INSTANT WINE WISDOM

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TREASURES OF THE ADRIATIC

Tourists have long flocked to Croatia and Slovenia for their stunning natural beauty, but the wines are the new draw, discovers SUE STYLE

People have long found good reasons to travel to Croatia and Slovenia: unspoiled Adriatic coastlines, well-preserved Roman sites, medieval hilltop villages, rugged alpine scenery and wild mountain walks. But they haven’t often featured in wine lovers’ travel guides. Until now.

The word is out that the neighbouring countries have something special to offer in vinous terms too, thanks to their deeply rooted winemaking culture and distinctive indigenous grapes. By way of proof, last year saw tiny Slovenia graduate to own-panel status in the Decanter World Wine Awards – a development vindicated by its medal scores – while Croatia distinguished itself from fellow Central & Eastern European countries with an astonishing eight Gold medals.

Of course, Croats and Slovenes need no convincing of the merits of their (often sweet) wines: they rank fourth and fifth (hot on the heels of Luxembourg, France and Italy) in global per capita wine consumption.

After both countries’ independence in 1991, followed by the implosion of Yugoslavia and the tragic aftermath of the war of independence, tourism slowly
re-established itself, vineyards returned to private ownership and wineries embarked on huge investment programmes. Twenty years on, there’s never been a better time to take a wine tour in the region.

The best seasons to visit, say locals, are spring (for gentle warmth and wild asparagus) or autumn (ditto, plus truffles). For an introductory taste, consider combining Istria, Croatia’s heart-shaped peninsula on the Adriatic, with Slovenia’s Primorska (coastal) region just to the north. Distances are small and the roads good. You could settle down in one place and radiate out on wine tasting forays, or move between two or three different hotels or stanijas (see box p103).

Istrian idyll

Stancija Meneghetti near Bale in southern Istria would make a great base for a week’s R&R and selected tastings. A traditional stone-built farmhouse on a large, secluded wine- and olive-growing estate, its weekly rental comes complete with chef, butler and maid. To help combat the ravages of the chef’s cuisine (‘minimum three-kilo gain in the week’), guarantees smiling host Miroslav Pišo, there are indoor and outdoor pools, sauna, fitness room and bikes to pound around the estate’s extensive network of tracks, or to take you to the beach 5km away.

Not far away is Rovinj, a sort of pre-1960s Portofino washed in faded pastel shades. After a mid-morning glass of Left: picturesque Rovinj is a sort of pre-1960s Portofino but in Croatia

‘He likens the local red to the Istrian male: “Not much good about him, but people still love him”’

Malvazija (Malvasia) by the quay, you may want to deepen acquaintance with this fragrant local Istrian variety with a tasting chez Matošević near Krnčići.

Its young winemaker Ivica Matošević (first harvest 2006) is fascinated by Malvazija, Istria’s main grape – his PhD from Italy’s Udine University focused on the influence of terroir on this distinctive local variety. Most Istrian Malvazija is designed for early bottling and drinking; Matošević has other ideas, including a blend (with Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay) or, his real passion, vinified alone and aged for several months in small acacia. It’s an association that makes perfect sense: get your nose into a glass of Malvazija and you’ll be hit by wafts of acacia blossom.

Over a superb seafood feast at Restaurant Viking on the Limski Kanal, a long fjord-like inlet reminiscent of Galicia’s Rías Baixas and famed for its oyster beds, Matošević reminded us of Istria’s frequently shifting borders and the diverse influences that have shaped it. ‘My grandfather was born in Austria,’ he said, ‘and my father in Italy. I was born in Yugoslavia and my son in Croatia – all that without the family ever moving house!’

Further inland is Motovun, a medieval hilltop village whose fountains and town gates are graced with elegantly sculpted bas-reliefs of Venetian lions – Venice ruled Istria and parts of Slovenia for the best part of two centuries from 1205. The famed truffle oak forests down in the valley are visible from the ramparts – October and November are best for the fresh tubers, shaved over gnocchi or fuži (Istrian bow-shaped pasta).

Another luxurious perch would be the San Rocco, a 12-room, 2-suite hotel in Brtonigla set in an extensive garden, its simple stone farmhouse core converted and extended by sommelier-owner Tullio Ferretti. Base yourself here and prepare for some serious hardship: there’s an indoor and outdoor pool, sauna, spa, olive oil or truffle massages, private tasting room and in-house restaurant where chef Zoran Kovanov’s cooking features local shellfish, truffles, pork and game.

San Rocco is perfectly placed for a visit to Marino Markežić’s 20ha (hectare) Kabola estate near Momjan. In the

ZAGREB’S WINE GOURMET FESTIVAL

Visiting a region whose wines you barely know, you could do worse than head for a wine festival that’s done the legwork for you and assembled key producers under one roof.

The Zagreb Wine Gourmet Festival, held annually in March (visit www.zagrebwinegourmet.com for 2011 dates) in the city’s historic Arts and Crafts Museum, provides an overview of Croatian and Slovenian wines from selected producers (plus a handful of wines from neighbouring countries). In the space of a few days you can zigzag your way from the depths of Dalmatia (look out for Korta Katarina and Frano) up through the Istrian peninsula (add Coronica and Degrossi Moreno to producers mentioned in the main feature) and on into Slovenia’s Primorska region (again producers listed in the main feature, plus Movia, Edi Simčič and Ščurek). Inland Slovenia boasts the Podravje wine region, home to the Decanter World Wine Awards multiple award-winning producers Dveri-Pax and Curin Prapotnik, while a final sweep down into Slavonia (confusingly, in Croatia) will give you a taste of Krauthaker’s elegant, prize-winning wines.
WINNING ACCLAIM

Croatia first announced itself on the world wine stage at the 2009 Decanter World Wine Awards with its tangy, appetising, cool-climate whites, both dry and dessert-style, from a range of grapes. The acogee was a flight in which eight dessert wines won Gold. The Inland Kontinenta region makes crisp whites, while the coastal area gives fruitier styles. The surprise of the 2010 Awards, meanwhile, was a 2008 Merlot from Podunavje’s Belje, which scooped a Regional Trophy.

Slovenia had its own panel for the first time at the 2009 DWWA. The whites shone, with a sweet wine by Podavje’s Jurij Brumec taking a Regional Trophy, and furthering the country’s reputation for sweet wines. At the 2010 Awards, Slovenia won eight Golds, with renowned producer Marjan Simčič winning two. Slovenia is also producing characterful dry whites from Sauvignon Blanc and Ribolla, while Zelen, Pinela and Sipon are the varietals to watch.

- For the full list of this year’s Croatian and Slovenian medal winners, see our special Awards Issue (October 2010).

Beautiful tasting room, over locally cured prosciutto and a truffle-infused cheese, we tried a classic, floral Malvazija, moved to a firmer, barrique-aged riserva and graduated to a stunning golden elixir that had spent six months on its skins in amphorae (this trend has trickled down from Italy via Slovenia to Istria), followed by a year in large Slovenian oak barrels and a final eight months in bottle.

Though Malvazija is Istria’s signature grape, Markež also rates Teran (aka Refosk), the tough local red he likens to the Istrian male: ‘There’s not much good about him, but people still love him!’ This highly acidic variety does seem to respond - presumably like the Istrian male - to a firm hand (in Kabola’s vineyards) and lots of TLC (in the cellar).

Gianfranco Kozlović’s estate, perched on a hillside overlooking neatly planted vineyards, looks across at the ruined castle of Momjan. Surveying his winery - now a building site - with its eye-watering investment in concrete, steel and oak, the winemaker admits, ‘I enjoy a challenge!’ The ambition is evident and the project huge, but Kozlović’s views on wine are refreshingly simple: ‘I want to make wines of varietal character, pleasing, with long-lasting flavour, but not a whole philosophy lesson. Wine shouldn’t burden you with expectations.’ The star of Kozlović’s cellar is Santa Lucia, a structured, fruit-filled Malvazija from a long-established but recently acquired vineyard where some 50-year-old vines survive.

Primorska hospitality

The Slovenian border is practically visible from Momjan. Once across, and before setting off north, stop off at the waterfront in Piran, which spreads out along a tiny tongue of land tipped with an ancient lighthouse and embracing a graceful bay. After a brief incursion into Italy, skirting round Trieste, you reach the little Slovenian enclave of Goriška Brda, whose vineyards nuzzle up against those of Italy’s Collio - they’re visible from the tower of Marjan Simčič’s winery. Typically for this small region, Simčič has vines on both sides of the border; of the estate’s 18ha, six are in Italy, the rest in Slovenia.

Primorska’s perfect winegrowing climate - gusts of warm air from the Gulf of Trieste to the south and cool draughts from the Julian Alps to the north - gives concentrated, full-bodied wines capable of great ageing. As in Istria, whites rule, but here Malvazija cedes ground to Rebula (aka Ribolla Gialla) and Sauvignonasse (Tocai Friuliano). Simčič’s luscious, food-friendly Rebulas range from a fine single varietal to the more complex Teodor Belo blend (with Pinot Grigio and Sauvignonasse), to the 2009 DWWA Gold medal-winner Leonardo, a passito aged 30 months in tiny barriques.

Just above Simčič in the hilltop village of Medana, with wrap-around views out over the Brda vineyards, is Belica, a haven built in typically Slovenian style –