

Grapes Mean Money; Tokay Means More Money

Posted by [Cindy Lambert](#) | Apr 15, 2021 | [Objects](#) |  

In May 2020 I wrote an article called ***Croze, Howel or Chio***, and in this article, I described barrels: what types of provisions were stored in barrels, the name for various sizes of casks, the vocabulary of the cooperage trade, and what tools were utilized to create them. The article included examples of patents for some of these various tools and showed actual photographs of tools from our collection along with explanations of who might have made them, descriptions of their physical materials, and design.

But as I have reviewed some of these past articles, I realize that I did not provide history or research the provenance for any of the barrels in the Wine History Project barrel collection. This is my next objective; to provide you all with some interesting tidbits of history from what might be behind the life of our barrels.

A Barrel Identified by TOKAY on the Lid

Recently, I was at the warehouse and photographing some of the collection attempting to identify one barrel from another. Part of my responsibilities include ensuring the integrity and identity of the supporting documentation for the collection; in other words, to ensure that a record of each object is prepared and that accurate research is conducted and available to the public about each object. So, while I was measuring, photographing, looking for distinguishing marks, noting the materials used, and taking a count of all the various barrels in the Wine History Project's collection, I stumbled upon a barrel that had lettering on the lid; TOKAY.

Because there is no electricity in the rooms where our collection is stored, I often walk around carrying an LED light, bent over, looking for the treasured objects. If anyone were to photograph me, they would think I look like one of those people that gather shells at the beaches of Sanibel Island in Florida. To explain my reference, people bend down as they look for seashells, and the posture is known as the “Sanibel Stoop.” Maybe some of you have heard this term before, maybe not. I know of it because we spent a lot of time there when I was young, and I eventually got married on that island.

Anyway, back to the barrel and what I found on my trail to solving the mystery of how it was used and why there was the word TOKAY stenciled on the lid. So even though I was investigating and documenting the Wine History Project's barrels in the collection, my research brought me insight into the contents of what has been in the barrel, and not how or where the barrel was created. As I mentioned in previous discussions on barrels, they held liquids and dry goods, including fruit prior to the lug box being created.



Barrel

Date: Circa 1860-1910s
Origin: Found in Sonoma County, United States
Materials: Oak, metal, silver paint, red ink/paint
Object ID: WHP-CT137

My Research Discoveries

It seems that “tokay” describes many things. Tokay is a grape known in English-speaking countries. This grape was grown in San Luis Obispo County in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, primarily in the Geneseo District and used to make local wines. In Hungary the word describes a grape known as Tokaii, from the Takaj region in northeast Hungary.

Here are some other examples. Muscadelle in Australia is called Tokay. In Spain the Viura wine grape has Tokay as a synonym. Tokay d'Alsace is an obsolete name for Pinot gris grapes in Alsace. Tocai Friulano, is a now defunct synonym for Sauvignon vert in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia wine region of Italy. An American grape, the Catawba, has Tokay as a synonym. Finally, Tokay is English spelling for Takaj; and then of course it is a Hungarian Furmint grape. So how do any of these relate to finding this barrel in Sonoma County, circa 1900s timeframe?

Because it is a barrel that I was researching, I thought to examine the Tokay grape that Hungarian's made the “world's oldest sweet wine” from. A blog I read on a ***Taste Hungary*** internet site, the Tokaji-Aszú grape wine (word for wine in Hungarian is “bor”) was first mentioned in 1571 or so writes Oz Clarke in *The History of Wine in 100 Bottles*. The wine was made by harvesting shriveled and nobly rotten grapes, on purpose. The wine it produces is golden yellow in color and honey-like in flavor.

Northeastern Hungary contains renowned wine regions and has a diverse range of volcanic terroirs and wines. Tokaj-Hegyalja is a district of this area where the conditions for viticulture are excellent and was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2002. The wine cellars are subterranean and the labyrinth they weave are black mold-coated carved from the volcanic tuff. The area we now know as Hungary was a hotbed of volcanic activity ten million years ago. The Tokaj region now has 5,500 hectares of vineyards which according to my calculations is equivalent to 13,590.775 acres.

The area was located on migration routes between the origin of winemaking in the southern Caucasus and continental Europe. The wine was known to be exported to France in the mid-1700s and King Louis XV called this the “Wine of Kings, the King of Wines.”

Agoston Haraszthy (1812-1869), a Hungarian born into a noble family, is known for achieving much after his move to the United States. He had left Hungary for the United States in March 1840, eventually settling in Sauk Prairie, Wisconsin west of Madison and laid out a town. He and his family left Wisconsin in 1849, arriving in San Diego in December 1850. While there he imported grapevines by mail; some from the eastern United States, others from Europe. By 1856 Haraszthy had purchased a vineyard northeast of Sonoma and renamed it to Buena Vista Winery, where he planted vines and hired Charles Krug (see our ***1860s wine timeline***) as its winemaker. Haraszthy is credited as the Father of California Viticulture and much more and is known for introducing more than three hundred varieties of European grapes. Haraszthy surely would have known of the Hungarian wine from the Tokaj-Hegyalja district. But I was unsure if this was the tie-in to the barrel with the stenciled Tokay on its lid. Were these grapes known as Tokaii one of the varieties that he introduced? I looked further and this is what I found.

Tokay Grape Wine

The most widely planted grape of all was the big, seeded table grape called Tokay, also known as Flame Tokay. In the late 1800s it was the premier grape in Lodi, California. Originally called Mokolunne, the name changed to Lodi on March 21, 1874 as some of the earliest settler families were from Lodi, Illinois. By 1888 it was named the fourth of five townships in San Joaquin County located in the center portion of California's Central Valley. Lodi, its early industries including cattle ranching, orchards, and vineyards is now best known for wine grape production.

The prominent grape introduced from Algeria in 1857 is known as the seeded “Flame Tokay” grape. Eventually substantial quantities of the grapes were sold to Inglenook and other older Napa wineries. These grapes were also sold right out of the trucks (after crushing) to San Francisco restaurants who made their own “house” wines. Lodi was the king of Tokay because it couldn't be successfully grown anywhere else in California. Lodi had a fine sandy loam so that the vines could establish their wild root systems. Here is where the term terroir, or sense of place comes into play; impacting the quality and characteristic of the grape ripening to optimum levels.

The demand for the Tokay grapes vanished during the mid-1980s after the widespread introduction of seedless grapes and the thousands of acres of the Tokay vines were pulled out in favor of the demand of Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay grapes.

Today, the area has many grapevines that have century-old grapevines. Old Vine Zinfandel grapes, which nowadays is the prominent grape grown in Lodi, are known to go into California wines popular today like Bedrock and Turley wines.

Prohibition Led to Lug Labels

Because of a provision allowing the head of every household to produce up to 200 gallons of fermented beverages per year for personal consumption and which outlawed the sale and transportation of intoxicating liquors in the Volstead Act, Americans from the Pacific to the Atlantic became home winemakers. Grape sales soared and even though numerous California wineries closed down during Prohibition (1920-1933), Lodi grape growers hastened to plant more vines.

According to Ralph Lea and Lucy Reller in an article from the Lodi Historical Society's newsletter (Lodi Historian), in 1864 George J. Leffler planted six acres of Tokay and it did the best of any other grapes that he planted. As “eating” grapes they were sent to the San Francisco market by boat. By 1879, Ezekial Lawrence (one of the original pioneer settlers of Lodi) and other small growers were shipping these crushed grapes “by railroad cattle car to New York City.” That took sixteen days. By the 1890s, not only were there now commercial plantings of the Tokay grapes but they were more profitable than the wheat and watermelons that had dominated the farmers landscapes in the area.



By 1905, growers reported selling Tokay grapes for as much as \$160/acre, more than two or three times what wine grapes like Zinfandel were selling for. That year a fruit packer named James A. Anderson (No he is not the same one that was on York Mountain) shipped Tokay grapes to New York for the first time by refrigerated railroad car. The 1907 season amounted to 1,141 carloads, valued at \$1,141,000. A.J. Weiner in a January 1908 issue of the magazine “Out West” wrote of Lodi: “it is a virtual agricultural Shangri-La, especially for Tokay.”

The success of shipping grapes led to a 1908 innovation of the half-lug which the Pacific Rural Press reported on in November of that year. This revolutionary method sold for \$.20 a box and demonstrated the success of the smaller crate; the grapes were picked from the vines and were laid directly into the boxes with no pressure lids. It also led to using an advertising label on the half-lug box to identify the grower. (See our ***article on lug boxes.***)

Lodi Tokay Grapes were in the WHP Barrel in California's History

According to the 1960 edition of *Guide to California Wines*, written by John Melville, the California Tokay is “a hybrid of little charm unrelated in any way to the renowned Tokay wines of Hungary. The California Tokay was a delicious table grape that went into sherry, brandy, sparkling wine and blends. California Tokay grapes were grown primarily as table grapes but were sold to winemakers who wanted a sweet fermented grape juice to blend with angelica, sherry, port, or sparkling wine.” Tokay added a nutty flavor to the sherry and rich color to the port. The term Old Tokay in California describes a sweet wine. Its later popularity in the 20th century was that it was generally used as a table grape.

So, it seems that Tokay grapes were grown and shipped by barrels prior to the creation of the half-lug. And now the Wine History Project of San Luis Obispo County has a barrel which reminds us that the Tokay grape was important to the history of wine in California. The barrel also relates to that of San Luis Obispo County's grape growing past

The Klintworth family grew Tokay grapes in the Geneseo area, east of Paso Robles in San Luis Obispo County. The Wine History Project had documented that the Klintworth family began growing Tokay grapes in the late 19th century in their vineyard which still exists in the Geneseo district. They may have obtained cuttings from the University of California Experiment Station which planted Tokay among over 100 grape varieties in their experimental vineyard. The family continued growing the variety for at least 60 years.

Today the Tokay grape is not even listed in the ***California Grape Crush Report***, a report that has information supplied by processors to fulfill the reporting requirements of Section 57601.5 of the Food and Agricultural Code. It details the crushed tonnage, degrees Brix, and weighted average prices by grape type, variety, and grape pricing districts during the crop season. In California there are seventeen Grape Crush Districts.

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