

Heimann Family Estate, Szekszard, Hungary: Current Releases

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The Transdanubian hills in Szekszárd (pronounced sex-sahrd), rise up sharply off the Hungarian Plain, bounding up several hundred meters in short order, so that the roads to the top must hairpin and switchback all the way. Once atop the ridge, however, the view is worth the climb, as beautiful hills and little valleys cascade from the central ridge line, carpeted in grapevines and dotted with the small farmhouses that seem like they could have been there since the beginning of time.

Szekszárd is one of Hungary's 22 growing regions. Like most, it has a long tradition of growing grapes, but in modern times it has, along with Villany, and Eger, become the powerhouse of red wine production in Hungary, and continues to be home to some of the country's most celebrated reds.

As I rolled up to the ivy-encrusted little farmhouse just off the crest of the hill, I could easily imagine the story that lay within. A family domaine, with winemaking traditions handed down from father to son for nine generations, many spent within this very farmhouse. The stately white beard, firm handshake, and ruddy cheeks of Zoltán Heimann -- not to mention his aproned, bespectacled wife -- seemed to tell the same tale.

Yet when I sat down at their kitchen table to taste a few wines, nothing could have been further from the truth. "We really had no idea what we were doing when we started," explained Heimann. "We were just pursuing this dream, but at the beginning we were in a dark fog, feeling our way around. Year by year we see a little bit more, but we don't have the heritage to know what to do when certain things happen. We don't have the experience. Every year we have a new challenge."

Many wineries in Hungary share the same point of origin. Following the fall of the communist regime, families who had their lands appropriated began to rebuild their



lives and livelihoods. Many had traditions of winegrowing and winemaking, but because of the length of the cold war, the lessons of the prior generation were lost. Without the continuity of tradition, those desirous of reclaiming their family's winemaking heritage were on their own, with little to guide them but instinct and book learning.

Heimann's father, with some encouragement (and financing) from his son, made such an effort in 1991, working the family's two acres of vineyards to produce the first wine of his new enterprise, and one of the earliest from the Szekszard appellation after the end of the Cold War.

While his dad was trying to coax the winemaking knowledge buried deep in the family's genes to the surface, Heimann and his wife were both busy climbing the corporate ladder. Both had studied economics in college (where they met) and were living in Budapest. Heimann would send his dad money for new equipment, make suggestions, and come home for the harvest, but largely expected to continue his path upwards through senior management in the business world.

But the more time he spent working with his father, the more he realized that there was something missing for him, even as he worked his way through positions in the pharmaceutical industry, foreign trade associations, and eventually landing a job as the regional director of a bank, managing operations in three countries.

"My father is a single guy, a lion, a tough guy," says Heimann, "and he started everything off. But after a couple of years, I was shaping everything according to my dreams. You see I started to have dreams about this. I pushed him to buy new vineyards, to change the labels, to plant certain things. I was putting together the walls, while my father controlled the insides."

Heimann eventually realized that his dreams for what could be, and what his father was prepared to do didn't match up. "He was still a hobby winemaker, a subsistence farmer. He wasn't oriented towards sales," says Heimann.

So Heimann and his wife moved back to Szekszard and became more involved.

"There were many fights," relates Heimann.



"We were both drunk and got into big fights about who was going to run what. It's your typical mediterranean family. You yell at each other a lot and then life continues smoothly."

But in 1993, things changed when Agnes started working for the business and doing the accounting. Over the next seven years, Heimann and his father expanded the family's acreage to about 50 acres, and replanted much of what they owned and purchased, with the exception of some old-vine plots that industry pioneer Istvan Szepsy convinced them to leave untouched. In the process Heimann became an pioneering advocate for the Szekszard region, and is credited with being one of the people, along with Ferenc Takler that put the region on the map and on the road to success.

Agnes quit her day job and went back to school to learn winemaking, and eventually in 2004 Zoltán took over all the operations from his father, and he and Agnes moved into the family house and winery. It took until 2009 for Heimann to extract himself from the business world completely.

"I was earning nice money, I had a company car," says Heimann. "When you leave a heated room and go out into the cold, it's scary. We wondered if we could do it."

But with their kids all out of the house, the two decided to risk it, and they haven't looked back.

"We changed everything. But now I am pretty positive that we will live something to our son that has potential," says Heimann. "We have a rough, uncut jewel. Not the most expensive, not the most rare, but we have a jewel, and we are far from showing what

we can find in it."

Heimann's eldest son, Zoltán, Jr., will be well poised to polish the gem. He's trained at Geisenheim University in Germany, and has a masters degree in winemaking from the University of Montpellier in France. It is the younger Zoltán that Heimann believes will truly shape what the family domaine will become. When I ask Heimann about his philosophies regarding winemaking and farming, he suggests that their approach to using native yeasts ("frightening, but we're trying to keep them that way") and to more sustainable farming ("we avoid chemicals, and are learning about Bio") are really questions to be settled by the next generation.

"We've invested," says Heimann, "but the real finesse will come from him."

Tasting Heimann's wines, however, it's clear that there's plenty of finesse already on



the table. Most are fermented in open concrete vats lined with epoxy, and then aged in either large oak casks or a combination of large casks and smaller barrels. Nearly all of the wines are fermented with native yeasts, and are fined and filtered before bottling.

The family began with mostly international grape varieties (Merlot, Syrah, and Cabernet Franc) but Heimann rapidly shifted plantings to the local Kadarka and Kékfrankos, with some Sagrantino, of all things, thrown in for good measure. The estate now produces about 10,000 cases of wine each year, most of which stays within Hungary.

The winemaking duties seem to be shared equally between Heimann and his wife, though secretly I believe she may exert more influence on the wines than Heimann, whose talents for the politics of a small wine region and its ornery winemakers are clearly prodigious. I enjoyed watching this husband and wife team lovingly argue about which barrels we ought to taste in the cellar, and left my visit with the distinct impression that a lot of that love makes it into the bottle. Zoltán and Agnes are simply wonderful people, and to say that their wines reflect the beauty of their decades-long partnership is not solely metaphor.

When I visit small wineries in foreign countries, there always exists a tension between

my desire to tell stories about good wines and my desire to ensure that I'm getting my readers excited about wines that they actually have a hope of tasting one day. There are some wineries that I simply don't write about because their wines are not, and will not be, available outside of the country in which they are produced. That is, in fact, the case for Heimann's wines. But I found these wines to be so good, and such great examples of the potential for Hungary, and Szekszárd in particular, that I felt it important to share their story. I hope my readers will forgive me tantalizing them with the temporarily unattainable. And who knows, perhaps we can all convince some enterprising importer to bring these wines across the Pacific.

TASTING NOTES:

2011 Heimann Viognier Szekszárd, Hungary

Palest greenish gold in the glass, this wine smells of celery and green apples. In the mouth flavors of green apple and wet stones have a fairly sharp bitterness to them, with zingy acidity. The wine ends up being a bit too austere for my taste, suggesting, perhaps, a lack of ripeness to the grapes. 14% alcohol. Score: between **8** and **8.5**

2011 Heimann Kadarka Szekszárd, Hungary

Light purple in the glass, this wine smells of forest berries (raspberry and redcurrant), flowers, and a hint of cedary spiciness. In the mouth, forest black raspberries and floral notes mix with an earthy cedary note in the body of the wine. The wine has a slightly woody finish. Delicate acidity keeps the flavors and aromas quite fresh. This wine was bottled only a few days ago, so it is slightly closed at the moment. My note should also be taken more as a barrel sample tasting note than a final evaluation of the wine. 13.5% alcohol. Score: around **8.5**

2009 Heimann Kadarka Szekszárd, Hungary

Light garnet in the glass, this wine smells of forest floor, with notes of black raspberry. In the mouth the wine has tremendous presence, with beautiful silky presence on the palate, fantastic, lacy acidity, and forest berries and forest floor flavors that evoke, if you'll excuse the romantic metaphor, Carpathian forests brimming with fruit and green growth in the Spring. Fantastic. 13% alcohol. Score: between **9** and **9.5**

2007 Heimann Kadarka Szekszárd, Hungary

Light garnet in the glass with a hint of orange at the rim, this wine smells of raspberries and forest floor with gorgeous floral notes. In the mouth the wine is gorgeously smooth, with a wonderful mix of raspberries, orange peel, forest floor, and faint notes of flowers on the breeze. Evocative and poised, this wine has remarkable length and purity. Excellent. 13% alcohol. Score: between **9** and **9.5**

2007 Heimann Kekfrancos Szekszárd, Hungary

Medium to dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of cedar and raspberries with deep sour cherry notes. In the mouth sour cherry and raspberry flavors mix with cedar and forest floor flavors. Nice acidity and a deep earthy quality pervade the wine. When the wine enters the mouth there is a wonderful aromatic sweetness that pervades the wine, but the wine is completely dry, as the herbal note that lingers through the finish attests. Lightly tacky tannins. 13% alcohol. Score: between **9** and **9.5**

2008 Heimann Kekfrancos Szekszárd, Hungary

Medium to dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of black raspberry and violets with hints of forest floor. In the mouth the wine offers gorgeous black raspberry and sour cherry, with faint powdery tannins. A gorgeous aromatic sweetness pervades this wine, and floats above the dry, earthy note that lingers in the finish. Great acidity. Complete, balanced, stunning, and utterly delicious. 14% alcohol. Score: around **9.5**

2009 Heimann Merlot Szekszárd, Hungary

Dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of red fruit and new oak. In the mouth the wine offers bright, pure cherry fruit and a lot of new French oak. The fruit is so bright and pure, it's a real shame to have it drenched in such sweet oak. Supple tannins have slightly drying quality. 14.5% alcohol. Score: between **8** and **8.5**

2009 Heimann "Stilusgyakorlat" Syrah Szekszárd, Hungary

Dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of cassis and blackberry fruit with interesting briary notes. In the mouth, cassis and briary blackberry flavors mix with an earthy note. The wine is a little low in acidity, and quite ripe. A crowd pleaser of a wine, with a hint of sweetness (probably from the alcohol rather than residual sugar). Powdery, even creamy tannins, and well integrated wood (it was made in a large old oak cask) 15% alcohol. Score: between **8.5** and **9**

2008 Heimann "Birtokbor" Red Blend Szekszárd, Hungary

Medium to dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of sweet black cherry and cassis. In the mouth the wine has a very faint sweetness to it, with a core of cassis and black cherry with a hint of menthol in the finish. Well integrated oak. A blend of 50% Cabernet Franc, 30% Merlot, and 20% Kekfrancos. 14% alcohol. Score: around **8.5**

2008 Heimann "Franciscus" Red Blend Szekszárd, Hungary

Medium to dark garnet in color this wine smells of cherry and a hint of floral character. In the mouth the wine offers deep cherry and cassis flavors with fairly beefy tannins that wrap around the core of fruit in the wine. Notes of oak linger faintly in the background, especially through the finish. There's a sweet note as the wine starts, and a tiny bit of heat flares in the back of the throat. A blend of Cabernet Franc and Sagrantino. 14.5% alcohol. Score: around **8.5**

2009 Heimann "Barbar" Red Blend Szekszárd, Hungary

Dark garnet in the glass this wine smells of rich black cherry and cassis. In the mouth this wine has a distinct sweetness in the mouth, with a core of dark cherry, cassis, and mulberry fruit. Smooth tannins, ripe fruit, and beautiful earthy notes underneath the very ripe fruit. Light acidity. 30% each of Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Tannat, with 10% Kekfrancos. 14.5% alcohol. Score: around **9**

2007 Heimann "Barbar" Red Blend Szekszárd, Hungary

Very dark garnet in the glass, this wine smells of black cherry and cassis. In the mouth flavors of cherry and cassis have a sweetness to them, along with tobacco and rich chocolately earthiness. A fleece blanket of tannins wraps around the core of the wine, but good acidity keeps the flavors bright and alive. 30% each of Merlot, Cabernet Franc and Tannat, with 10% Kekfrancos. 15% alcohol. Score: between **8.5** and **9**

2006 Heimann "Barbar" Red Blend Szekszárd, Hungary

Dark ruby in the glass, this wine smells of leather and cherry and chocolate. In the mouth, rich chocolate and cherry flavors mix with a leatheriness that is beginning to emerge with age, along with a cedar note. The finish is shorter in this vintage than in others. Nice acidity and texture. A blend of 40% merlot, 30% Cabernet Franc, 20% Tannat, 10% Kekfrancos. 14% alcohol. Score: between **8.5** and **9**

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