



CRAFTY RABBIT

Six wines made by the Eger-based winemaker János Bolyki, were awarded in Bordeaux, France in 2016, yet his distributors in London and California asked him not to put his acknowledgements on his labels, because otherwise, the original charm of the bottles would get lost. It seems that *Meta Téma*, *Pocok a Szántásban* (Vole in Ploughland) or *Indián Nyár* (Indian Summer) did not bewitch their international consumers only with their taste.

‘In your autobiography you claimed that your very first words after your were born were: “Good morning, father, how is it going in the vineyard?” Yet, you went to study at the Department of Leather Engineering at the College of Light Industry. Why?’

“The story goes back a long time. I wasn’t even born yet, when my grandma, with a real entrepreneur’s spirit, who lived in Recsk started to manufacture artificial leather bags. For a long while, it had no impact on me, but as a schoolboy I saw that a lot of old ladies and gentlemen were carrying my grandma’s bags. She had two hired hands, who sewed and nailed and then peddled them. She also had a “representative” in every village, who bought the bags off her for 150 forints each and resold them for 180 forints. I remember going with her on a distribution tour by train, and she sold two whole sacks of bags that day. It must have been very profitable because at the end of the day, we ended up in a pastry

shop, and I could eat delicious custard cakes. Later, my dad, who was the head of mining in the local cooperative farm, also took up my granny's bag-business as a side-job. Just like my mum, who was an economist at an electricity company. They soon switched from bags to leather dog leashes. At the age of 8 or 10, I was already helping them, and I could earn quite a bit of pocket money nailing leashes and collars. I enjoyed working with leather, so I enrolled in a Budapest-based secondary school which specialised in the leather industry. From there, moving on to study to be a leather technology engineer the College of Light Industry was a seamless transition. My masterwork was a pair of shoes, which my mum did wear for a while, but I don't think it would have been much coveted in the fashion world of Milan. For some time, I traded in shoes, but then the whole thing died down.'

'Did you start working in the vineyard?'

'My dad had received two smaller plots of land with vines from the agricultural cooperative Egri Csillagok². It proved to be such a good business to produce grapes on these two plots of 0.7 hectare, that on the profit of a better harvest, we could have afforded even a new Trabant. I would often put my petrol tiller into our Trabant sedan, which I had already driven without a driving license at the age of 14, and went to the vineyard to work. And I was the coolest guy on the beach because on my day's wages, I could afford for myself lángos and pancakes. Thanks to the land compensation act, we had more and more land, and the time came when my fa-

ther began entrusting entire plots to me. He helped me with some starting capital to plant and grow grape vines and with time, I could start making wine myself. Initially, I thought that in the fourth year of growth when the vine is ready to produce fruit, after the harvest at the end of October, I'd go snowboarding in France, and I'd come back in March to prune. But when the first plantations started producing fruit in 2002, I began laying down further plantations of grape vines, thus snowboarding had to take a back seat. First, I held 11 hectares, and now I have 26 hectares of land with nine parcels and plenty of work.'

'How is it possible to produce unique wine in a region like Eger, which is full of wineries?'

'The Eger region has great potential. I consider myself lucky for being able to choose from many available plots, and I laid down my plantations only in those that are most suitable for growing grape vines thanks to their agricultural properties. I was also in the position to pick the types that I wanted to produce and had the opportunity to go on study trips to Bordeaux, Burgundy, Australia and California.'

'You have been making wine as an agricultural engineer since 2003, and your first ever "Bull's Blood" Egri Bikaver was awarded with a prestigious Silver in Bordeaux in 2006.'

'2003 was an excellent vintage year, anyone could have made good wine that year, so I managed too. Since 2006, I have won one to two medals in Bordeaux every year, except for this year, when six of my wines – three red and three white - fetched medals: two gold, two silver and two bronze.'

'You have got your wines tested from the first moment. Is public recognition so important to you?'

'What I actually have in mind is to see how my wines do in comparison to the international wine landscape. As our

2 Egri csillagok (Eclipse of the Crescent Moon) is a famous work written by the Eger-based novelist, Géza Gárdonyi. The title literally means "Stars of Eger", hence the name of the agricultural cooperative.

winery cannot boast a long tradition, we follow the trends, and this way we can tell whether we are going on the right path. So far, this method has worked and it is now a proven fact that Eger has great potential, and that not only red but also white wine sorts can win prestigious medals.'

'Do you take your wines to other competitions as well?'

'I used to, but I don't anymore. In fact, I no longer send them to Bordeaux either.'

'Why quit while ahead?'

'I don't think I can achieve more than I have, but actually, I have other reasons to quit. 5000 items from 38 countries were judged in Bordeaux in April, and following this evaluation, the best wine sorts were posted on their website. This is how I learned about our six medals. Some days later, a Californian wine merchant came to visit, and I proudly told them about my accomplishments in Bordeaux. "It's good" – he said under his breath, basically only out of courtesy. I didn't really understand and I asked back. Doesn't he care about the medals I won at the grandest wine competition of the globe? He did congratulate me on them but asked me not to flag my victories on the bottles that were going to be delivered to the US. Now I have a playful, dynamic label, which contradicts the trendy awards in design and age, so my wines wouldn't lose their charm... California is far from Bordeaux, but London is much closer. Two days later, on Monday I welcomed a visitor from England, who had fifteen sommeliers with him from the best restaurants in London. When I told the English wine merchant about his Californian colleague's opinion, he agreed with him and also asked me not to put the gold, silver and bronze stamps on the bottles sent to him either. Otherwise, the wine will lose its playful character. So, I, the country boy from Eger, thought to myself that there certainly are cus-

tomers who put wine bottles in their shopping cart that have stamps on them, believing in their high quality, but it seems that there are other customers out there too.'

'You have been naming your wines from the start, like Hazug Mókus (Insincere Squirrel), Meta Téma, Ördögös (Crafty Rabbit), Pocok a Szántásban (Vole in Ploughland) or Indián Nyár (Indian Summer), whose back label tells the story: "the forest had a man, similar to Mowgli, Tarzan or Frodo. He was Indian Summer, an elf-like little man." Legends and a world of fairy tales match his wines. "Every forest has its own Maradona"; "he was the Mick Jagger of stoneball playing." Or "the vulture wants no cucumber" are all very eye-catching sentences. The illustration is absolutely original too. On one label, for instance, a cheetah sticks out its head from a television screen. Youthful dynamism everywhere. Was it all your idea?'

'A graphic designer, Géza Ipacs helps me with it. He doesn't only draw wine label images but also various types of packaging and also restaurant designs. He is an excellent marketing expert. When we were discussing the first label, I told him what I had in mind. He designed it, but he also showed me his own ideas. At that moment, I realised that it wasn't my cup of tea. Since then, I have given him complete freedom, but of course, he creates a visual world that I can go along with. We have been friends, he asked me just the other day to be the godfather of his seventh child. He is a person with real perseverance: after six girls, finally his first son was born.'

'Have you perhaps found a market niche? Medium and superior category, higher price range wines with mostly sterner looking labels are mainly bought by people over forty, while these high-quality products with a tongue-in-cheek style are preferred by customers in their twenties or thirties.'

'My graphic designer also writes narratives that match the imagery, which then get published on our website and in our publications. The centre of the winery also encompasses a medieval quarry, where we organise concerts and festivals in cooperation with the city of Eger. We've welcomed such celebrated Hungarian artists and bands as Ákos, Tankcsapda, Halott Pénz, Bori Péterfy or Punnany Massif, and most recently, we hosted the Robotkrumpli Festival. We try to address those who drink our wines. We don't conduct surveys about our customers, but we notice that it gets drunk. By the way, fairy-tale like stories also come our way even without us using our imagination. In 2007, a rock broke loose, hit a tank, and 37,800 litres of wine poured out on the main road. The ditches filled with wine, and the homeless filled their cups from there and pushed the entire vintage away on their bicycles. Then, there was a Bolyki Wine Bar in Budapest, next to the Danube. The restaurant wasn't ours, but we supplied it with wine, and the place's name Gepárd és Űrhajó (Cheetah and Spaceship) was my brainchild. It soon became obvious that the guests who were recommended to eat there by their hotels didn't understand the name and decided to go somewhere else instead. So, now they operate under another name.'

'You support a lot of charities as far as your means allow or even beyond that.'

'In 2006, deaf children came to help with the harvest. They had no money for a class trip, so they came to me. They worked for two days, got their wages and had the money for the trip. We treated the grapes harvested by them separately, they were fermented in a separate vat, and we bottled this wine under the name Can't See Can't Hear Can't Talk. I must add that the last two hundred bottles of this

Kékfrankos were purchased by the three Michelin star restaurant in London, The Fat Duck. When I told the story of the wine to a British sommelier, they bought up all the last of it. The money raised this way was donated to the School of the Deaf in Eger, and an EU-compliant playground was built from it. Of course, I came under quite a bit of criticism inflicted on me by wine consumers that I wanted to sell my wine using physically impaired children, even though it meant only 2,000 out of the 130 thousand bottles a year, so the attacks stopped. Naturally, we support several foundations; I have aid deliveries sent to Father Csaba Bőjte's orphanage in Torockó every year (Csaba Bőjte: Franciscan friar and the Director of the Saint Francis Foundation in Déva, Romania, an organisation which has been looking after children in extreme poverty for over 25 years), and his kids regularly spend their summer vacation here. They exploit my network of contacts when they go to the spa, on a wellness retreat, go rowing, or to adventure parks, to the circus or to the zoo. This year, I didn't even go on holiday but joined them instead. That was my summer vacation.'

'This year is no ordinary one! Your son, Borisz Bolyki, was born this year. Will he also say the same sentence as you supposedly said: "Good morning, father, how is it going in the vineyard?"'

'The baby is one month old now. Whenever a group comes, they would like to see me and learn the secret of winemaking from me. Last week, we had visitors from Australia, Sweden, Britain and Slovenia. And Poland, of course, because they come every week. On Saturdays, we have six groups, but we try to merge some, as I can't be here day and night. Yesterday, it became clear to all the 140 members of a group that I have a baby of one month, and they sent me home with

appalled cries. I felt so ashamed that I sneaked home. This year's vintage is so good that I wouldn't mind having similar ones for the next forty years.

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Australians, Swedes, Brits and Slovenians keep coming to visit. And of course, also representatives of other nations too, among them, Hungarians. The British Dachshund Club also purchased a considerable amount of one of his wines because its labels featured dachshunds. His step-son is Zsolti, and after Borisz, he's had three more children: Szonyja, Misa and Szergej. So, at wine sampling events, he is often told to go home to his beautiful family.