

Slovenia - land of extreme winemaking

26 Feb 2008 by FT

See also [this link](#) on more than 150 Slovenian wines, some outstanding

Slovenia is possibly the most unusual wine culture in the world, certainly in Europe. During a brief visit there last November I tasted some of the most distinctively delicious wines to have come my way for several years, and some of the worst.

Let's get the bad ones out of the way first. Slovenia still seems to have too many wine producers who think that high acidity, severe tannins and a lack of fruit are positive qualities in red wines – particularly those made from the Bordeaux grape varieties Cabernet and Merlot, although it is also easy to display these qualities in the eastern Slovenian grape variety variously called Teran and Refošk, a relative of Italy's Refosco. The second, rathering, so-called malolactic fermentation that is now practically de rigueur for red wines throughout the rest of the world still seems to be a novelty in certain Slovenian quarters.

That east producers such as Somarinos in Slovenian Istria (Istria is called the Languedoc's admirable Chateau de la Magy) seem to have got the hang of it, even if their glamorous reds have such hideous in their native land that the prices look unreasonably high outside it.

Slovenia can also produce some worthy examples of the red burgundy grape Pinot Noir such as the Miroslav Pinot 2002 Bida that was so outstanding in a [Tasting in Burgundy](#)

last year (more luscious than the current 2005). In Slovenia I was also impressed by the Miroslav Pinot 2004 made by Tita, one of the most cosmopolitan of Slovenian producers. I was even offered a Tita white of Spago, the hairet of Hollywood's big hitters, last November. Tita is based in Vipava inland from Bida, Slovenia's westernmost wine area right on the border with Friuli. White Bida is influenced by the Adriatic, which can

often be seen in the distance. Vipava is significantly cooler. Magaj Lenuf of Tita, who has worked in both Switzerland and the Napa Valley, explained to me "our grandfathers and fathers tried to bring Bordeaux to the Vipava valley but now that some are bringing Burgundy".

But it is the white wines that are by far Slovenia's most original gift to the world of wine. Of the wine regions of this small country in the far north of the old Yugoslavia the most fashionable is Primorska on or near the west coast. It encompasses subregions Vipava, Istra (Slovenian Istria) and Bida, an extension of Friuli's Collio that also means 'hill', as well it might to judge from the precipitous landscape. "This is heroic viticulture," the manager of one of the most successful Bida wine co-operatives observed as we wound round a series of mountainside vineyards. "I don't understand how the farmers across the border on much flatter land get all the EU subsidies. Instead of trying to help us, our Slovenian bureaucrats spend most of their time counting exactly what volume of wine we have in stock – and they don't even understand that it expands in summer."

Most of the wineries I visited were on the dramatic slopes of Bida, whose cells were used to build Venice and whose restaurants today are heavily patronised by Italian visitors on the weekends. The region most like it is Burgundy, in that most producers own their own small plots of vines (often partly on what is now Italian soil) and tend them themselves as well as making (my hand-crafting) the wine. As Slovenian wine writer Robert Gogol, who was my guide, put it, "they are artisans rather than businessmen."

But what differentiates them from Burgundians are the wine varieties they grow – Refošk (Italy's Ribolla Gialla) is most common although Sveti Pinot (Pinot Grigio) has been catching up – and their unusual creativity in winemaking methods. I have never seen such a variety of different sizes and provenances of casks for both fermenting and ageing wine. Kalcia and mulberry woods were traditionally used here (as kalcia seems to be increasingly in Austria) and the more artisanal producers seem to play with a cocktail of different casks and other woods, fashioned into vessels of widely varying capacities – not to mention some exceptional techniques.

And Klemen?? of Miroslav in Bida takes this to the extreme of using tiny cubic-like tanks in order to play with temperatures and ambient yeasts and specially made Austrian barrels with metal valves on the top to allow some white wines to be made, like Beaujolais, from whole berries. Some wines are kept on the lees for six years. No sulphur is added. This is extreme winemaking. "It's full moon so the wines are very calm," he told me while leading me through positively opulent cellars beneath his house, which serves as an informal clubhouse for the region's innovative young winemakers.

In general the white wines that predominate here are very different from their aromatic, sleek, if predictable varietal counterparts across the border in Friuli. blends are common. Malolactic fermentation is pretty much de rigueur, making the wines rather richer and bolder, more burgundian in that they build in the mouth, and bottle, but the real point of difference for some producers is their unusual fondness for keeping their baby wines in contact with the grape skins.

Two extreme Friuli producers with strong Slovenian connections, Gramer and Radikon, could be said to have encouraged this tendency which, if done well, results in thoroughly thrilling, intense, very long lived wines but can add a downright uncomfortable sour apple-skin note to whites if done badly. This unusual technique seems out the skillful vine-growers from the rest as it can only work if the grapes are perfectly healthy.

Slovenia's third wine region Podgorje and, much more important, Podgorje are also better known for whites than reds. Indeed many British readers over 50 will have drunk some Podgorje white in their time, shipped in bulk to the London docks stuffed full of sugar and sulphur and bottled to order as Litterer Pinot, subsequently renamed, according to geographical correctness, Litterer Ladin Pinot, Ladin Pinot (known in Austria as Weissteinberg) with Sporn known in Hungary as Furem) and Chardonnay are the most common grape varieties of Podgorje.

Although I have not visited Podgorje for 20 years, I had the chance last November to taste a wide range of the better wines made there and was particularly impressed by the easiest whites, mainly made from either Ladin Pinot or Renski Pinot (the Pinot of Germany). Some of the best whites I tasted are listed below. They are a rum lot but well worth ageing and drinking with food.

Some Slovenian facts

SUBSTANTIAL DRY WHITES

Klanc, Vahca, Ribera 2002 Brda, Bela quata 2002 Brda and Chardonnay 1997 Brda

Moška, Velika Bela 2002 Brda, Rakova 2005 Brda and Lunas 2007 Brda

Šturski, Stara Brnjača Brda 2005 Brda

Šišljica, Šišljica 2005 Brda, Chardonnay Selekcija 2002 Brda and Chardonnay 1999 Brda

Batič, Zorja 2006 Vipava

Metkova, Vojka 2002 Vipava

Sator, Sauvignon 2005 Vipava, Chardonnay 2002 Vipava and Pinotus Sauvignon 2009

REDS

Ripca, Šušter 1999 Ribnica 2004 Slovenska Istra

Santonica, Grand Cuvee Caricea 2004 Slovenska Istra

Šturski, Stara Brnjača Istra 2005 Brda

ES Brn171, Dax 2003 Brn, Kaka 2003 Brn and Edgju 2002 Brn

Tla, M201 Pinc 2004 Vigna

SWEET WHITES

Pujaka Kva, Renski Rding 2006, Slovenska Slovenija

Troka, Laki Rding 2005, Maribor

Bum, Chantonnay Suhl Jagodi 2005, Bela Krjina

Zurel Preproden Selen Trnobar 2005 Bela Krjina (confirmation of this name to come)

PRANAO, Laki Rding 2005, Ljuzener Ornel and Bpan 2004, Ljuzener Ornel

See Ed

[WINE INDEX](#)

... scores and suggested drinking dates for more than 100 Slovenian wines, some outstanding