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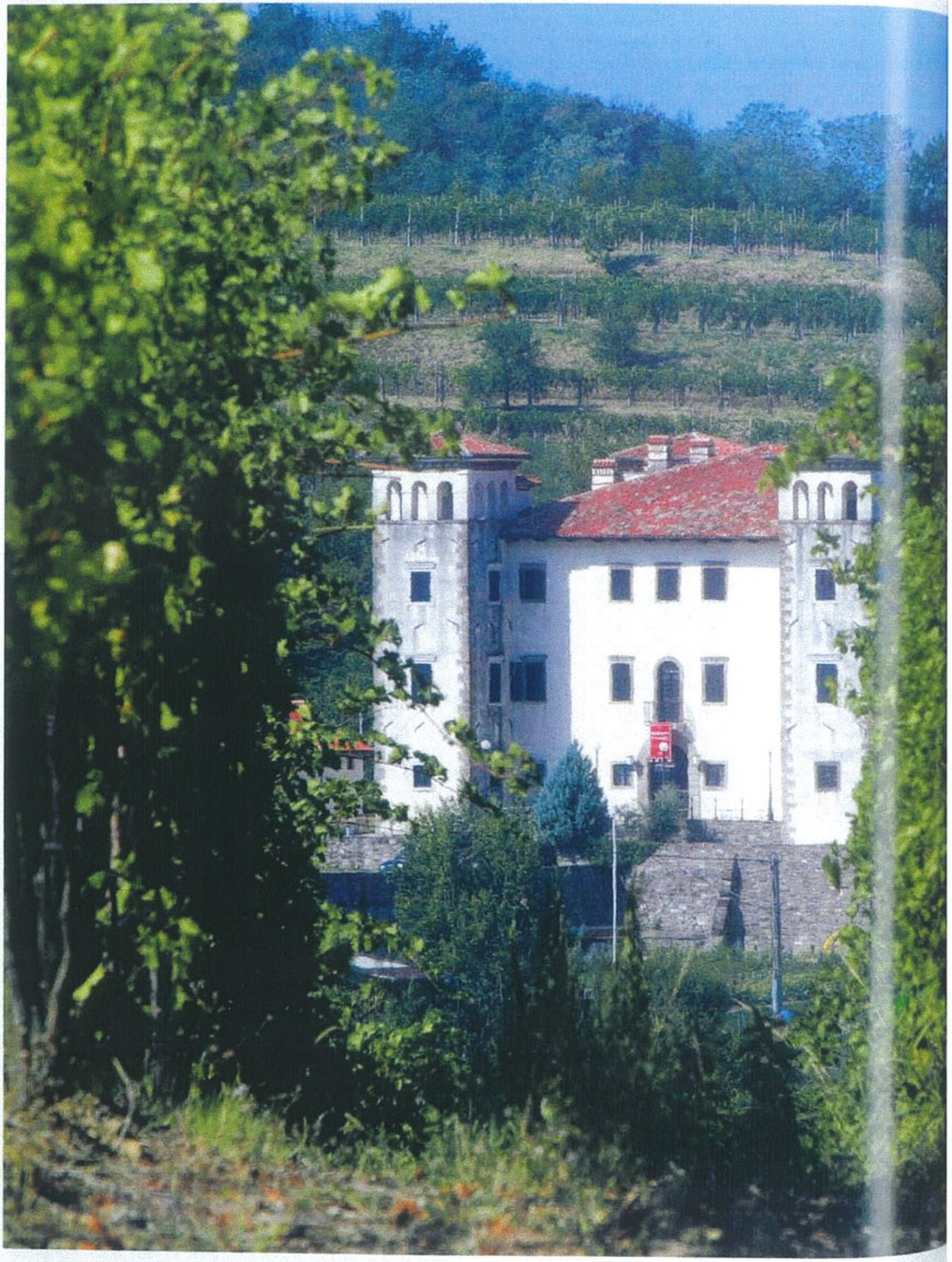

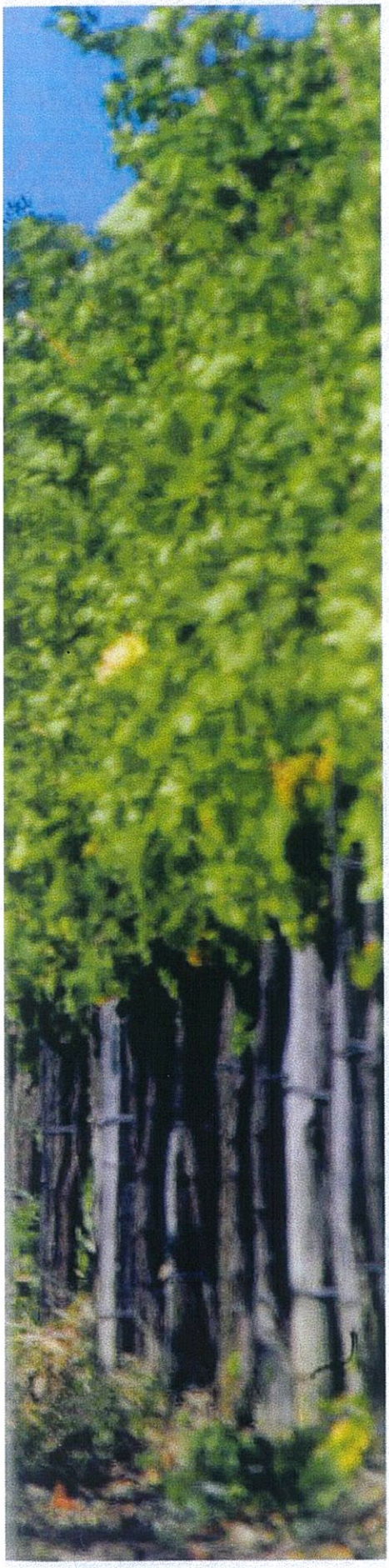

Photography courtesy of the Slovenian Tourist Board

SLOVENIA
ANOTHER COUNTRY

Slovenia's borders have been fluid, but the country and its wines have their own fascination. Bruce Schoenfeld crossed over from Italy for a closer look

The liquid on the bar disgusts me. Brownish black, it smells like herbs but tastes horribly bitter. Sitting at a Slovenian roadhouse a five-minute walk from the Italian border, I recognize the truth in the family joke about my great-grandfather, who was raised in a contentious pocket of Eastern Europe. Some years his town would be Polish. Then the contours of empire would shift and it would become Russian—then back again, to and fro, through the decades. As the story goes, my great-grandfather hated when Russia had control. "Ohhh," he'd moan, "those Russian winters."

In other words, borders matter. Little more than an hour before and only a few miles away, I'd been at dinner in Italy with Andrea Felluga of the Friulian producer Marco Felluga, drinking Italian Tokay, eating gnocchi, reveling in the melodic lilt of the language, feeling smart and sophisticated. Now I'm trying to work up the courage to take a second sip of this foul liqueur, called *pelinkovec*, with voices around me clamoring like grinding machinery. Acrid smoke swirls from some brand of Soviet-era cigarette. If I didn't know better, I'd think Italy was a world away.

In truth, this *was* Italy, and barely half a lifetime ago. Following World War I and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire, this wine-producing valley of Goriška Brda became as Italian as the Piazza San Marco. Then Italy lost the next war, and the settlement that followed ceded it to the nascent amalgamation of Balkan states called Yugoslavia. That lasted from 1946 until 1990, when Slovenia emerged.

If a cultural schizophrenia manifests itself among the small farmers and vineyard owners of Western Slovenia today, well, that's probably to be expected. "My family comes from the same village, all the generations," says Tomaž Kavčič, who serves avant-garde Slovenian food (such as bear cooked *sous vide*) at his restaurant, Pri Lojzetu, down the highway toward Ljubljana. "My grandfather was Austrian. My father is Italian. I was born in Yugoslavia, and my daughter was born in Slovenia. All in the same house!"

Walking through the Slovene town of Medana the next morning, I'm struck by how the countryside around it resembles Italy. And why

We taste a 1966 Movia Rebula that rivals most white Burgundy I've had. "A great, old wine that doesn't announce itself," I tell him, and his expressive face creases into a grin. "That's Slovenia," he says

shouldn't it? Italy, Slovenians keep telling me, with a wave of the hand, is right over there. The family-run hotel where I'm staying overlooks a valley of grapevines framed by a broad-shouldered hill. As I gaze out from the terrace, the international border slices somewhere between background and foreground.

Yet Medana also looks like no Italian town ever would. Purple flowers are planted around a squat, exotic-looking clock tower. A wooden gazebo, open for public use, cantilevers over the city's old stone walls—something I've never seen in two decades of Italian travel. It's Sunday, and the churchgoing crowd in its conservative, slightly tattered, semi-formal wear reminds me of Bucharest or Sofia.

"For 40 years, we had the Communist regime," explains Kavčič. "Everything slowed down. My fiancée's father is Italian. He's 70, I'm 37, and in a sense we're the same generation. We recognize the way we slaughter the hogs, husk the corn. We connect over that. But my fiancée is a modern Italian woman. She says, 'What are you talking about?'"

Ducking and weaving and finger-shooting

At the height of the Cold War, clandestine crossing from Yugoslavia to Italy would have meant serious trouble: fines, imprisonment, worse. But the valley itself, peaceful and verdant, is indivisible by borders. Its grapes provide an ongoing connection between Goriška Brda and Collio, the Italian portion. Governments come and go, control shifts, borders are drawn and redrawn, yet the vineyards, planted to the same grape varieties, never notice or care.

Or do they? As we drive through the countryside, winery owner and enologist Aleš Kristančič of Movia pulls both hands from the steering wheel and throws them in the air in disgust. "Look at these vineyards," he shouts. "It's criminal!" The vines—planted with a high trellis, as opposed to the squatter, more horizontal configuration across the border—show a seediness, a lack of attention, that galls Kristančič, an eighth-generation proprietor and the unofficial ambassador for Slovenian wines.

The vines at his Movia winery are planted in the Italian style, and his winemaking is state of the art. Yet for some reason, the Slovenian manifestation of local grapes like Rebula—as well as the more international Sauvignon Blanc and Merlot—tastes different from the Italian. Certainly the Movia wines have a tang, an agreeable sharpness, that their more sophisticated cousins across the border don't share. I actually like the Slovenian wines better, I tell Kristančič, and he raises his arms again, this time in triumph. Later we'll taste a 1966 Movia Rebula that rivals most any white Burgundy I've had. Gold-colored, yet still fresh in the mouth, it will majestically evolve into a subtle, seductive, beauty over the course of a glass: a wine with the internal tension of a great Montrachet, but none of the trappings. "A great, old wine that doesn't announce itself," I tell him, and his expressive face will crease into a grin. "That's Slovenia," he says.

But before we can do that, before we can taste any wine at all, Kristančič takes me to Sabatin, a steep mountain that straddles the border. We hike up a mule path that was used to supply troops during World War I. At the top, we encounter a network of tunnels that was started by the Austro-Hungarians, and then, after Caporetto turned the war's momentum, finished by the Italians. Inside a small bar there, we eat Slovenian sausage, pickles, and cheese and drink a glass of a rough Merlot/Cabernet blend produced by the local cooperative. I close my eyes and imagine Hemingway, who reputedly drove ambulances on this front, drinking the same coarse wine. It isn't hard.

The battle for Sabatin was one of the longest and fiercest of the war, but as we clamber back down the hillside, I can't help thinking how frustrated troops on both sides would be if they returned nearly a century later to see the inconclusive result of their efforts. Every few minutes, Kristančič raises his head and announces a change of country. "Now we're in Italy," he says. Then, passing a small stone that serves as a marker: "We're in Slovenia." A moment later we're back in Italy again. And then we turn a corner and duck under a strand of wire, and he comes up with a grimace. "To tell you the truth," he says, "I don't know where we are."

On the way to dinner, Kristančič drives for half an hour over dark, winding roads. If he'd been able to cross through Italy, the trip would have taken less than ten minutes. But most borders are closed in the evening, so he's forced to make a series of switchbacks. "We are in Europe," he says, meaning the European Community, of which both countries are members. "But we're only in Europe until 7 o'clock, you see."

The restaurant, Breg, is a traditional Slovenian dining hall owned by two sisters. Adrijana works the front of house; Mirela cooks. Pans hang from beams overhead. The food is hearty and simple—egg noodles with wild asparagus and ham; barley with an egg frittata—and wonderfully flavorful. We drink Kristančič's wines, including the all-Rebula Lunar, which is at once round in the mouth yet delightfully sharp, with a thirst-quenching streak of acid that makes the water on the table redundant.

Afterward, Mirela and Aleš begin a feverish round of Mora, a betting game involving finger-shooting and number-shouting that's played on both sides of the border. Instantly the air is charged with emotion. The game consists of trying to predict the sum of the number of fingers showing on your hand and your opponent's hand. It is both a dance and a battle, a string of grunts and groans that becomes a test of wills and wits (the

PLACES TO VISIT

WINERIES

Movia, Dobrovo

+386 5 39 59 510

The benchmark producer in the area. Aleš Kristančič, whose family has owned the estate since 1820, designs his own, starkly beautiful wine glasses (which can be found in high-end restaurants around the world) and turns out clean, fresh, accessible bottlings that all have at least a touch of grace. The Slovenian art in the Kristančič living room, which doubles as a reception area for visitors, is itself worth the visit.

Edi Simčič, Dobrovo

+386 5 39 59 173

The piercing, high-acid Simčič whites may be Slovenia's best wines, and the taut but generous Duet Lex is one of the better reds of the region from either side of the border. Rudimentary tourism facilities. Call ahead for an appointment.

ACCOMMODATION

Lodging in the Goriška Brda comes in two distinct types: traditional, family-run hotels and inns; and splashy, modern outlets of Eastern European chains, usually accompanied by casinos. Expect to spend $80–170 nightly.

Belica, Medana

+386 5 30 42 104; www.belica.net

The Mavric family serves the food in the restaurant, grows the grapes in the nearby vineyard, makes the wine, runs the simple but unfailingly pleasant ten-room hostelry, and probably cleans the rooms, too. Genuine Old World enotourism.

Hotel Casino Perla, Nova Gorica

+386 5 33 63 449

Shiny, sleek, relentlessly clean, but utterly devoid of charm, for when you absolutely must have high-speed Internet, CNN, and Bulgari soap.

RESTAURANTS

Breg, Breg pri Golem Brdu

+386 5 30 42 555; www.turizembreg.com

Run by sisters in a two-story house with rooms to let, Breg has unadorned wooden chairs and tables, kitschy ceramic figures, and the best local food in the area. Specialties include roast rabbit, egg noodles with prosciutto and wild asparagus, and an array of home-baked breads.

Dambar, Nova Gorica

+386 5 33 31 147

Stereotypical Eastern European attempt at a modern eatery, with bad '80s pop on the sound system and sleek metallic detailing. But the artfully made food transcends the surroundings, and the wine list is the deepest in town.

Pri Lojzetu, Zemono

+386 5 36 87 007; www.prilojzetu.com

This hilltop castle dating to 1650, 12 miles (20km) down the highway toward Ljubljana, serves the most avant-garde food in the region. With its cubes of tuna belly dipped in orange-flavored olive oil, pasta injected with carbonara, and a gin-and-tonic *sorbetto*, Tomaž Kavčič's tasting menu wouldn't be out of place in San Francisco or Sant Celoni—except, possibly, the *sous vide* bear.

word for "one" in the half-Friulian, half-Slovene dialect unique to Mora seems to be "uhhh"; the word for six, a serpentine hiss). I sip my wine and revel in my good fortune to be glimpsing a bit of the connective tissue that binds the two halves of this singular place together.

Vins sans frontières?

My last day in Slovenia I spend in Nova Gorica, the Slovenian town that was cut from just about whole cloth after the parsing of the landscape put Gorizia, the region's only urban center, in Italian territory. It's neat and orderly, far cleaner than a comparable Italian city, and full of impressive public art, including strikingly modern fountains. It also has a block of faceless Communist-era apartment houses and a shiny new casino that, everyone tells me, attracts all the top Italian businessmen.

The casino is attached to a hotel, where, lured by the prospect of wireless Internet access and CNN, I spend my final night. I eat an early dinner of lobster salad and venison steak and drink an impressive red Duet Lex from Edi Simčič, which is plush but full of Old World grip. Then I take a walk. An hour in, with dusk falling, I end up standing before the railway station, a 1906 remnant of old Gorizia that happened to land on the Slovenian side when the lines were drawn.

Across the street and a small plaza, I spot an Italian flag flapping in the breeze. The plaza, I realize, is a border operating on the honor system. Running a fence through the plaza would clearly ruin it for the citizens of both sides, so it has been kept open. Strict warnings are posted, however: "STATE BORDER. CROSSING PROHIBITED. THE MOVEMENT OF PEDESTRIANS IS STRICTLY LIMITED TO THE SQUARE."

That concept seems preposterous. If a Slovenian toddler wanders a step too far, he's breaking international law? If an Italian carelessly kicks a ball so that it skips into the street, he can't retrieve it? I'm all for security in this perilous age, but surely such a concept is an anachronism. I recall my dinner with Felluga in Collio several days before, and my shock at learning that he has visited Slovenia only once, 16 years ago, because the concept of border crossing remains too intimidating. I think of the Duet Lex I'd just enjoyed—a wine available in the United States but practically unknown in Italy. I decide to strike a blow for unfettered internationalism, for cultural interchange, for gently questioning authority. I walk across the plaza and into another land. ■