SLOVENIA may be a tiny and relatively new country, but this year's DWQA 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 hlig hurting 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 Kutzler. He makes beautifully poised whites – especially the fresh, zesty Riesling, elegant Tramince (the local name for Gewürztraminer) and a lush  Trockenbeerenauslese, made from Chardonnay and Sipon (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 Protnar's Renski Riesling 2004 is a prime example of the local style, while Steyer produces a delicious, apricotty, sweet Tramince, 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 Kogler 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, Marjan Simcic, Edi Simcic, Jakoncic, Sivec and Zertic. Here, too, whites dominate production. Sivi Pinot and its little sister Beli Pinot (Pinot Blanc) make rich, full-bodied wines capable of age exceedingly 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 Simcics (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 or even months) and oak-aging. 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 Marjan Simcic’s, successfully manage to walk the tightrope of balancing extraction and flavour against oxidation and heaviness, while Edi Simcic 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
Primoz Lavrenic with his wife and brother. The local microclimate gives a superb mineral backbone to his Chardonnay, 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 Lenut 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 Bokina 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 Cotor, 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.