SLOVENIAN VINES

Martin Moran MW visits Slovenia, a new member of the EC, and a country producing some seriously good wine

Mr Marc, the man from the embassy was most insistent. I must visit Slovenia and try their wines. And so it was that a few weeks later I found myself on a disturbingly small aircraft with a select group of journalists and importers circling in the sky and mountains above Ljubljana airport praying that we wouldn’t bump into anything hidden in the dense cloud. After what seemed an eternity we emerged beneath the cloud where a stunning snow clad vista of hills and forests was revealed. “Wow, it’s beautiful!” I thought to myself, something I was to repeat regularly over the next few days.

Why were the Slovenians so keen for our group to visit? Well they are one of the ten accession countries who signed up to the EU on May 1st 2004 and they want us to know all about them. Their biggest problem they say is people confusing them with Slovakia and even occasionally, God forbid, Serbia. Well they all start with the letter S and used to be part of bigger countries, so you can see the problem. It’s gotten so serious they are discussing changing their flag to make it more distinctive. So let’s clear this up straight away. Slovenia is part of the former Yugoslavia, bordered by Italy to the west, Austria to the North, and Hungary to the east and Croatia to the South and it’s been independent since 1991 after a brief ten-day war, which was more of a face off than a battle to be honest.

Some parts of the former Yugoslavia may be mired in internecine strife but the Slovenes have just quietly gotten on with building a modern society. Foolishly my expectations had been low. So many of the former communist or socialist countries have struggled with the change to capitalism with issues of land ownership and corrupt administrations dragging them down. In the wine world this has tended to mean low investment and old-fashioned, inconstant wines with dreadful packaging whose main appeal to Irish consumers has been price. But boy was I wrong to mentally lump the Slovenians in with the likes of Bulgaria and Romania.

The first thing you notice are the streams of smart cars on the excellent motorway system and the numerous beautiful houses, villas and castles dotting hilltops in the rolling countryside that all in their way scream money and prosperity. Its history and geography make it something of a melting pot, a fascinating rainbow of cultures and climates, all crammed into a relatively small space with a population just under two million. There also seems to be drive and determination to succeed and this is certainly no impoverished backwater. Minister McDowell need have no fear of Ireland being swamped by hordes of Slovene ‘welfare tourists’.

Interestingly even during the socialist era most of the vineyards remained in private hands. What was nationalised though was wine production with co-operatives dominating. Following independence and a sudden dose of financial reality many of the co-ops were unable to pay growers. The latter started to make their own wine literally in their garages, but 12 or 13 years on several have blossomed into state of the art wineries gleaming with stainless steel and rows of new barriques from France, America and proudly
their own Slovenian oak.

After falling to retrieve our bags which had probably known how scary the landing was going to be and decided to stay in Frankfurt, where we'd changed planes, we boarded a bus and left the snow-draped airport and 90 minutes later we were eating lunch on the balmy Mediterranean coast. The frontier with Italy has been redrawn several times and many farms and wine estates now actually straddle the border. The Italian side of the border, Collio in Friuli, makes very modern expensive varietal wines and not surprisingly the wines can be similar on the Slovenian side.

The western vineyards region on the border with Italy and the Adriatic is known collectively as Primorska with four sub districts: Brda, Vipava, Kras and Koper running north to south. The varieties grown are not surprisingly a mixture of the international and indigenous. For whites, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Sivi Pinot (Pinot Grigio), Beli Pinot (Pinot Blanc), Tocai Friulano, Malvasija (Malvasia) and Rebula (Ribolla) and Picolit can all perform well.

Popular red varieties include Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Barbara Modri Pinot (Pinot Noir) plus the indigenous Refosk, also known as Teran when grown on the terra rossa soils of Kras.

My initial impressions after tastings and meeting producers are that Sauvignon Blanc is particularly good here. Most producers seem to make it using wood in a Californian like 'Fumé Blanc' style that is far more firm and sturdy as the American versions while a few make vibrant, pure unwooded herbaceous styles that will have the South Africans and Kiwis looking over their shoulders. It always helps a country or wine region to have a unique offering and for Primorska it could be Rebula. With its firm acidity, non-aromatic nose, and good body it almost passes as Slovenia’s answer to Chablis and is also great base material for sparkling wine. The early ripening Merlot was consistently the best of the reds tasted which makes me think that Pinot Noir could do well and one we did try from leading producer Movia was superb.

As good as Primorska was, the bulk of the country's vineyards actually lie in the east, on the borders with Austria, Hungary and Croatia. And so we travelled next to the South East of the country, bizarrely stopping en route at a service station for a rendez-vous with our baggage, to a region called Posavje, where we stayed at the sparkling wine producer Istenic. Posajen encompasses three districts: Bizeljsko-Stremec, Delnaska and Bela Hrastna, running north to south. The climate here has less Mediterranean influence and is more alpine. Hence reds are less likely to ripen and firm acids found are useful in sparkling wine production. With luck, some years they can also make ice wines too.

Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc and Sauvignon are supplemented by Rumeni Muscat (Muscat Blanc), Laski Rizling (Welschriesling), Reski Rizling (Rhine Riesling) with Modri Frankinja (Blaufrankisch) for the reds. There were some real highlights at our tasting including some stunning ice wines from a producer called Prus and first-rate sparklers from our host Miha Istenic. Incidentally ex-Wimbledon champion Goran Ivanisevic was enjoying his dinner at the next table during our tasting.

In the North East of the country Podavje is the country’s largest winegrowing region and is subdivided into seven districts including Ljutomer-Ormož home of the old Ljutomer Laski Rizling, tragically the only Slovenian wine many in Ireland will have heard of. First, though, in some historic cellars and then at a beautiful alpine lodge, an array of wines were paraded before us and several were a real delight. Grape varieties grown here are similar to Posavje but additionally given the Austro-Hungarian influence others are grown including Cipon (Furmint), Gewürztraminer, Sivi Pinot (Pinot Grigio) and Modri Pinot (Pinot Noir).
for the reds.

Do Slovenian wines have a future in Ireland? I hope so. The best of them are very good and sadly for us they would probably be also quite expensive but there are good quality affordable wines to be found too. The terrain for the most part doesn’t lend itself to large scale mechanised production so we’re unlikely to see a mass-market Jacobs Creek type brand although a couple of the big co-ops are working with Angela Muir MW as a consultant to see if she can help them produce the kind of good quality affordable wines that the UK and Ireland lap up. Perhaps it’s best to view Slovenia as a sort of East European New Zealand, capable of producing high quality individual wines to complement the huge output of a neighbour, i.e. Australia if you’re a Kiwi, but in Slovenia’s case, Italy.

On the downside many a label reads like a bad hand at scrabble, but smart producers, like Edi Simele are working to simplify them and keep all the technical and legislative information in small print on the back label so as not to frighten us off.

At the time of writing few if any were yet imported but that should change. If you really want to try them then why not visit Ryanair and Easyjet fly from Stansted to Trieste and Ljubljana respectively and you’ll find a beautiful country with friendly people and reasonably priced food and accommodation when you get there. Besides, apparently Ljubljana is the ‘new’ Prague, so what are you waiting for? €

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**RECOMMENDED PRODUCERS**

This is by no means a complete list but names those that caught the eye on this trip:

**Primorje Region**
- Edi Simele, Marjan Simele, Mavio, Catar, Battn, Samtomas, Vindkoper, Sibav, Kmetija Prinej

**Posavje Region**
- Mikl Isenjie, Pris, Groben

**Podravje Region**
- Prtnar, Steier, Gurr, Gaube, Krajen, Radvonsko Gorice, Jerzulak Omozi

**SLOVENIAN WINE CLASSIFICATIONS**
- Namzno Vino – Table wine
- Kakovastno Vino ZGP – Quality Wine with protected geographic origin
- Vrhunsko Vino – Superior Quality wine with protected geographic origin
- There are also German style ‘pradikat’ designations relating to late harvest styles
- Ladanjo Vino – Ice Wine
- Renece Vino – Sparkling wine

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**COMPETITION WINNERS**

**April 2004**

**Les Routiers**
2 NIGHTS ACCOM FOR 2 WITH BREAKFAST AND ONE DINNER
CASTLEGROVE COUNTRY HOUSE HOTEL
Mary Dooley, Athy, Co Kildare

**Caherinae House Hotel**
Catherine Kelly, Ballinasloe, Co Galway

**Noel Stewart**
2 NIGHTS LUXURY ACCOM FOR 2 WITH ONE DINNER
AND BREAKFAST
Gerry McConnell, Dunlooghaire, Co Dublin

**Georgina Campbell**
WINNER OF SHORT BREAK IN GREGANS CASTLE HOTEL
Fiolna McKenna, Athboy, Co Meath

**RUNNERS UP**
N. Moorad, 34 The Rise, Woodpark, Ballinteer, Dublin 16
Cathy McCarter, Crumlin Fanore, Co Clare
Geraldine Murphy, Millbrook Bclainamullia, Athlone,
Co Roscommon
Jacqueline McGuire, 60 The Pines, Herbert Pk Lane, Dublin 4
John Horgan, Kiltra Dromagh, Mallow, Co Cork