Part I

Slovenia is a republic country, formerly part of Yugoslavia, that gained independence in 1991 after a short conflict. In truth, Slovenia had always been the most prosperous and western-facing of the former Yugoslav states.

Slovenia's cultural and social attitudes have been influenced by its neighbours: Italy to the west, Austria to the north and Hungary to the east. Croatia to the south is an important trade partner, but Slovenia has fully entered the EU since December 2004, and adoption of the euro as its currency. In January 2004, Slovenia takes over the EU presidency, just as the Schengen Agreement removes all border controls with Austria and Italy.

Today Slovenia is a confident democracy that engages with the rest of the world. The current political and economic situation is stable, and the country has experienced growth and prosperity in recent years. The country is known for its wine and is a leader in the European wine market.

The Slovenian wine industry has also gone through massive changes. Under communism, grape growers were required to sell their produce to the state. But since 1991, a new generation of independent wine estates has emerged from the country's former ambitious farmers. As young winemaker Primoz Lavrenc said, "The whole population has been energised."

**Wine Regions**

To the north-east, the region of Primorska is the largest winegrowing area. It has a continental climate, and is known for its white and red wines. Just to the south is Podravje, where some very good-quality wines are made, but also a few notable wines, light, pink wine made by blending red and white grapes. In the south are the Goriska Brda wine regions, with a more Mediterranean climate, with some of the country's best wines.

**Grapes**

Slovenia grows a fascinating mix of indigenous and international grape varieties. Some of the most famous are Ribolla, Tocai and Refosco (also known as Friulano). In terms of French varieties, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay and Pinot Gris are common for whites, while Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah are being joined by Pinot Noir for reds.

**Primorska, Western Slovenia**

Standing on the balcony of the Mestna otok in the Goriska Brda region, a beautiful landscape of rolling vineyards and stone-faced buildings as far as the eye can see. A few begin to fall into a drizzling curtain across the valley, as clear as birdsong, evoking a sense of harmony and tranquility. Impossible to imagine how it is, that church in another country, for just a few dozen metres from where I stand, Slovenia becomes Italy. The political boundary - nothing more than a line on a map - seems absurd.

Indeed, the best-known wine of Primorska is the iconic Friulian Griffin, which is a delicious dry white wine with a long finish. The Kranj veteran, Monika Kranjac, owner and winemaker, pours out his wines, scattered across both appellations, showing me the source of the fruit for the finest wines we are about to taste. The rest of the wines would carry the DOC stamp from Friuli.

**Footnotes**

Part II

[Including profiles of three estates] In Part II, there are profiles of six more top estates and there are tasting notes on over 180 wines.
Slovenian eXtremes

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This is part II of this feature, profiling six of Slovenia's most interesting estates. Part I has an overview of the Slovenian wine scene, and profiles of three producers. There are also tasting notes on over 100 Slovenian wines.

Part II

Marjan Simčič, Brda

The estate of Marjan Simčič is also in Brda, though Marjan and Aleks Simčič above are only very distantly related. Marjan Simčič is represented in the UK by H&H Bancroft, and his wines have appeared on these pages before with very positive comments. Like Gravner, Marjan (left) farms both sides of the border: Italy is literally a stone's throw from his winery. The international appeal of Simčič's wines is enhanced by ageing in French and Slovenian barrels. But he strikes a middle ground between

an international style and something more iconoclastic: he is a passionate advocate of skin macerations of up to one year and says "The first place great wine is made is here," 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?"

To allow these long macerations for white wines it is essential to have perfect grapes and perfect hygiene in the winery. Marjan stresses that phenolic ripeness of skins and pips is essential: "when you vinify like this you are 'walking on the edge' and if a mistake is made, it is very easy to fall down. I have sent whole vats of wine to make grappa before now..."

Farming 16 hectares only 10 kilometres from the coast, some new planting is as dense as 10,000 vines per hectare. The soil here is flysch, and new land is relatively inexpensive at around 6,000 Euros per hectare, but it is very difficult to find it. Maceration for most wines is followed by one year in big wooden casks, then the wine is transferred to 500-litre barrels of both Slovenian and French oak. Marjan selects Slovenian oak and cures it for 10 years in the open air before having it coopered, to eliminate hard tannins and greenness.

* [Click here for tasting notes on 13 wines from Marjan Simčič](#)
Marjan Simčič Sauvignon Blanc 2006
Part fermented with 2 days fermentation and 14 days for part. Beautiful aromatics here, with limpid fruit brightness hinting at tropicality, with expressive gooseberry and passionfruit notes and just a cream/ background from the oak. The palate has some grip from the skins, and powerfully concentrated fruit. There’s a huge core of lemon and minerality, with plenty of substance and extract. A huge, mouthfilling wine, in at 15% alcohol. 90

Marjan Simčič Chardonnay 2006
Bright, tropical, but quite aromatic and elegant variety. A grassy and gooseberry intensity. The palate has a breadth and pithy orange juiciness, with an oak note and pre-cooked oak. Very concentrated, with an intense sweet edge to the fruit, but big savoyage acidity structure and tannic grip. A ‘twenty year wine’ says Marjan confidently, pointing out the wine’s fresh minerality and maturity of grapes. 91

Marjan Simčič Sauvignon 2001
Plenty of varietal character, with a vivid elderflower note, but even more tropicality and richness, pre-cooked and orange fruit. Floral sweetness on the palate, with mouthfilling varnish sweetness and a melange of creamy yet pinpoint sharp flavours. Wonderful balance and length. 92

Marjan Simčič Teodor white 2000
Absolutely stunning mint toffee and lime, with a little floral note and some green gin nuances. On the palate a wonderful limpid quality, with that intense lime fruit and zesty acidity cutting through. Fabulous lucious palate but razor-sharp acid structure and warning depths of fuyggy richness. 92

Marjan Simčič Teodor red 1997
Hugely plush, cedar, lustful tobacco and fuyggy pudding richness, with such plush, ripe fruit. There’s a floral note and something herbal, but very plush overall. Beautiful balance on the palate, with pepper and spice and rich, ripe cherry fruit. That tobacco depth is lovely. Long and balanced, and quite hedonistic. 93

Marjan Simčič Leonardo 1997
First vintage of this passito, named after Marjan’s son. Wonderfully rich, fuyggy plum pudding and quince nose with lovely coffee and tobacco richness. The palate has a lovely orange and fig flavours, with ginger and very good acidity brightening the structure. Delicious wine, with great length. 92

Marjan Simčič Pinot Gris 2005
Lemon rind and nectarine skin, waxy fruitiness. A deal of stony minerality too. On the palate a very light, crisp, beautifully poised wine with plenty of green, tangy and hints of more tropical, ripe fruitiness. Nice rich texture with a bit of grip, but stays very focused and clean. Lovely wine. 92

Marjan Simčič Ribolla 2004
Stylistically a pale with Limassol-like root system. Six months fermentation and maceration on skins in wooden casks, followed by two years in 500 litre tonneaux. A dark, brassy yellow colour. That wonderful and complex, layered, fragrant wine, and the intensity and richness of the wine is balanced perfectly into a very concentrated wine with balanced fruit and structure. Fabulous Ribolla/Rabola. 92

Marjan Simčič Sauvignon Reserve 2004
Fantastic nose with real toffeed richness and minty, leafy intensity of fruit. A piercing rendition of a Graves style perhaps, with an extra burst of intensity and lush, juicy fruit, honeyed freshness. Full and powerful on the palate, with delicious fruit and a real earthy, terroir-driven minerality still coming through layers of varietal fruit, layered, fig and passionfruit character and the creamy, supporting depth of the finish. Superb. 92

Marjan Simčič Chardonnay Reserve 2004
18-41-year-old vineyards. Big, figgy, rich style, with toast and buttery richness, but that piercing minerality comes through, with lemon rind and nectarine juiciness. The palate is full and very big scaled, with masses of dry extract richness and bite, a creamy, toastty oak in the background, but masses of crunch and vivid fruit, as well as that steely core of minerality. This is balanced despite its extract and oak, and will age very well. 91

Marjan Simčič Pinot Noir Reserve 2002
This was the first Pinot Noir vintage, from 20 to 33-year-old vines. Lovely colour, with earthy tones. Big, very ripe and creamy cranberry and black berry fruits, with a heavy overlap of spices and exotic, incense-like notes. Seems plush and smoothly sweet. On the palate it is really quite ripe and jammy, with a sweetness and plumpness to the fruit. Has lovely fleshing. Very soft, silky quality of the oak and earthiness fills in very nicely. There’s a coffee-like intensity and nicely roughening tannin quality, with very good acidity. 91

Marjan Simčič Merlot 2003
Plenty of power, with sweet vanilla oak coming through, with masses of incense and Sandalwood spice. There’s a meatiness and smoky quality here, with roasting, full, fudgy-like depth. There may be a touch of bizar and possibly a touch of herbality, but once the juicy character, beautiful brightness of cherry fruit, all wrap up in a little chocolate and fudge. Really nice acidity here, with a savoury, structured character. Real finesse here, with plenty of coffee and plummy depth. Delicious. 91

Marjan Simčič Teodor 2003
Beautiful waxy density and green fig richness, with complex notes of leaf tea, grass and peonies. Lots of honey that persists through into the palate, giving real richness and buttery, fuzzy quality to clean, pure, lusciously bright fruit and acidity. Minerality is expressive here too, with a slightly smoky quality into the finish. 92