will be filled with Dry Furmint from 40-year-old vines in Betsek-dűlő.”*

Kresimir Vuckovic, winemaker of the Grgić Vina in Croatia got in touch with them in 2018. *“Apart from Georgina’s personality, I was truly convinced by the fact our sister winery in Napa Valley also uses their barrels. They are particularly successful with our high-tannin wines – for those I heartily recommend them to anyone.”*

When the foresters harvest an area, the best quality trunks are individually selected and removed. Then the buyers who are only interested in this top quality arrive and then grade them one by one. The highest quality Slovak wood is auctioned in a way similar to the Japanese bluefin tuna market – only here it is colder or maybe there’s loads of mud – and the bidders do not know the others’ bids. *“During those couple of days, I estimate the value of the logs there to see roughly how many staves we can make from them: this size and that, but there’s a knot in it, and another one, that means a loss of one and a half metres and 120 degrees, so four metres is last and it is worth x to me. By the evening I’m so tired that I don’t know whether I’m coming or going. At the end*

everyone presents a bid for the logs in a sealed envelope and then the foresters evaluate them and sell the wood to those who offered the most. As we're talking about top quality, this can mean a difference of one and two hundred thousand forints per cubic metre. Then comes the processing. As staves require an incredibly special cutting, it means that only about 20% of the wood is used – that is the total of staves from it. Then we start to age them. We have seasoned the staves ourselves since 2005 as this way we can be certain that they were aged in the conditions and for the time that we would like. This – depending on which wine the barrel is destined for – means 24-36 months in our site in the middle of the forest. In other places in the world the seasoning can be shorter, but in this climate there is less precipitation, larger variances in temperature and the life cycle of fungus and micro-organisms in one year is shorter, so this is what we think is appropriate," András told me. I have already mentioned, haven't I, that the devil rests in the details.

The four elements: fire, water, wood and time

"We make 150 to 170 different character barrels each year, but theoretically we would be able to make 2000 different variations.

Of this, volume only gives six variants. The other qualities are the length and conditions of seasoning of staves, the grain density of the wood, the length and heat of toasting: the combination of fire, water, wood and time. Plenty of variations exist within one toasting level that even a cooper is unable to identify after completion but that give a totally different character to the barrels and so to the wine too."

But how can a winemaker choose from all this? Georgina Garai, Kádár Hungary's Sales Manager for Central Europe gave me the answer: *"In the best case scenario while we taste together and talk, I get to know the winemaker's style. They tell me their vision and what they would like to change so we can narrow down the choice to two or three barrel types of the 160. And from there taste is the deciding factor. Above a certain quality there is no best, only what pleases more. We do not create a stock. When we start to make a barrel, we know exactly whose it will be and what wine will age in it."*

And in the cases of old and close connections a winemaker often tells them that they would like a barrel for this kind of wine and trust Kádár Hungary to choose the most suitable for that.

Very few will procure one

And this is exactly how the barrels Petraea Obsidian and Larus Opal were created. Both existed in the premium barrel family and both have extreme wood grain density but while Petraea is recommended for aging red wine,

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Larus is able to make white wines more complex and elegant within a short time but without noticeable barrel notes. *"About two hundred components in the barrel can react with the wine during maturing. These integration processes can be described with various curves: the secret lies in how we can speed up or slow down the integration, emphasise or underplay the barrel effect. The grain density is key as the slower a tree grows, the thinner the rings and the more aroma compounds they contain which result in more elegant barrel influence with more finesse. Grain thickness of 2 mm is regarded as fine grain throughout the world: we are talking about less than 1 mm with these barrels,"* said András Kalydy, listing the tiny but important details. *"We choose this quality when we buy, but this grain density can only be measured in tenths of a percent in our stocks. In terms of the world's oak, in ppm. So, we're talking about barrels with extreme grain density and extreme aroma potential."*

It is no coincidence that Attila Gere and winemaker of Dobogó Winery Attila Domokos both accepted unseen when they were told that a barrel was being made for them about which nothing would be revealed but that it would cost double the normal price.

Those fortunate enough to receive an Obsidian or Opal will pay 1300 EUR. Kádár will make only a couple of dozen a year, and they do not want to increase this quantity under any circumstances. We all know of luxury car brands where you can only buy if you already have two standing in the garage – the type of prestige product where the price is no longer a factor. Just as the price of the wines that will come from them is not calculated based on production costs. What is certain is that wherever in the world they end up, they will not be placed in the darkest corner of the cellar but will shine in a prime position.



ANDRÁS KALYDY