



## SLOVENIAN SWEET WINE by Caroline Gilby MW

**I T SEEMED A** fair bet that the DWWA Regional Trophy for Sweet Wine (Over £10) for Central and Eastern Europe would go the way of Hungary. There were several wonderful Tokajis in the line-up, and the country has an established reputation for great wines of this ilk. It came as a surprise, then, when

Slovenia snatched the trophy thanks to Curin-Prapotnik's stunning Sipon ice wine from the Ljutomer-Ormož region.

Slovenia is a small, little-known, but dramatically beautiful country in the northwest corner of the former Yugoslavia, once famous for Laski Rizling. Since the country gained independence in 1991, a culture of quality wine has evolved, with several producers now contenders for





**Far left: Jeruzalem Ormozis is a shining example of the progress made by former Slovenian state cooperatives, notably in producing top quality ice wine (harvested left)**

communism, when the industry favoured quantity above all else, his motto was: 'we can only prosper through quality.' Curin's warmth and generosity have won him many admirers, and his staunch, even stubborn, commitment to producing a world-class sweet wine has made him into a local legend. He can still be seen wandering the rows of his precious vines in the hills near Kog, close to Ljutomer-Ormož, though son-in-law Slavko Prapotnik and grandson Borut now run the estate.

It is Hungary's Furmint grape, known in Slovenia as Sipun, that has produced this amazing ice wine, though Riesling can be included, depending on the vintage. The grapes were left on the vines until February, with humble scarecrows to protect the precious crop from ravenous birds. Conditions for ice wine only appear every five years or so, and it's a challenge to pick frozen berries by hand, once temperatures have fallen to  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$  as they need to, for over a week.

In the west of the country, the vineyards of Primorska straddle the Italian border stretching into Collio, though arguably Slovenia has the best hillside sites. Here the climate does not suit late-harvest wines, hence sweet wines are made by the method of drying grapes (or passito), which has long been a tradition for

household consumption. With his rockstar looks of copiously flowing locks, Marjan Simčič seems an unlikely winemaker, but Simčič won't trust anyone else with his precious barrels, except for a week in February when he goes snowboarding. His Leonardo Passito is named after his son and is made from low-yielding Rebula vines, which in Italy are Ribolla Gialla. The berries are dried on racks until April, allowing noble rot to develop and shrivelling the fruit to around

### **'Despite this amazing ice wine, Slovenia has more to offer than just its sweet wines'**

10% of its original weight, giving both depth and richness. The wine is hand-pressed and fermented, then aged in small barrels. This wine is unfiltered, and should age for a decade.

Slovenia has more to offer than just its sweet wines, however, shown by a clutch of very good Silver medals. Marjan Simčič's time in Burgundy and Bordeaux included a stage at Pétrus and this shows in the elegance of his Merlot-based Teodor red and a silken Marjan Pinot Noir Reserve, while his whites are powerful and rich.

Distant cousin Aleks Simčič (of Edi Simčič) insists his family thought him mad when he first started to green

harvest – 'my mother used to follow me to hide the grapes I'd cut off'. His wonderfully intense Duet Riserva improves every year and tastes like blueberries in a spice market, while the Sauvignon Riserva is a really lovely example of a style of barrel-fermented Sauvignon that is unique to this corner of Europe, a world away from the herbaceous New Zealand norm.

Other top producers include the biodynamic Movia, where computers follow phases of the moon. Wines mature in oak for many years, but they appear to have the fruit quality to cope. The Modri Pinot Noir spends four years surrounded by wood, but is still amazingly silky, and Veliko Rdeče, or 'Big Red', has actually gained depth from six years in barrel. Up-and-coming names include Jakončič with its top Carolina red and white, while the Lavrenčič brothers at Sutor produce some

beautifully crafted whites. The best wines of Austrian-owned Dveri-Pax, perhaps not surprisingly, are its stylish Rieslings. Cotar's Teran and Santomas Refošk are worth a look – Refošk, from Koper, is a deep ruby, lively raspberry-ish wine, while Teran has rich berry fruits and robust acidity. This comes from a unique strain of Refošk grown round Kras on rich, red soil.

None of these wines come cheap, but lower down the scale, former state cooperatives at Ptuj, Brda and most impressively Jeruzalem-Ormož have sought international help to make clean, attractive wines that should win Slovenia many new followers. **D**

some of the most exciting wines in Eastern Europe.

In the northeast, the Podravje region borders Austria, and has a long tradition of sweeter wine styles, though it was Stanko Curin who was the first to make high-quality late-harvest wines, including the country's first ice wine. He was also first to bottle wine via a private label back in 1971 in a step towards a new era of individual estates. Even under