Bordering on greatness

NATASHA HUGHES SAVOURS THE FLAVOURS OF SLOVENIA AND NORTHERN ITALY

WINE is no respecter of national borders. While this statement might seem self-evident, I've seldom had the truth of it brought home to me as forcefully as it was a couple of months ago.

I was standing on the balcony of Marjan Simčič’s winery in Slovenia, sipping from a glass of his wonderful Teodor white while he pointed out the vineyards where he grew the grapes. His vines are planted in an amphitheatre formed by a range of hills, some of which lie in Goriska Brda and some of which are located just over the border in Italy’s Collio region.

“Most of the grape growers round here have vines on both sides of the border,” Simčič told me. “Whether the wine is labelled as Italian or Slovene depends on the location of the winery itself.”

The boundaries between northern Italy and western Slovenia have always been a bit blurry. Even during the era when Slovenia was a part of Tito’s Yugoslavia, people travelled relatively freely to visit their Italian neighbours, and the influence shows in the local architecture and the regional cuisine, not to mention the fluency with which people slip from one language to another depending on who they’re talking to.

Like north-eastern Italy, western Slovenia tends to be better at white wines than at reds (although some producers are making a decent fist of aromatic Cabernet Franc and others are successfully experimenting with Pinot Noir). But if you’re familiar with the light, zesty style of many Collio whites (and those of their Friulian neighbours), you might experience a bit of a shock when you open your first bottle of Slovene wine. The grapes on which the wines are based are largely the same in both countries – Sivi Pinot (the Slovene name for Pinot Grigio), Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay, as well as the indigenous Malvasia and Rebolla (known as Ribula or Rebula in Slovenia); but Slovene wines are different from the easy-going, early-drinking Italian wines.

The first thing you’ll notice is their colour – rich gold rather than pale lemon, the result of macerating the grape pulp with the skins for four or five days after pressing, rather than draining the juice off into a fermentation tank straight away. There’s often more than a hint of oxidation as well (this is deliberate oxidation rather than evidence of inept winemaking), and even Sauvignon Blanc tends to spend a bit of time in oak barrels rather than being fermented and aged in stainless steel.

These aren’t necessarily wines for the casual quaffer. Instead they’re rich, complex and relatively long-lived. They’re great wines for food lovers, and slip down a treat with seafood, chicken or pork in rich sauces, and with pasta, gnocchi and risottos. It might take you a while to track these wines down – and possibly a little while longer to develop an appreciation for their rich, extracted style. Give it a whirl, though – life’s too short to stick to Pinot Grigio.

THREE TOP SLOVENIAN PRODUCERS WHOSE WINES ARE AVAILABLE IN THE UK

Marjan Simčič’s Teodor White, an unusual blend of Ribula, Sauvignonasse and Pinot Grigio, is one of the best wines I’ve tasted all year. Run, don’t walk, to H&H Bancroft (tel 020 7232 5450) to get hold of a bottle of it (£15.50).

Edi Simčič is based in the same village as Marjan Simčič, but despite having the same surname the two are only distantly related. The standouts in Edi’s range are the Rebula and the Sivi Pinot (£14.94 and £16.23 + VAT, respectively; available from Astrum Wine Cellars, tel 020 8870 5252).

Over in the Vipava Valley, Sutor makes a super Chardonnay, as well as Buria – a blend of Malvasia, Rebula and Riesling (both £13.49 + VAT, from Astrum Wine Cellars). Last year Sutor bottled its first Pinot Noir, but it will be a while before its reds are on sale here.