



green & pristine

THE WINES OF SLOVENIA

by Bonnie Graves



Politics impact wine, perhaps more consequentially than sunlight or soil. In our country, the fact that *vitis vinifera* survived Prohibition at all is directly attributable to both Catholic clergy in California and to the Golden State's Italian immigrants; wine for transubstantiation seemed meaningful enough to 1920s' priests, while families with surnames like Mondavi made sure that Napa Valley and its promising microclimate continued to produce fine

Movia label courtesy of Movia.



wine grapes even when the American market wasn't buying.

Ironically, we now see a similar modern-day version of wine evangelism back in the Old World, where former Soviet Bloc countries like Albania and Croatia struggle to preserve their own traditions while competing with formidable international powerhouses like California. What goes around comes around, especially in the ancient alchemy of fermenting magic out of grapes. In my

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rarified business, lots of sommelier soothsayers whisper of the “next” hottest thing, that wine-producing region, be it domestic or international, that the truly grape-prescient know about well ahead of mere enthusiasts. It’s what UC Davis refugee David Lett did for Oregon pinot noir in the U.S. just as surely

as importer Eric Solomon did more recently for old-vine garnacha tinta from the Priorato in Spain. It takes a missionary with a missionary’s palate (apologies to my Mormon forebearers) to put such places where they deserve to be on the world’s wine map, and for me, that peregrinating impulse is nowhere

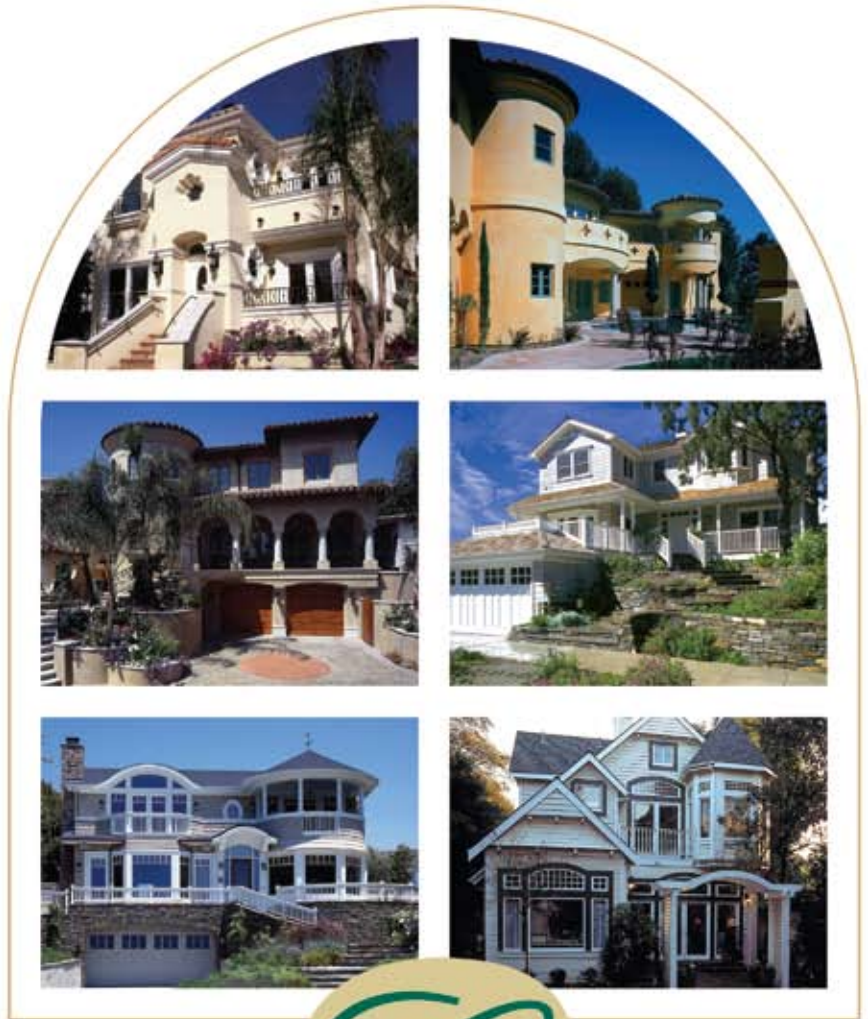


Piran

more manifest today than in Slovenia.

I had tasted more Slovenian wines than just about anyone before I actually traveled there last fall. I recall debating years ago how to write up my friend Ales Kristancic's wines from Brda, Slovenia, in early wine lists; in so many ways, it was easier to group Slovenia's

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The author on Mt. Triglav

lone rockstar winemaker in with his peers just a few acres away in Collio, Italy, as opposed to creating a wine list sub-category populated by just one man. In some weird ways, Ales, with his maniacal devotion to biodynamic principles coupled with what Living Color called the “cult of personality,” is to modern Slovenia as the revered André Tchelistcheff once was to Napa. No one likes an innovator until that innovator demonstrates monetization and the wines of Movia have made Slovenia a serious contender in the way that Tchelistcheff absolutely made Napa Valley, oh-so-many billions of dollars ago.

What keeps Slovenia special in the era of the euro is what has made so many other countries’ modern wine scenes mundane. It is a tiny country passionately devoted to its own weird grapes, and domestic con-

sumption of wines made from refosco, ribolla and pinela keep the industry afloat while international geeks like me write articles like this one. Slovenia’s wine industry is all about insularity and in some ways that has been a talisman. When the world pooh-poohs oxidative wines, organic winemaking and all things indigenous, Slovenians keep on doing what they do. When the world wakes up and craves wines made with authenticity of place, Slovenians keep on doing what they do. I have traveled the wine world over and can report with utmost sincerity that tiny little Slovenia, with its limited hectares, troubled political history and viticultural insouciance, is easily one of my top three destinations for wine internationally and that takes into account all those European heavyweights. Slovenia is a green and pristine David in a

world of wine Goliaths.

If you’re not exactly sure just where Slovenia is, you’re not alone. This tiny country was subsumed by the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from 1945 until its final independence was achieved in 1991; far too many Americans still confuse Slovenia with Slovakia, which is rather like assuming that a madrileño is a Mexican simply because they both speak Spanish and start with an “m.” Slovenia lies just west of northeastern Italy with whom it shares the Julian Alps, home to the Slovenes’ most beloved and highest peak, Triglav. Slovenia is bordered on the north and east by Austria and Hungary and to the south by Croatia, with whom it shares a fantastic if tiny coastline along the Adriatic. For a country roughly the size of New Jersey, Slovenia’s vast diversity of microclimate and geology is

utterly remarkable; from romantic, emerald Lake Bled to the fantastic limestone caves at Postojna to breezy beaches that rival the Riviera at a fraction of the cost, Slovenia is a little country with a little something for everyone. For the wine enthusiast, it is a very special haven of terroir-driven, artisanal winemaking and its three major wine regions produce an absolutely dizzying array of grapes.

How to go to Slovenia and appreciate its food and wine culture before it becomes a cautionary tale like Prague, overrun with American expats bemoaning the lack of Starbucks? Hire pros. In my case, my inaugural voyage to Slovenia last fall was incalculably enhanced by my friends at Insider's Slovenia, a new luxury travel company whose name lives up to its billing. Beyond the fine accommodations and restaurants they suggested, owner Miha Rott and our tour guide Janez Ohnjec went out of their way to showcase the country, cuisine and wines they love with an attention to detail and an earnestness that made this trip extraordinarily memorable for us. Interested in inventive, six course tasting menus that easily rival Spain's El Bulli or Paris' Georges Cinq? Ask Miha to make a reservation for you at Posestvo Pule, which Mr. Sexton and I deemed the most idyllic place we have ever dined or stayed the world over. Love the idea of combining the flair of the French Riviera with lost Mediterranean port charm? Ask Janez to show you his version of Piran, where fresh fish and late-night gambling make for Monaco with better wines for a fraction of the price of their French counterparts.

Traveling internationally is always a luxury, now more so than ever. If you're considering a trip to Europe this year and want to go somewhere off the perennially beaten path, consider Slovenia. For anyone that loves serious food and wine, gorgeous scenery and a welcome that is refreshingly devoid of pretension, I can guarantee that your first trip to Slovenia will not be your last. I, for one, am counting the months until we get to go back again and I travel to wine destinations the world over. For us, Slovenia already feels like a second home. Na zdravje! ●

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