Star in the East

Improved techniques with indigenous and international grapes and experimentation with organic and biodynamic viticulture have been of great benefit to Slovenia’s wine industry since the country’s independence. DAVID FURER meets a new generation of dedicated winemakers intent on putting their wines on the world stage.

‘Slovenia is a boutique shop of fine wines not yet discovered by the rest of the world.’ It was this phrase, uttered by fellow wine judge Marin Berovic, that led me to his native country’s capital, Ljubljana, and beyond, for a week of discovery.

A May 2004 entrant to the European Union, Slovenia impresses visitors with its low-ego national character, family-friendly atmosphere, minimal level of cigarette smoking and excellent value for the wine tourist. On the same day, you can breakfast on the Hungarian border, lunch in Ljubljana and dine on the Adriatic coast.

The Slow Food movement and the significant influence of Italian winemaker Josko Gravner (a Collio Slovene) have nudged winemakers to produce sleeker, better wines. The implementation of and experimentation with organic and biodynamic principles, the retention of indigenous varieties and planting of better clones of international ones have all aided this drive.

Viticulture preceded Roman presence in Slovenia, and later Austrian and Italian influences also contributed to the country’s wine culture. Yet, due to several factors, recognition of Slovenia by the current world wine community has been laggard. Regardless of past associations and current difficulties, Slovenia – with its eastern Alpine foothills and northern Adriatic coast – is geographically, historically and culturally more central looking than Eastern Europe.

This most northern and modern part of the former Yugoslavia possesses three major wine regions, each boasting a variety of wines and microclimates. Primorska produces about 45% of the country’s wines and takes in Slovenia’s 46km coastline, Brda (along Italy’s Collio), the windy Vipava Valley and the upland Kras. Podravje, in the north east, covers the most territory over seven sub-regions that border Austria, Hungary and Croatia, while Posavje, in the south east, abuts Croatia over three sub-regions.

**Primorska**

Sitting on the terrace of Ales Kristancic’s Movia winery, I couldn’t distinguish between where Slovenia ends and Italy begins. Since 1947, wines in Italy and Slovenia can be produced with grapes from either side of the border and still be called Collio if made in Italy or Brda if made in Slovenia. Brda is the most organised and concentrated wine region in Slovenia, with producers who, with yields often lower than 1kg per vine, are the first to attain international attention and sales.

Kristancic, the founder of Slow Food Slovenia, has built an impressive modern winery surrounded by his biodynamically grown vineyards. Independent since 1820, his estate managed to keep its independence through the Communist period. Kristancic has designed a patented hybrid oak/steel fermentation vessel to join 1,600 new barriques and several steel tanks. Barriqued wines are left up to six years on lees without the use of sulphur. ‘We aren’t making wine by numbers, we’re making serious wine for drinking,’ said the marketing-savvy young winemaker. Movia wines are the most exported and reported upon of Slovenia.

In Slovenia, Simic is a name as common as Smith, so it should come as no surprise that two of this region’s finest winemakers are so named. Marjan Simic combines New World fruit and oak with Old World terroir in sleek attractive packaging. His wines are exported to 12 countries and he and wife Valerija often journey along to promote them. ‘For me, elegance and a long finish without a heavy extraction are best,’ stated the rocker-styled winemaker. He produces the country’s finest white table wines and some of the best reds – worthy of international recognition.

In the next village is Edi Simic, a distant cousin of Marjan’s. Edi and his family have been working vines near the Italian border and producing their own label. All fermentation and ageing take place in new and three-year-old barriques. Caroline Gilby MW listed two of Edi’s wines among the Ten Greatest-Quality Wines in Eastern Europe in Tom Stevenson’s *Wine Report 2005*.

Since 1990, Stojan Scurek and his five sons have been working 13 hectares (ha) of vines where his 19th-century ancestors once did, producing...
**Personal choice: Slovenia's top ten**

**96 Stanko Curin Lazki Riesling Eiswein 1999**
Delicate aroma. Piercing acidity and luxuriously sweet, yet, as wound up as this is, it has a silky texture. Long, earthy finish. Drink 2006-2020.
Sold out: +386 (0)2 719 6277; www.ourin.net

**95 Marjan Simcic Teodor Reserve Rdece 2000**
85% Merlot, 15% Cabernet Sauvignon, three years in barriques. Complex nose and palate of spices, cocoa and berry candy. Ripe with fresh acidity and firm tannins. Will develop well. Drink 2005-2016.
€17 ex-cellier
+386 (0)5 395 9200; www.simcic.si

**95 Mlenek Chardonnay 2000**
Balanced sweet, cream, lemon and butter aromas. Quince, toffee, dried apricots and pears with medium acidity on a medium-full body. Long finish with a hint of spiciness and warmth. Complex, and one of the world’s best-value wines. Drink 2005-2008.
€11 ex-cellier
+386 (0)5 395 5323; mlenek@email.si

**93 Mlenek Merlot 1996**
€45 ex-cellier
+386 (0)5 395 5323; mlenek@email.si

**93 Cotar Cabernet Sauvignon 1999**
A difficult choice to make between this international variety and Cotar’s native 2002 Teran. Both reflect the unique terra rossa soil they’ve grown up on, but I give this Cabernet the edge for its more easily structured character. There’s fine red and black fruits on both the nose and palate, brisk acidity balanced with good minerality. Pleased, medium length. Drink 2005-2012.
€15 ex-cellier
+386 (0)5 766 8228; www.cotar.vinarstvo.info

**93 Movia Veliko Belo 1999**
After four years in new oak, you’d expect this blend of Pinot Blanc/Gris/Noir and Chardonnay to be a tannic monster. It’s not, but it does have a subtle, mineral nose with immense yellow-fruit concentration, over-slight tannins and a very high acidity. Drink 2005-2012.
€8 ex-cellier
+386 (0)5 395 9210; www.movia.si/lof

**90 Stanko Curin Riesling 2003**
€8 ex-cellier
+386 (0)2 719 6277; www.curin.net

**90 Stojan S curek ‘Up’ 2001**
€25 ex-cellier
+386 (0)5 394 9221; www.s curek.com
a wide range of solid to seriously high-quality wine. 'Slovenian winemakers have two problems to overcome: low quantities to export and the lack of government support,' explained Scurek.

Valter Mlecnik makes wines organically, without added yeasts and, since 1993, without fining or filtration. 'Learning to act in harmony with nature is a continuous process,' he claimed. One of his treasures is a 55-year-old Tocai vineyard where he replants via previnage (making a vine stock take root without detaching it from the mother plant). He also practises a non-interventionist process in his winery by not controlling the temperature of the fermenting must. These efforts result in some of Slovenia's most sought-after wines, but occasionally reflect the less-than-desirable ambient temperature during this phase.

Frenchman Jean-Michel Morel arrived in Dobrovo in 1987 to join his wife Katja in her father's Kabaj Winery. His is the first winery in Brda to be certified organic. 'In the 1990s, the Italians exercised an influence that led to too much bentonite and sulphur, and the use of artificial additives,' said Morel. Like many of his neighbours, he employs extended lees ageing for all his wines, and not only for the claret-style reds that are sold en primeur.

In 1989, Miran Sirk began the process of recovering land and property that his ancestors had lost from the government. 'We wanted to make something different in this area,' he said, and that he does. Fellow winemakers were puzzled that he would make sparkling wines in a region renowned for its Mediterranean climate, but all who taste Bjana's small quantities of individualistic sparkling and still wines made in a dilapidated cellar that dates to 1208 are pleasantly surprised.

'Slovenian winemakers have two problems to overcome: low quantities to export and the lack of government support'

Stojan Scurek

The Kras, or Karst, district is Primorska's poorest. Winds have been blowing across these highlands for millennia and left little topsoil on the limestone-dominant subsoil. Fortunately, much of this topsoil is iron-rich terra rossa—as in Australia's Coonawarra. The indigenous Refosco (the Italian Refosco) here makes a high-acid, high-tannin wine called Teran, which by law must contain a minimum 90% Refosco, and is occasionally buttressed with Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah. Teran is also remarkably reductive, thereby lessening the need for sulphur.

Branko Cotar and his son Vasa have been so successful with their organically grown Teran and other wines—both in terms of in-country sales and export markets such as Germany—that they're now building the third extension of their cellars. With Italy's Trieste only 5km away, the extension will include a modern tasting room to accommodate regular tourists.

Not far away, maverick grower Josko Rencel works his 3ha of 20- to 40-year-old vines to produce an ever-changing portfolio of Teran and other bottlings. 'There was an Amarone-type wine made in Kras in the 19th century, but it was abandoned in favour of a fresher style,' he explained. Rencel revived it (the massive, complex wine is still in barrel), while making the only naivello style of Teran known. Rencel also works with Malavazija (Malvasia) and with it produced a delicious Gran Riserva 1999 from partially dried grapes.

Equally unorthodox is the hermit-like Joseph Jazbec. Until February 2004, he and his wife Silva ran one of Slovenia's most famous restaurants.
Now he devotes his time to making mostly sparkling Teran in a cistern built for the former rail station into the hillside. The tannins are hardly noticeable in the current 1996 release, except to provide a hint of structure.

Ivan Batic’s family has been making wine in the village of Sempas since 1592. Batic’s long-haired son Miha said of attending wine school: ‘My dad said that, since we’re organic, there’s nothing more to learn.’ Though Sivi (Pinot) Gris is Batic’s favourite grape, his much-celebrated local Pinela will become increasingly important in coming years, with all wines being aged in Slovenian barrels.

The brothers Lavrencic are two of Slovenia’s fastest-rising stars. At their Sutor winery, they make top-quality Ribolla, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Merlot and old-vine Malvasia from extremely low-yielding vineyards. The wines are treated to extended fermentation in new French barriques in the cleanest small winery I saw in Slovenia.

Slovenia’s first co-op was established in 1894 in the Pipavca Valley. Now privately owned as Agroind, it has 400ha under vine and produces two-thirds of Slovenia’s output. I tasted a commendable Chardonnay and Merlot from 1997 and a firm and aromatic Sauvignon Blanc 2002 harvested along the historic Zemunica Castle. Agroind also produces indigenous rarities such as Picolit, Pinela, Rumeni Muscat and Zelen.

**Posavje**

After a six-month stay in Champagne in 1968, Janez Istenic returned to produce his own sparkling wine in this method while keeping his daily job as winemaker for the Avia brand. Today he and his son Miha are Slovenia’s leading producers of sparkling wine. Vineyards of Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris and Pinot Noir are grown on nearby hills, while the winery boasts an advanced vacuum-sealed press and must-concentration process that reduces their dependence on SO2, a heat exchanger for cooling musts, all the while maintaining cool fermentation at 16°C to 18°C in all base wines. ‘People here are drinking less but better,’ says Miha. To further this point, their home and winery also feature guest rooms for hire and a restaurant with a French chef.

One of Slovenia’s more interesting characters is Janez Sekoranja of Graben Wine Cellar, a former pharmaceutical company manager who uses rare yeasts culled from former business contacts to experiment with 24 varieties. The most memorable wine I tasted was a 1992 Tramin low-pressure sparkling wine still fermenting in bottle and requiring storage under 10°C. The Krcko co-operative operated its ISO 9001 certification in 2000, and has been gradually upgrading its facilities. Krcko is famous throughout Slovenia for the very light red wine Cvicek, but also makes a clean Beli Pinot (Blanc) and an appetizing Modri Frankinja (Lemberger/Blaufränkisch).

**Podravje**

Not far from the Austrian border is the district of Stajerska. Jozef Proter, along with his sons Bostjan and Gregor, makes dry wines, while their neighbours are still leaving 10g/l to 25g/l of sugar in theirs—a hangover from the Communist days. The Proters excel in Riesling of varying levels of residual sugar, Pinot Gris and Chardonnay, all at reasonable prices.

No overview of Slovenia is complete without mentioning the man whose commitment to preserving the country’s great sweet wines is legendary. Stanko Curin works with wines first planted on the Kog hills by his grandfather at the dawn of the 20th century. In 1972, with the help of his daughter and her husband, he expanded cultivation and development of one of Slovenia’s few private wineries. ‘We can only prosper through quality’ is their motto, even in times when quantity, and not quality, was of primary concern. Curin’s warmth and generosity have earned him the unfailing respect and admiration of all members of the Slovenian wine community. His grandchildren continue in the family business. Great dry and off-dry wines abound, but to taste the full range of Curin’s sweet wines is an experience comparable to tasting the best of Europe.

**Recommendations for dining out**

Slovenian hospitality is professional and friendly. Expect to pay 40% to 75% of what you’d pay for comparable meals in the UK.

### HIsa Franko Casa (pictured)
Stara selja 1, Kobarid
+ 386 (0)5 389 4120; www.hisafranko.com

A family affair. Franko Kramar took over this restaurant in 1970 and now works the vegetable garden; son Valtar runs the show with his mother, Ana, ruling the kitchen. Worth the detour.

### Hlebec Vinicultural Farm
Kog 108, Kog
+ 386 (0)2 713 7062; www.hlebec-kog.com

The Hlebec’s winery restaurant/guesthouse has seven comfortable, modern rooms and a restaurant serving Marica’s traditional menu of local meats, veggies and remarkably silky egg noodles.

### La Subida
Comasco, Italy
+ 39 (0)4 3816 0331; www.lasubida.it

What is arguably the world’s best Slovenian restaurant is across the border in Italy. It offers seasonal dishes prepared in a traditional, elegant manner. A formidable wine list full of verticals of the region’s finest wines completes the picture.

### Pri Ložetu
Zemunica-Vipava; +386 (0)5 389 700
Ketja Kavcic and her son Tomaz oversee this eclectic restaurant in the historic Zemunica Castle with sweeping views of the Pipavca Valley and one of the best wine lists in the country. When weather allows, sit outside under the chestnut trees.

### Pri Narobetu
Mengeska 37, Trzin; +386 (0)1 564 2689

Located on the main road between Ljubljana and its airport, Narobeta also allows you to eat a seriously good meal late at night and then stay over. Owner Maja Brenk is a national treasure and has hosted many dignitaries—government meetings are said to take place here over temed horseshoe dinners.

### Restavracija Pikol
Vipavska 94, Rozna dolina, Nova Gorica
+386 (0)5 302 262; www.pikol-gasparen.si

Since 1960, the Gasparen family has been running Slovenia’s best fish restaurant specializing in local products. Sommelier Tadej maintains a strong wine orientation with a wide variety of glasses and a calligraphed wine list. A small sushi restaurant is due to open on the ground floor soon.