



SECRETS, SMUGGLING AND STATECRAFT

The sensational history behind Hungary's 'National Shot'

The story of Unicum – universally accepted as the “National Shot” of Hungary – is the story of Hungary itself: shrouded in history, wrapped in an enigma and as tasty as a steaming bowl of goulash.

From its early use as a popular aperitif at opulent Habsburg galas, to its struggle for survival under the oppressive communist regime, to its emergence as a national symbol of modern Hungary, partaking in the country's traditional herbal liqueur is more than just an experience – it's an initiation into all that is Hungary.

Produced right here in Budapest according to its original recipe of over 40 herbs, the concoction – much like Colonel Sanders' classified KFC compound – is a highly guarded secret. In fact, as the curator at Budapest's chic Zwack Museum is sure to tell you, the original recipe had to be smuggled out of the country when the Soviets “liberated” the city after the Second World War.

The Zwack Museum, named after the family that founded the liqueur, is as much of a shrine to the family as it is to the special drink, and is easily one of Budapest's coolest tourist attractions. So if you're looking for one place in the city where you can quench your thirst for history, for intrigue or for Unicum itself – the Zwack Museum should be your first stop.

Just what is Unicum exactly? It can be difficult to put the taste into words; what we can say is that it is a flavourful aperitif with an inimitable bitter and yet still sweet taste. The popular liqueur gets its flavour from those 40-plus carefully selected herbs and spices from around the world and a lengthy ageing process featuring enormous oak barrels.

It is noted for its soothing effect on the stomach, which makes it a popular after-dinner drink. But Budapesters also enjoy the shot in between rounds of beer, which gives it its other famous moniker – the “National Accelerator”. Along with pálinka, Unicum is considered to be the national drink of Hungary.

The birth of Unicum

Its story dates all the way back to the late 18th century when Dr. József Zwack, then the Royal Physician for the Habsburg Court, created the “medicinal” concoction for Emperor Joseph II. In an effort to aid the ailing emperor's digestive problems, Zwack developed a special concoction using 40 different medicinal herbs and spices: for example, ginger from China, cardamom from India, aloe from South Africa and chamomile from here in Hungary.

It was the monarch's appreciative response – “Das ist ein unicum!” (This is unique!) – that gave the drink its name.

Already by the mid-19th century, the Zwack family had turned the creation into not only Hungary's very first liqueur manufacturer, but one of the leading distilleries in all of Central Europe. The unique bomb-shaped bottle was adopted from the very beginning and a sizeable donation was made to the Red Cross to allow them to feature the medicinal symbol on its bottles.

Ambitious marketing campaigns soon followed, such as the iconic “Drowning Man” poster of a shipwrecked sailor overjoyed to find a bottle of Unicum and the special Unicum Foxtrot jingle that featured in a popular movie ad.

At the height of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Zwack family was producing well over 200 separate liqueurs for export all over the world, some of which are on display at the museum. But much like Hungary itself, the turbulent times would soon catch up with the company.

The secret history of Unicum

By the early 20th century, the company was already in the hands of the fifth generation of Zwack boys: Béla

and János. Making it through the First World War, interestingly enough it was America's foray into Prohibition that nearly brought the company to its knees. Béla and János would instead develop light bulbs in the production facility and were responsible for blanketing Budapest's beautiful streets in neon.

The Second World War, however, would not be so kind to the establishment. The factory was bombed on three occasions, torched by the retreating Nazi army and nearly completely destroyed. The cellars, however, remained mostly intact. The large oak barrels that help give Unicum its distinct flavour were also handy in helping rebuild Budapest's destroyed bridges and they were all removed for that purpose.

All that remains from that time is one giant barrel dating back to 1937 – too heavy for even an army to move. The Zwack family were quick to rebuild in the post-war years and had the factory up-and-running again by 1948. Just in time, as it turned out, for the communist state to seize the premises and all that was in them.

Hungary's communist years were not exactly kind to the “class enemy” business elite and it was no different for Unicum's Zwack family. The authorities were able to “nationalise” businesses, confiscate property without compensation and generally make life difficult for business owners.

János was forced to send his son Peter to Yugoslavia in the hopes of emigrating to America, while he himself was forced to bribe the Russian authorities into letting him escape – in an upturned oil barrel with the family's treasured recipe in his jacket pocket!

The two were able to meet up again in Italy and travel to America, where they were interned at the refugee camp →

on Ellis Island for months. Word has it that the only reason they were allowed to immigrate was because they possessed that potent Unicum formula.

Meanwhile, Béla was still back in Budapest and involuntarily working for the new communist owners. He was forced to give up the family recipe – or at least what the authorities believed was the recipe. Instead, Béla passed on a shoddy replacement, famously featuring less than half the herbs and spices of the original.

That recipe still exists today – but it's not available for view at the museum. It's guarded nearly as secretly as the original. Béla would eventually be deported to the Puzsta (Hungarian Plain) before finally escaping to Italy. He would continue production there, which is why Unicum is nearly as popular in Italy as it is in Hungary.

The rebirth of Hungary's "National Shot"

Both brothers continued to work in the alcohol production and distribution sector in the USA and Italy. When

Zwack Museum

Address: 1 Dandár utca, District IX
 Metro: Klinikák (and short walk)
 Cost: HUF 800-1800, tasting included
 Website: unicum.hu/en/
 Phone: (+36-1) 476-2383

they died – less than two weeks apart – it was their widows who took over the family business before passing it on to Peter, the sixth-generation heir.

Times were changing again in Europe, and with communist governments weakened and vulnerable, Peter saw an opportunity and returned to his homeland. The first major industrialist to return, he witnessed the fall of the government just one year later.

His business ties to the USA made him the ideal choice as the first Hungarian ambassador to the USA; while back home he proceeded to flood the market with Unicum – and not the terrible replacement the communists had distributed. Aggressive marketing, including of national sports teams such as water polo and hockey, and a return to its original,

distinct flavour, saw Unicum quickly become the "it" drink in Hungary.

The increase in popularity was marked by different offerings of the drink, including a sweeter version infused with Hungarian plum (Unicum Plum) and a milder, citrus-based version (Unicum Next). To-

day the company is once again one of the leading distillers in Central Europe, producing over 15 million litres of the bitter booze every year. Unicum is recognised not only as Hungary's "National Shot" but also as a modern symbol of the country, and a representation of the success and determination imbued in modern Hungarian history.

The Zwack Museum of Unicum

Any visit to Budapest is not complete without stopping by the trendy Zwack Museum of Unicum. Featuring multilingual staff and displays, the experience is part Zwack family history, part celebration of Unicum.

Drawing over 10,000 visitors last year alone, there is plenty to keep patrons occupied – from an interesting historical film narrated by Peter Zwack to a museum featuring 100-year-old Unicum bottles and adverts; from a trip through the distillery (including a couple of taste tests!) to one of the largest collections of mini alcohol bottles in Europe, there is a little something for every Unicum fan.

There is a museum shop where you can buy the drink, books about it or even some of those iconic centuries-old adverts. The HUF 1800 ticket (HUF 1500 for seniors, HUF 800 for students) includes an audio guide and the chance to try each of the three Unicum flavours. The museum is near Petöfi Bridge, which is a short walk from the Klinikák metro stop, and is open Monday to Saturday from 10am to 5pm.

So no matter whether you are looking for a taste of Hungarian history, a hip hangout or just want to be "Hungarian for a day", the Zwack Museum of Unicum is the place for you. **Lee Reaney**



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