



PORTRAIT: WINE MAKER, PIANIST AND MAN OF THE WORLD MICHAEL LISZKAY

“No time for modesty”

If someone really defines the word cosmopolitan, it must be Michael (Mihály) Liszkay. If that's not enough, he is also an artist of life par excellence. The word artist is especially exact in his case, because in his younger years he worked as a pianist and travelled half the world. Today he owns a winery and an upscale hotel in the Káli basin, north of Balaton, a place that is also referred to as the “Hungarian Toscana”.

■ PETER BOGNAR

Michael Liszkay is sitting on the terrace of his estate and telling his story. The landscape in the background must be one of the most beautiful in the country: the breath-taking Káli basin. Some buzzards circling high in the sky are screeching. Suddenly a flock of starlings appears. They are the enemy

of the winemaker because the gluttonous birds sometimes come by the thousand and can cause great damage to the grapes. Liszkay quickly disappears into the house, returns with a shotgun and fires a couple of deafening shots. This is the only way to scare them away. The flock was a vanguard, Liszkay says.

It's not a coincidence that he has experience with weapons. Liszkay used to live in British Columbia for a long

time and in the vast Canadian Rocky Mountains he developed a passion for hunting. What was he doing there? He managed the gigantic estate of the wealthy Reichmann brothers from Toronto. A hotel, a golf course, around 5,000 cows and 200 horses, lakes, cross-country ski trails and a small airport were all part of the estate. Later he moved to Vancouver, where he specialised in attracting Asian investors into the country. →





Let's start from the beginning. Liskay was born during World War Two in Budapest. After the failed 1956 Uprising, he left for Yugoslavia in early 1957, fully alone, at the age of 16. He saw his parents again only 13 years later, two broken people seriously hurt by the loss of their two children (his sister emigrated to the USA ten years after he escaped the country) and life under communism.

Hip pianist in the Benelux states

After spending around ten months in Yugoslavia, Liskay moved to the Netherlands, where he graduated from high school and with the help of a state grant completed a valuable hotel manager training in Maastricht. Instead of working in the hotel industry after finishing school, he travelled widely as a pianist.

Surprisingly he cannot read music at all and plays completely by ear. He quickly advanced from being a beginner pub musician to "one of the most well-paid pianists of the Benelux states". He also played in Paris and London and on a boat commuting between Rotterdam and New York. Another stop was a posh hotel on a mountain top in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, where he befriended world-famous Austrian actress Romy Schneider.

When he was 25 years old, he decided to say goodbye to the bohemian

lifestyle and become a restaurant owner. He managed to buy and renovate a house listed as a historical monument in the middle of the trendy university district of Maastricht without any personal capital but with the financial support of a Belgian brewery. He convinced the brewery by committing himself to serve only their beer for the following 15 years. Later Liskay operated three venues within the building: a Hungarian restaurant called "Puszta Grill", a bistro and a fish restaurant.

After the socialist Joop den Uyl came to power in the Netherlands in the 1970s, Liskay rented his Maastricht gastronomy complex to the Belgian brewery. He says Uyl's policy was hostile towards the open market, and 350 entrepreneurs hastily left the Netherlands under his governance. Liskay was also driven abroad. He moved to British Columbia with his family (he has a daughter and a son).

After the successful and prosperous decades spent in Canada, Liskay



kay finally returned to Hungary. As a “proud Hungarian” he had the illusion that his home country would offer lush possibilities to invest and be a successful entrepreneur after the fall of communism. As he sees it today, he was wrong in many things. Unfortunately he found a country where corruption and nepotism are widespread.

The life of a “foreign” entrepreneur in Hungary is especially hard because on one hand Liszkay says he is often harassed by the authorities, and on the other hand corruption and greed are everywhere. He had to experience a couple of disappointments too, in the restaurant and hotel businesses. Liszkay feels sorry that the people don’t support each other in this country; there is no cohesion. “This is a foreign word in this country,” he says.

Nevertheless he stayed and for a few years has operated a ten-hectare winery in the tranquil village Monoszló, along with a pension that meets the highest standards (www.liszkay.com). Liszkay says red grapes grew here in Roman times. They called this piece of land *Tvscvlanvm*. Although today usually white wines are produced in the Balaton region, such as Riesling, he still decided to produce red: Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, Pinot Noir and Merlot.

It was a good decision and the Liszkay estate has produced top-quality wines ever since. This is largely due to the special micro climate and fertile volcanic soil of the Káli basin. The Liszkay wine hill is called *Pangyér dűlő* and is one of the most valuable wine regions in Hungary with 385 quality points out of the possible 400. His “top wine” is currently the 2011 Cabernet Sauvignon. We must mention winemaker János Barna, the person responsible for the high-class output.

We ask Liszkay whether he has time to enjoy the stunning scenery, and receive a bit of a sad answer: “No, I don’t have any time to relax at all.” He is on the road a lot working as a pianist, giving numerous concerts that combine tastings of his wines.

What would he advise a young person? “If you have accomplished something valuable in your life and you would like to share it with others, there is no time for modesty. Because the clock is ticking.”



Michael Liszkay and wine master János Barna

