

Working title: Five o'clock in Budapest

Hot and dirty from [banging and shooting your way through the 'killing house'](#), you lean awkwardly against the side of the connex. A cauldron spews meaty smoke infused with paprika. The non-commissioned officer adds more [Eros Pista](#) paprika paste and laughs at you with his soldiers. The *Gulyás* isn't quite what they serve in the DFAC – it's way better. You dig in and feel your strength restored. Hungarians love paprika.

As you wipe sweat and dirt from your brow, unmarked glass bottles appear. A soldier leans over and pours double (triple?) shots. Damn, you think, what is this, *Krupnikas*? I'll show these guys I'm not an uncultured undergrad. You sip.

It hits your tongue [like a slap in the face](#).

They laugh as you cough and sputter. This isn't Lithuanian honey schnapps - you're in Hungary and you're sipping Uncle Csabi's *Pálinka*. This brandy hooch isn't a [fine tequila, meant for sipping](#). No, it's for shooting and burning your taste buds. The Hungarian non-comms laugh at your misstep, but invite you to slam the rest of it with them. Before long, you're six *Egészségére* deep and the slap barely stings.

Citizens of every country take pride in their national drink. Customs vary widely. In Hungary, *Pálinka* is best straight-no-chaser, while aperitif drinkers take Zwack Unicum either over ice like vodka or room-temperature like brandy.

Local libations help civilians, diplomats, and troops overcome cultural and linguistic barriers. Hooch forms the mortar for the bricks of hard labor. Excessive drinking may be hazardous to your health, but responsible social alcohol consumption smooths early missteps and exposes your humanity. Firmly founded interpersonal relationships support broader alliance goals.

The 2017 United States National Security Strategy points to six regions, including Europe, as vital to American national security interests. Second in priority, Europe houses both our biggest trading partners and NATO allies. Hungary, situated on the front-lines of NATO and at the crossroads of West and East, provides a glimpse into transatlantic tensions. Below, I channel Burgoyne and Manuat's analysis of tequila's role in Mexican-American relations to break down key facts about Hungarian-American politics.

At the end of the Cold War, Hungary channeled the [1956 Hungarian uprising](#) to orient away from Russia towards the West. Hungary joined NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004. During this time period, Hungary transitioned towards a market-based economy and reformed its military. Hungary shed about 130,000 troops from a Cold War high of 160,000. This much smaller military focused on joining NATO and [out-of-area-operations](#).

In 2013, I connected with Hungary during one of of [Hungary's many special operations forces rotations](#) in Afghanistan. As a testament to the strength of the relationship between the United States and Hungary at the time, [a Hungarian colonel](#) led my Task Group as part of the [only American special operators serving under NATO operational control](#). Unfortunately, the [refugee crisis and shifts away from liberal democracy](#) in Hungary cooled relations between our countries.

Though still frosty, American relations with Hungary thawed recently. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo met with Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto in Washington [this summer](#) ending a six-year period without bilateral contact. The Trump administration is less critical of Hungary's move towards "[illiberal Christian democracy](#)" recognizing the need to keep eastern partners in the NATO community.

To bolster NATO, the European Deterrence Initiative continues to deploy American soldiers into Hungary. European Command's [2018 posture statement](#) highlighted SABER GUARDIAN 18 hosted by Hungary and neighboring Black Sea countries. Beyond exercises, the United States will [spend \\$56 million refurbishing Kecskemet Air Base](#), which housed American F-15 fighters [until 2015](#). With American and NATO troops [popular in Hungary](#), take my advice on how to handle an offered drink.

Soldiers gather after work for a beer or drink in *kocsma* or gather at someone's home. After long training days or a slog of meetings, these pubs are just the place. However, you won't learn local drinking culture unless you really embed with the locals. One way to learn about national drinking cultures is to go all in. After receiving the [Hungarian Medal for Merit in Bronze Grade decorated with Swords](#) from the Minister of Defense, you'll certainly be offered *Pálinka*.

According to Hungarian law, *Pálinka* is fermented exclusively from fruit, produced in Hungary, and bottled with at least 37.5 percent alcohol by volume. The [EU recognizes Pálinka as an exclusively Hungarian beverage](#), though neighbors in Austria and Romania produce similar brandies. I prefer homemade (*házi*) for its sharper taste and higher alcohol content. However, high-quality commercial *Pálinkas* can be found across Hungary. [Király Pálinka-Patika](#) and [Panyolai Pálinka](#) are two brands of note. Those brands suggest *Pálinka* cocktails too, though they're rare in the wild. If you find yourself in Hungary in September, consider the [Budapest Palinka and Sausage Festival](#), which is a steal at \$20 USD. Once you acquire your taste for *Pálinka*, however, you'll struggle to locate it stateside as the sole distributor [appears defunct](#).

When drinking *Pálinka*, follow three rules. First, don't race with your Hungarian hosts. Their [local-level knowledge](#) will trump our livers every time. Second, don't think you're stronger than the *Pálinka*. Finally, don't drink *Pálinka* on an empty stomach. Though you can find [delicious treats in Budapest](#), I prefer *Pálinka* with saltier foods, like goulash. Violate these rules and not even a strong [Hungarian coffee](#) will bring you back.

If you want to try a Hungarian drink without travelling all the way to Hungary, Zwack Unicum is easier to find in the United States. Though some [compare it to Jagermeister](#), Unicum is a uniquely Hungarian digestif. Beware though, most Unicum in the states is actually Unicom Next. The American version's mild flavor is [more grapefruit than violently herbal](#).

Solidified over drink, personal relationships form the sinews of Russian deterrence. Americans must do their part to understand and embrace local culture. However, the two-way elixir exchange is better than the one-way.

Build relationships with our three easy steps:

First, build partner capacity. If hand carrying isn't an option, hit the military's [Class Six](#) liquor store on the way over. I recommend a few fifths of Jack Daniels. Not the best America offers, but your partners will recognize the bottle and appreciate the gesture.

Second, don't be the ugly American. Drunkenness sours relationships and ruins reputations faster than a bad rendition of "Under the bridge downtown" ever will. Worse than drunkenness is disrespect. Hungary is a proud nation with 1,000 years of history and is [one of 29 voting NATO members](#).

Third, ditch [your assumptions](#) and enjoy. Booze, foreign or otherwise, is best enjoyed with an open mind. Though this article focused on Hungarian liquors, your dinner hosts may follow opening *Pálinka* shots with a glass of Bull's Blood or *bikavér* red-wine. Don't be alarmed. You've had the Hungarian experience when you follow the bottle of Bull's Blood with a Unicum nightcap.

While debate over the death of the postwar liberal order continues, the American troops that underpin that order [haven't slowed down](#). Personal relationships make alliances more responsive and effective. With Russia rallying in the east, I've been collecting threat intelligence by sampling *vodka*. I recommend you do the same.

BIO

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