

Region uncorks its potential and brings cheer to visitors

WINE TOURISM

Kester Eddy visits an area whose fine reds are helping build a renaissance

In the Mandula last Friday orders were as much in French, English and German as in the native vernacular. Nothing so strange about that for a restaurant in Budapest, but the Mandula is in Villany, a village about three hours drive south from the Hungarian capital.

"We only opened last week. I only have a chef five days a week - he comes from Budapest. We are looking for someone more permanent," says Attila Gere, the restaurant owner.

Mr Gere is not just a restaurateur; his name, with others like Jozsef Bock and Ede Tiffan, is synonymous with the renaissance of Villany as a wine region, based on fine reds from carefully tended vineyards on the slopes that stretch westwards for 25km.

The former forester gave up his profession to spend his entire savings - and more - on re-establishing quality winemaking, and very successful he is, too; a bottle of his best cuvée will fetch €35 or more on the shelves of Budapest and, if you can find it, at specialised wine shops in Europe and North America.

But from the beginning the Gere family also provided accommodation for visitors, turning their family home into a pension, or B&B, in 1991.

The formula has worked, and the Mandula restaurant is only one part of the latest Gere building scheme that includes a wellness, sauna and swimming pool complex that is almost completed.

As a result, the staff numbers at the Gere winery-hotel operation have jumped from 42 to 70, a significant number of jobs in a rural area.

"We now have room for 50 people overnight. I'm not

so much in this for profit; it's another platform to build the wine brand. We sell about 10 per cent of sales at the cellar door," he says.

Nor is he alone; a few miles west, Monika Debreczeni, managing director of Vylyan Winery, has had to dedicate part of her cellars to cope with the number of visitors that spill over from the terrace designed to host them.

Even without accommodation, Ms Debreczeni sells an estimated 15 per cent of her annual output of 600,000 bottles to visiting guests.

"We have visitors from all over, including Chinese and Japanese. I'd like to provide a proper kitchen and overnight facilities, but there is always so much to do," she says.

Villany may lag Tokaj as Hungary's flagship wine region, but in tourism terms it is perhaps neck and neck with its more famous domestic rival. It boasts of having created the country's first wine road, in 1994, for example.

However, much more

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could be done in integrating wine tourism in Hungary with other products such as fairs, exhibitions, equestrian and culinary tourism, says Andrea Sartori, partner at KPMG, the professional

services firm, for travel and tourism in central and eastern Europe.

"A few years ago wine-tourism was very much stand-alone. Now it seems the regional tourism authorities are beginning to move in the right direction, but I'm talking of the likes of Italy, France, California and South Africa, where the wine routes, the foreign language signage, make tourism such a good experience," he says.

Mr Gere, in this regard, has made a start; he speaks German and most of his staff appear to speak English and/or German.

"There are perhaps another 200 guest rooms in Villany, but there's nothing to match the standard we've created here," he says.



Bottle bonanza: Monika Debreczeni sells 15 per cent of her output to visitors