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Welcome to the new New World

When a Slovenian wine took the International Sweet Wine Trophy at the Decanter World Wine Awards last month, it was further evidence of the rise of Central and Eastern European winemaking. Angela Muir MW gives an overview of this diverse region and joins fellow experts in naming the most dynamic producers

THE CENTRAL AND Eastern European countries that emerged from behind the Iron Curtain just over 20 years ago now produce more wine than Argentina. If you include Moldova, Georgia, the Crimea and Russia, the output rivals that of the whole of South America. And yet our wine columns are full of South American success stories, our shops are full of South American wines, and poor old CEE is nowhere to be seen. We accept that South America can go upmarket, but we ignore what’s happening on our own doorstep. Football fanatics flock to Ljubljana in droves, but are wine lovers and importers making similar voyages of discovery? There’s not much sign of it. How can we have missed out so badly in sharing some of the wine world’s most exciting renaissance stories?

Here’s the roll of honour: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Georgia, Hungary, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine – all of which are producing wines worthy of attention. The hallmarks of wines from this largely cool-climate area are the bright tang of natural acidity lifting the ripe, juicy fruit, married to a huge diversity. The region as a whole has ancestral rights to all the international varieties and, on top of that, hundreds if not thousands of ancient native grapes.

The 1990s saw a scramble to re-establish private ownership of agricultural land and other assets. By the end of the decade, replanting was getting into its stride, backed by many sources of income. A growing, aspirational middle class began to take an interest in local, quality food and drink, with a hugely positive effect on the wine industry and subsequent investment. Young winemakers are now emerging, serious about quality; the best wines are snapped up at serious prices on local markets. UK trade buyers have to compete to obtain them and, so far, they largely haven’t bothered. Our loss.

While most CEE countries are successfully scrambling up the greasy pole from basic large-scale production in the Communist years towards the fashioning of highly individual wines, some have moved more quickly than others. Slovenia, Croatia and Hungary are to the fore – and with regards to the latter, I exclude Tokaji, which already has a global presence.

Making their move

Slovenia, first into the Eurozone after avoiding the wars that rent former Yugoslavia, now offers a range of balanced, expressive, mainly white wines. West of Ljubljana, the wines are influenced by shelter from the Alps on one side, the Adriatic coast to the other and by the winemaking styles of Friuli, just across the Italian border. Chardonnay and Pinot Gris work well, as does the local Rebula (aka Ribolla Gialla, via a citrus character that can take subtle oaking), and Sauvignonasse (via fresh, leafy aromas). East of Ljubljana, wines are fresher and more delicate, akin to southern Austria. Sauvignon Blanc is at home here, as is Šipov (aka Furmint), producing every style from dry to ice wine.

By the mid-1990s, western Slovenia had a clique of boutique, family-owned wineries making unique wines for restaurants in the capital and along the Istrian coast. Well-known names like the Šimčič families, Šuvec and Movia were already offering
concentrated, macerated whites that took years to come round. At their best, these wines were a revelation, and this macerated style was copied down the Dalmatian coast and beyond.

**Croatia** is rapidly making up for the time lost in its terrible wars. With every vintage, the Istrian peninsula realises more of its enormous potential – for whites from Malvazija, but especially for reds. Look out for Refošk, often blended with Merlot or Cabernet, as winemakers learn to control its often crude tannins. Further south on the Dalmatian coast we find the individual Plavac Mali red grape, with its highly distinctive red plum flavours and fine tannins. Getting to know it is a must, as it can yield wines with elegance and hidden power, provided the grapes are not allowed to over-ripen.

Inland, south of the Hungarian border, there’s the same bright style of white wine as in inland Slovenia. Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Gewurztraminer and a vast amount of Graševina (aka Laški Rizling). The latter is now handled so well that its natural, fresh bread and lemon barley flavours offer charming wines across the sweetness spectrum.

**Hungary** solved land restitution problems faster than most. It also defined and publicised its quality production areas early and well – and, importantly, beyond its own borders. Its land screams terroir. Plugs of old volcanoes rise from calmer, flatter, grain-covered landscapes with vineyards on their shoulders – Villány, Somló, and Tokaj are prime examples. Much about Hungarian viticulture had been recorded over centuries, and acquiring this knowledge, and recreating its lessons, has been the work of many fanatic wine people. In addition to Tokaji’s Furmint and Hárslevelű, which both grow elsewhere, especially in Somlo, try Juhfark – rare and to be aged like a top Alsace; Kekfrankos, on its own or in blends, especially from Eger or Villány; or Cabernet Franc, as happy in Villány as in Bordeaux.

In some ways, the Communist years may have been a boon for winemakers. Their end provided such a break that the CEE countries have none of the bad habits AC, DO and DOC systems perpetuated. People have had to create styles using original ideas. This is making a huge contribution to the diversity and delight of what’s on offer. So is the steep learning curve of the past decade’s vintages. Read on, taste on and – most of all – get on a plane and visit.

‘Communism may have left one positive legacy: people have had to create wine styles using original ideas’

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Above: vines encroach on the hilltop town of Motovun in Croatia, where native grapes Malvazija and Refošk show great potential

Left: interest in local wines continues to grow in bars and restaurants across Slovenia

Angela Muir MW is the Decanter World Wine Awards Regional Chair for Central & Eastern Europe.
CROATIA
Planted vineyards 18,000 hectares
Main wine regions Coastal (Primorska), Eastern Continental, Western Continental
Key sub-regions Istra, Central and Southern Dalmatia, Slavonia, Plešivica
Number of wineries 1,000

1 Coastal
Planted vineyards 9,200ha
Sub-region Istria
White grape Malvazija Istarska
Red grapes Teran, Refošk, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon
Top producers Arman, Benvenuti, Brecjević, Clai, Coronica, Degras, Kabola, Kozlović, Trapan, Matošević, Roxanič
Sub-region Central and Southern Dalmatia (includes Korčula, Hvar and appellations Dingac and Postup)
White grape Pošip
Red grape Plavac Mali
Top producers Antunović, Baković, Gracin, Grgić, Kota Katarina, Kranjačić, Milina-Bire, Franco Miloš, Plenković, Saints Hills

2 Eastern Continental
(includes Slavonia)
Planted vineyards 2,600ha
White grapes Graševina, Zelenac, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Pinot Gris
Red grapes Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah
Top producers Krauthaker, Belje, 1Iločki Podrumi, Adžić

3 Western Continental
(includes Plešivica)
Planted vineyards 6,400ha
White grapes Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay
Red grape Pinot Noir
Top producers Šember, Tomac, Bodren, Bolfan, Safran

SLOVENIA
Planted vineyards 16,000ha-22,300ha
(statistics vary)
Main wine regions Primorje, Podravje, Posavje
Number of wineries 1,900

Primorje (8,081ha)
Sub-region Vipava Valley
Planted vineyards 3,005ha
White grapes Rebuła, Sauvignon Blanc, Malvazija Istriana, Zelen, Pinela
Red grapes Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon
Top producers Batič, Tila, Sutor, Lavrenčič, Guerila

Sub-region Slovenska Istra
Planted vineyards 2,331ha
White grape Malvazija Istriana
Red grapes Refošk, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot
Top producers Primoz Rojac, Santomas

Sub-region Goriska Brda
Planted vineyards 1,992ha
White grapes Rebula, Sauvignonnasse, Chardonnay, Sivi Pinot
Red grapes Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir
Top producers Movia, Ščurek, Edi Simčič, Marjan Simčič, Prinčič

Sub-region Kras
Planted vineyards 753ha
White grapes Malvazija Istriana, Vitovska
Red grape Refošk
Top producer Cotar

Prodaivje (9,650ha)
Sub-region Stajerska Slovenija
Planted vineyards 8,685ha
White grapes Sipon, Renski Rizling, Sauvignon Blanc, Laški Rizling, Sivi Pinot, Traminec
Red grape Modri Pinot
Top producers Verus, Ćurin-Prapatnik, Kupljen, Kogl, Puklavec & Friends, Dveri Pax, Ptujska Klet, Valdhuber

Sub-region Prekmurje
Planted vineyards 965ha
White grapes Laški Rizling, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Renski Rizling
Top producer Marof

Posavje
Sub-regions Bizeljsko-Semec (908ha), Bela Krajina (367ha), Dolenska (1,472ha)
White grapes Laški Rizling, Sipon

HUNGARY
Planted vineyards 83,000ha
Main wine regions 22 notably Tokaj, Villány, Somló, Eger, Supron, Badacsony, Szekszárd, Balatonboglár, Pannonhalma also significant
Number of wineries 1,500

Villány
Planted vineyards 1,770ha
White grapes Chardonnay, Olaszrizling, Harstevelő
Red grapes Cabernet Franc, Kékfrankos, Cabernet Sauvignon, Zweigelt
Top producers Bock, Attila Gere, Sauska, Malatinszky, Tiffán, Vylván, Jeki, Wunderlich

Somló
Planted vineyards 830ha
White grapes Furmint, Harslevelü, Juhfark, Olaszrizling
Top producers Kreinbacher, Györgykovács, Inhäuser, Somlói Apátsági Pince

Eger
Planted vineyards 3,910ha
White grapes Olaszrizling, Leányka, Muscat Ottone
Red grapes Kékfrankos, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Pinot Noir, Kadarka
Top producers St Andrea, Tibor Gál, Támás Pók, Thummerer
Slovenia’s top names

by Robert Gorjak

Dveri-Pax
Stajerska, Podravje

Dveri-Pax was formed in 2002, north of Maribor, very close to the Austrian border. Since its first release, the winery — under chief oenologist Damilo Flakus – has shown exemplary professionalism, from meticulous vineyard management to slick marketing campaigns. With Riesling M, a ripe, full, rich wine, close to a smaragd from Austria’s Wachau region in style, Dveri-Pax has re-introduced the concept of single-vineyard wines and raised prices to levels never before seen in the country. Its classic line-up of whites, notably the Riesling and Furmint, is the region’s reference. It’s also a standard-bearer for reds, via its single-vineyard Pinot Noir, Blaufränkisch and entry-level Benedict (a blend of the two with Zweigelt). Sweet wines were never the focus, yet it took this year’s DWWA International Sweet Over £10 Trophy for its 2009 Sipon straw wine, beating stickies from such classic regions as Sauternes, Alsace, Germany and Tokaji.

Marjan Simčič
Goriska Brda, Istria

The key to the success of Slovenia’s Goriska Brda district, which borders Italy’s Collio region, was the takeover of the Sim’ci’c family estate by the younger generation in the early 1990s, when Marjan Simčič, the current owner, was in his early 20s. At that time, the wines of Brda were of very basic quality. Sim’ci’c was one of the pioneers of the region’s fine
wine revolution, helping to change its face and bring it to premier status at home and now abroad. Improved grape management and selection, prolonged ageing in new wood, ageing on lees, extended skin contact for white varieties, and many other experiments and trials helped Simčič to stay ahead of the pack. Today he tends 16ha of vines and more than 75% of his production is exported. While his distinctive, pure Pinot Noirs have been praised by both Steven Spurrier and Jancis Robinson MW, Simčič is a passionate ambassador for Rebula. His flagship line, Opoka, made from marly soils, includes a Rebula that is macerated for four days, and is one of the finest expressions of the grape I’ve ever tasted – full-bodied, salty, minerally, slightly tannic, with refreshing acidity and an ability to age. Simčič has been pushing the limits for more than 20 years and doesn’t look like stopping yet.

Verus
Stajerska, Podravje
The story of Verus began in 2006 when three friends, the future founders, were sacked by ill-managed co-op owners: Božidar Grabovac is an expert in winegrowing and marketing, Rajko Žličar in sales and Danilo Šnajder in oenology. Having had offers from other wineries, they choose the hard way, founding a new winery on their home ground in Ljutomer-Ormož, northeast Slovenia. The district has a high reputation for distinctive white grapes with delicate aromas. Their vision was to make varietal wines from the estate’s 12 hectares that express the origin and the grape as truly as possible, which explains the name Verus – genuine, honest. In their first vintage, they immediately set a new standard for dry Sípon (aka Furmint) in the region – the 2007 was praised by Jancis Robinson MW, Oz Clarke and Steven Spurrier. With 60% of its production exported, Verus is a true international player whose popularity continues to increase.

Hungary’s top names
by Caroline Gilby MW

Kreinbacher
Somió
Hungary is blessed with distinctive terroirs, and arguably the most dramatic is Somió, where an extinct volcano rises from the plain, northwest of Lake Balaton. It’s one of Hungary’s smallest wine regions, historically dominated by artisan producers, too small to show off their great terroir. But that all changed in 2002 with the arrival of engineer József Kreinbacher. He now has 30ha of terraced vineyards on the south side of the hill, overlooked by dramatic basalt pillars that help trap the sun’s heat. The vines are grown organically and are mostly local whites – Furmint, Harslevelü, Juhfark and Olaszrizling – vinified alone, or in blends that reflect the fiery intensity given by the mineral-rich soils. These are wines that take time to show their true depth, though the 2007s are drinking well now.

Malatinszky
Villány
Csaba Malatinszky’s veins must run with Cabernet Franc. He is obsessive about tending his vines, ‘Hungary screams terroir. Old volcanoes rise from calmer, flatter, grain-covered landscapes with vineyards on their shoulders’.

Below: György Lőrincz, the co-owner and winemaker at the St Andrea winery in Hungary’s Eger region