Chemical-free radicals put faith in niche markets

Winemakers in this reborn nation are gambling on extreme ‘green’ viticulture.

Tom Cannavan reports

Slovenia today is a confident democracy that engages with the rest of the world both politically and economically. Since gaining independence from the former Yugoslavia in 1991, the naturally western-facing tendencies of Slovenia have flourished, including full membership of the EU since 2004. In January 2008 Slovenia will assume presidency of the EU council, and the Schengen Agreement will eliminate border controls with its neighbours in Italy and Austria.

There has been a subtle, but growing buzz surrounding Slovenia over the past year or so, with more and more people recognising the country as a place to visit for its natural, unspoiled beauty. Its wine industry has also gone through change.

No longer required to sell to the co-operatives, a new generation of independent growers, a new generation of independent wine estates has emerged from the country’s more enlightened grape growers. “The whole population has been energised,” says Primoz Lavrenc, winemaker at Sutur in the Vipava Valley.

The best known name in Slovenian viticulture is Janko Gravner. Gravner is one of the world’s great winemaking visionaries, who has gained a cult following for his extraordinary white wines – where long skin macerations mean fruit is submerged beneath all sorts of waxy, nutty and mineral tones. Gravner has vineyards in Slovenia’s Brda region, but like many in the area, also farms just over the Italian border in Friuli. Crucially, though, Gravner’s winery lies in Italy, so his wines are Italian.

Slovenia may not benefit from the “Gravner effect”, but his success has had a powerful impact on a small group of winemakers. They are acutely aware of Gravner’s philosophy, and of the high prices his wines command. They embrace the same natural farming and winemaking techniques, using few chemicals, minimal or no sulphur, and only ambient yeasts to manage implausibly long skin macerations. This extreme winemaking means that results can be thrilling, but disaster awaits those who do not harvest perfect grapes or practice perfect hygiene.

Aiming for natural perfection

First stop on my recent tour of western Slovenia was Batˇ in the Vipava Valley, where Miha Batˇ one of many youthful, passionate winemakers I would meet – explained his philosophy: “We are trying to do as little as possible in the winery,” he told me, “we strive to harvest perfect grapes in natural conditions.”

Batˇ ’s top wines are made in the macerated style, and for western European palates a certain amount of “expectation adjustment” is needed. My tasting notes were full of words like “waxy”, “salty” and “herbal”. But the wines are fascinating: individual and complex, they unravel layer by layer in the glass.

Over the next two days I visited several of Slovenia’s most interesting family estates. Styles varied widely, from more “international” wines to iconoclastic.

In Brda, the human dynamo that is Aleˇ Kristanˇcˇ oversees the biodynamic estate of Mervia (in the UK via Lea & Sandeman). Kristanˇcˇ talks with infectious, sometimes overwhelming enthusiasm about the quality of Slovenia’s terroirs. He rejects the modern enthusiasm for clonal selection of planting material: “I may have a thousand different results in one vineyard, but that means life!” Kristanˇcˇ also produces an extraordinary sparkling wine called Puro. After three years in vats, the base wine is bottled with the must from the new vintage, but no sugar or yeast. The bottles are then buried in the earth for three more years, to be subjected to the earth’s magnetic forces. Finally, the wine is sold with instructions on how to disgorg it at home, in a sink full of water. Each step is designed to make the wine as natural as possible.

Another star winery is Marjan Simˇciˇ, also in Brda (represented in the UK by H&H Bancroft). Like Gravner, Simˇciˇ farms on both sides of the border: Italy is literally a stone’s throw from his winery. The international appeal of Simˇciˇ’ s wines is enhanced by ageing in French and Slovenian barrels, but he is a passionate advocate of skin macerations of up to one year. “The first place great wine is made is here,” he tells me, tapping his temple. “If the grapes are fully mature, then skin contact gives only good things.”

What is more interesting – eating whole, ripe grapes or sipping just the juice?”

Of course, not all Slovenian wineries are making such idiosyncratic wines. There are large co-ops and private companies aiming, crisp Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Grigio at the sub-£6 shelves in the UK’s multiples. But estates like those featured in this report are pushing the limits of winemaking to create some truly fascinating wines.

The shock of the style means these are wines to be hand-sold to enthusiasts. But for more jaded consumers, they offer a whole new world of tastes. There are wines here of extraordinary quality. In a world crowded with safe, look-alike bottles, they deserve our attention.

Selected estates

Edi Simˇcˇiˇ (Brda)
All French oak, more “international”, aiming for Slovenia’s first “icon wine” with his Bordeaux blend.

Šucˇek (Brda)
Look out for an extraordinary 16 per cent abv Pikolet, smelling of old roses and lavender.

Četar (Kras)
Farms organically on rich Terrarossa soils. Sladko is a delightful passito Malvasia.

Rejac (Istria)
Investing heavily in cellars, 50 per cent of plantings here are Refosk (Refosco).

Sutor (Vipava)
Excellent white wines – and a highly promising Pinot Noir programme on stream.

Tilia
Generally fresher, more commercial range. Good quality, and 2005 Rebola a star.

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