

A STAR IS BORN

Discovering the rich and storied wonders of Hungary's newest wine.

BY JENNIFER L. BLANCK

The train pulled into the station. I was *finally* in Eger. I came to this castle-dotted Baroque city in northern Hungary for its legends, its role in history—from St. Stephen to World War II—and for its Egri Bikavér wine.

There are a number of legends surrounding Bikavér, a red blend known as “bull’s blood.” The most popular stems from the 1552 Turkish invasion: During a pause in the battle, Eger’s cellars were opened so Hungarian soldiers could quench their thirst.

The wine stained their beards (clearly, not a slow-sipping crowd), and the Turks ran away intimidated, assuming the soldiers were imbibing bull’s blood.

Intrigued by the legends and lured by the wine, I arrived with one goal—to drink in all that Eger had to offer. I wanted to gain a sense of place and delve deeper into Bikavér.

But my journey was rerouted in a surprising and delightful way.

In 2010, Eger winemakers decided they needed to have a white wine blend for the region to complement Bikavér. They created Egri Csillag, a blend of indigenous grapes and often Pinot Blanc, Chardonnay or Viognier.

The word *csillag*, or “star” in Hungarian, earned its parochial meaning in the 16th and 17th centuries, when scores of torches atop the watchmen’s towers illuminated the main road at night. Travelers were told to simply follow the stars of Eger as they passed through the area.

Just like Bikavér, Csillag has a range of production regulations, including specific blending rules. The varying categories of the dry and delicious white wine are based on degrees of ripeness and concentration.

Every year, wineries introduce their new Csillag on March 15, marking the coming spring. Bringing the legend to life, this annual “Opening of the Stars” celebration includes a parade of torch-bearers marching to the central square of Eger and presenting the previous year’s award-winning Csillag to the city’s mayor.

Soon after arriving, I sipped my first Csillag. Although wineries all have their own distinct blends, the ones I tasted were full-bodied, complex and had bright acidity.

Suddenly, I had a new itinerary for my stay in Hungary—to follow the stars of Eger. 🍷



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