

SPECIAL PROFILE: **SLOVENIA**

Slovenia's rising stars

BY CAROLINE GILBY MW

Slovenia may be a tiny and relatively new country, but this year's DWWA results show its wine producers are punching well above their weight in terms of sheer quality. Slovenia's stunningly beautiful green hillsides provide an abundance of terroirs and there is an array of unique, exciting wine styles too, bagging an impressive haul of four Golds, two Regional trophies and a raft of strong Silvers bubbling just under.

The increase in quality over recent years has been staggering. Increasingly, Slovenia is being compared, not only to its highflying neighbours, such as Collio in Italy and Styria in Austria, but even to New Zealand.

The relatively cool climate in Slovenia means that whites typically dominate production (around 75%). The country is actually divided into three main wine regions, but for quality wine, it is Primorska in the west and Podravje near the Austrian border that are most important.

In the north-east, the Austrian influence is clear, in both the grapes grown and in the wine styles, with their distinctive mineral undertones and vibrant acidity.

Dveri-Pax, with its historic 13th-century castle near Maribor, Slovenia's second largest town, is managed by Austrian winemaker Erich Krutzler. He makes beautifully poised whites – especially the fresh, zesty Riesling, elegant Traminac (the local name for Gewürztraminer) and a lush Trockenbeerenauslese, made from Chardonnay and Sipun

(Hungary's Furmint), an unusual blend that works superbly well.

Pinot Gris, known locally as Sivi Pinot, also does well here, leaner in structure than wines from the west, and with vivid mineral undertones. Riesling, not surprisingly, suits this region and Joannes Protner's Renski Riesling 2004 is a prime example of the local style, while Steyer produces a delicious, apricoty, sweet Traminac, and young winery Faust is up and coming. Even Laski Rizling, once the backbone of Yugoslavian wine production around Ljutomer, is now being reinvented.

In this part of Slovenia, reds are generally limited to the occasional Blaufränkisch, and a few Pinot Noirs, with the best examples, such as Kogl and Kupljen, being fresh and precise with lively raspberry-ish fruit.

The west of Slovenia is very different – climatically Mediterranean and far more influenced by its Italian neighbours. Many of the vineyards around Goriska Brda straddle the border of the Italian Collio region. Some of Italy's most renowned producers even grow their grapes in Slovenia. Goriska Brda has perhaps the greatest concentration of the country's top producers, including Movia, Marian Simec, Edi Simec, Jakoncic, Scurek and Erzetic. Here, too, whites dominate



Clockwise from above: top producer Edi Simec; Slovenia's hillsides are ideal for vines; local winemaker Matjaz Lemut

or even months) and oak-ageing. In part, this is due to the influence of Josko Gravner from the Italian side of Collio and, in part, because the region has few reds and big, structured whites can fill this niche (and are excellent food wines, to boot).

The best of these macerated whites, such as Marian Simec's, successfully manage to walk the tightrope of balancing extraction and flavour against oxidation and heaviness, while Edi Simec is a contrast for a good non-macerated version. Rebula is also important in providing a strong sense of place and local identity in the best blends, such as Teodor Belo, Movia's Veliko

production. Sivi Pinot and its little sister Beli Pinot (Pinot Blanc) make rich, full-bodied wines capable of ageing superbly well, and there are also some well-crafted and intense Chardonnays.

Sauvignon is a source of pride, made here in a uniquely weighty and textured style. Both Simecs (distant cousins) make good examples, as does Sutor in Vipava. The speciality white grape of the region is Rebula (Italy's Ribolla Gialla) and, increasingly, there is a fashion for making this with long skin maceration (weeks



Primoz Lavrencic with his wife and brother. The local micro-climate gives a superb mineral backbone to his Chardonnays, currently some of the best and most consistent in the country. His blended white Burja is also intriguing: Rebula, Malvazija and Laski Rizling, fermented in small wooden vats, and with 10% skins added for a long maceration, once the juice is busy fermenting.

Not far away, Matjaz Lemut and his wife run their 7ha vineyards, named Tilia after the lime tree among the vines. They are focusing on the unique local Zelen, which makes a light, fresh, pretty wine – perfect with the local food. The rest of the range is appealing too, with well-made Sivi Pinot and Pinot Noir. Another promising producer is Guerila, where Uros Bolcina is a bit of a rebel by avoiding all signs of maceration, while concentrating on local grapes, Zelen, Pinela and Malvazija.

The district of Kras produces some of Slovenia's most distinctive reds. The biggest producer here is Cotar, where a father-and-son team take a very natural approach to winemaking. As the limestone bedrock has no top soil, several truckloads of red soil were brought in to give the vines a start. The local strain of Refosk makes a red wine called Teran, marked by almost searing acidity and raspberry leaf notes when young.

Eight years on, the 1999 is delicious matched with home-cured ham, matured in the same cellar. Another strain of Refosk is grown in the Koper region, also with notably high acidity, but with interesting modern interpretations from Rojac and Vinakoper.

Slovenia's dynamic winemakers are making an array of unique and distinctive wines. They have made great strides in the last few years, and there's little doubt that with wines this good, we will be seeing a lot more of them. **D**

Belo, Jakoni's Carolina and Scurek's Stara Brajda.

There are also some good reds in this region; typically Merlot-based, as Cabernet can struggle to ripen well. Also a couple of impressive Pinot Noirs have appeared, most notably Movia's powerful 2002, and a more delicate example from Marjan Simcic. The trend towards biodynamics in the area is also worth a mention – Marjan Simcic has been biodynamic for six to seven years, for the quality of fruit.

The Vipava Valley (or 'valley of cherries') is another important zone in the west of Slovenia. It's notable for high winds (known as *Burja*). Cool nights due to mountain air mean that reds are challenging, though Sutor's new Pinot Noir looks very promising tasted from barrel.

This small family winery is run by viticultural researcher

HISTORY IN THE MAKING

Having become a member of the EU in 2004, Slovenia will further boost its European profile in January 2008 as it assumes presidency of the EU council. This, hope the Slovenes, will also help establish a higher profile for the accomplished wines emerging as a young generation of producers embrace their craft with a renewed passion.

And what stunning wines they are. I recently visited several of Slovenia's leading producers in the sub-regions around Nova Gorcia in the west of the country, and discovered an almost messianic devotion to organic viticultural practices, coupled with the use of ambient yeasts, incredibly low-intervention winemaking and long maceration on the skin for the whites. The resulting wines are typically complex, displaying oodles of nutty, waxy character, delicately threaded on a taught backbone of nervy minerality.



Timeless landscape: Brda vineyard

What is most remarkable is just how recently and how quickly the confidence to aim so high has spread among Slovene winemakers. Slovenia has long achieved acclaim for its vineyards, not least during the days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Alongside a wealth of indigenous varieties such as Rebula and Teran, the Austro-Hungarian overlords planted varieties such as Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Cabernet and Merlot

and varieties such as Pinot Gris, Pinot Blanc, Picolit and others common to north-eastern Italy.

In fact, the labelling of a winemaker's wine as Collio or Brda, Italian or Slovenian (grapes are often harvested from both sides of the border), depends on the sighting of his winery. And, as Brda producers like to point out, all the best aspects of the 'Collio' are in fact in Slovenia. All of these influences – Italian, Austrian, Hungarian, plus Slovenia's own soils and vineyard sites – have conspired to create the base ingredients for the country's modern-day wines.

Half of production still takes place in the local co-ops, but this is changing fast. Slovenia has around 24,000ha of vines, with 10 big producers accounting for half of production, and another 500 producers making up the balance. These are typically growers with between 3ha and 15ha.

Crowning this independent sector is a recently created organisation called Family Estates of Slovenia, its 90 members counting 5,000ha between them. It includes leading lights such as Marjan Simcic, Edi Simcic, Scurek, Cotar,

Rojac, Sutor and Movia, where Ales Krstancic weaves his biodynamic magic.

Merchants, sommeliers and writers are beginning to sit up and take notice of Slovenia, and it can only be a matter of time before self-respecting wine enthusiasts do the same. Whatever their past, Slovenian wines clearly have an exciting future.

Andrew Catchpole is the former wine correspondent of the Daily Telegraph