

HARPERS

Slovenia Focus Eastern Europe's jewel in the crown finally comes good for UK market



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THE FACTS

Slovenia's 24,000 hectares under vine are divided into three regions, but for quality wines, the split is really between Primorska in the west and Podravje in the east.

In Podravje, long, cool autumns allow botrytis to develop, and Germanic whites like Gewürztraminer and Riesling do well. Chardonnay, Pinot Gris, Sauvignon and even Laski Rizling turn up in some beautifully mineral versions, while reds are limited to a few vivid, fresh Pinot Noirs, with some sweet highlights from PraVino and Dveri-Pax.

Primorska, near the Italian border has a more Mediterranean climate. During the wars the border moved to and fro across the Collio region but, arguably, Slovenia has ended up with the best sites. There are four sub-zones and the Brda area has a high concentration of top producers. Grapes include Rebula, Sauvignonasse and local rarities like Zelen, Pinela and Klarnica.

Chardonnay, Pinot Gris and Sauvignon have been planted since before the war and can give exciting results, on their own or in blends, like Jakončič's superb Carolina white. Other producers of note include Scurek, Erzešič, Dolfo and Prinčič. Reds are in the minority but tend to be Merlot-based rather than Cabernet, which doesn't always ripen so well, with a few stylish Pinot Noirs appearing from Sutor, Movia, Tilia and Marjan Simčič.





Angela Muir MW recently described Slovenia as the New Zealand of Europe, others call it “the new Collio”, but either way, Slovenia has certainly been punching above its weight in recent years. Slovenia is still a young country and its mountains, lakes and fast-flowing rivers make it an increasingly popular holiday destination for outdoor types. With a population of just two million people and vineyards covering about 24,000 hectares, it’s not a big player in terms of volume, but there’s an increasing buzz about its wines.

These are slowly starting to creep into the UK trade and to make an impression both with medals and favourable reviews in the press. Its distributors are working with the top end of the on-trade and quality independents. H&H Bancroft, for example, sell Marjan Simčič’s superb wines to the likes of the Fat Duck and Robersons.

Neb Gusic, who handles London trade sales for H&H Bancroft, says: “We think Slovenia offers really interesting wines with a sense of terroir. Marjan is a

vibrant winemaker making a particular style, and we love the quality.”

Bruno Besa, managing director of Astrum Wine Cellars, is also focusing on top on-trade accounts such as Maze, Zuma and Locanda Locatelli with wines from two small family wineries, Sutor and Edi Simčič.

Besa, a native of nearby Friuli himself, says: “Multiples are not our target, but the on-trade is willing to look at new and different things. Quality has to match as people won’t list just for the sake of adding a Slovenian wine.”

He admits low price expectations for wines from the former Eastern Europe can be an issue, but says this was a “problem for Italy too a few years back”.

Alex Hunt at Berkmann, which imports two wines under the Quercus label from the revitalised co-operative at Goriška Brda, adds: “Slovenia is not the easiest proposition – it’s amazing what a difference a border can make. Brda is essentially in Collio but we sell a lot more of wines like Felluga from the Italian side.” Even so, he says “sales are pretty healthy, prices are accessible and the whites are terrific.” →

AN EYE ON THE HIGH GROUND

The top performer in the round table tasting was Slovenia, so exactly where can its more serious wines be found? And are they so much better than the rest of Eastern Europe? Caroline Gilby MW reports on a country that some say got all the best vineyards when the boundary was drawn with northern Italy



Retail perspective

Slovenia, however, has made little progress in the off-trade. James Griswood at Tesco has "been impressed with the quality of wines I have tasted recently", but the supermarket doesn't stock any. "Commercially it's hard. The wines tend to be relatively high in price compared to neighbouring Italy. However, with the success of Italian Pinot Grigio, and the current fashion for Sauvignon Blanc, Slovenia could make an angle by offering these wines to the UK," he adds.

Vladimir Ichpekov of Winez believes multiple buyers do appreciate the quality from Slovenia, but believes price is the big issue. "Slovenia can't do £2.99 or even £3.99," he says.

The recent listing by Virgin Airlines of Sauvignon Blanc from Jeruzalem-Ormož clearly shows that quality can stand up against international competition. There are also a couple of niche players bringing Slovenian wines into the UK, including *latevintage.com*, an internet company with a strong portfolio of top producers, and newcomers Harlington wines, which lists an attractive Chardonnay and a Riesling from Faust, targeted at the £7.99 retail market.

Co-owner David Harlington says: "Having trawled through the Podravje wine region on three separate occasions during the past two years, looking for quality wines, we think we have found a jewel in our latest wine producer, Faust."

Growing trends

A new wine trend that has emerged in western Slovenia is for big-hitting macerated whites. Some claim that long skin contact (as much as several months in some cases) is traditional, but it seems more likely that this style is driven partly by fashion; following the influence of Josko Gravner and Radikon over the border.

It may also be because Slovenia produces mostly whites, so these big, structured whites can fill the role of reds. Certainly, they are excellent food wines and the best (like Marjan Simčič and Movia) manage to strike a

Previous page: Lake Bled is one of the many attractions for the growing number of tourists to Slovenia; above: vineyards in the Karst region; below: Primož Laurenčič of Sutor and president of Family Estates



balance between extraction and complexity, though some are far too rustic, and marked by excess oxidation and phenolic bitterness, to work at anything other than local level.

Other producers are firmly against this style, including Aleks Simčič at Edi Simčič, as well as Sutor and Guerila in the Vipava sub-zone. There's undoubtedly some extreme winemaking happening in Slovenia, with Ales Kristančič of Movia playing the charismatic showman role for his eighth generation family winery. He's committed to biodynamics, though underneath all the talk, he takes a very practical approach, including using ultra-clean new oak and stainless steel, and ensuring his own yeast selections are fermenting strongly in mini-vats, before adding to the main tanks.

Political divides

Slovenia is also divided in two by its wine politics. On one hand, 15 of the bigger wineries are presented by Vinska Družba Slovenije or Wines from Slovenia. This is headed by Dušan Brejc, a former winemaker who moved into a marketing role in the US. His Slovenian producers have committed to a three-year programme of promotions in key markets, including the UK and Germany. Brejc points out that "the UK is the leader in terms of PR so it makes sense to invest here".

Last year, Family Estates of Slovenia was set up to represent the interests of the smaller family producers who have vineyards in the three to 20ha range. Matjaz Lemut – vice president and owner of up-and-coming Tilia Winery – reckons that the 90 member wineries include at least 80% of Slovenia's best producers. However, "it took us three years to convince the growers that they needed to join together," he says.

Key aims include lobbying government on legal matters, as well as seeking access to funds for promotion. Until recently, the interests of small and big producers have been perceived as conflicting. However, Primož Lavrenčič, president of Family Estates and co-owner of Sutor, says, "both organisations are now talking and plan to do joint tasting events, and to work together over several years."

Brejc agrees: "Our lack of a proper generic body is a big failure – we need to do more than sporadic activities. What we require is a holistic approach to put Slovenia on the map as a wine destination. That includes having smaller producers at the top and the large ones at more entry level."

Both sides are concerned about the ever-present issue of the grey market. As much as 20% of Slovenia's wine comes from so-called afternoon farmers, who have other jobs, but sell off surplus bulk without any control or payment of taxes, to be sold in restaurants and bars. Quality is often poor and it's a competitive headache for decent commercial wine.

Slovenians are fairly heavy wine drinkers, up there with the French at an estimated 50 litres per head. Figures are imprecise, though, because of this huge grey market. Gaspar Carman, who runs a wine distributor called eVino in Slovenia, is encouraged to see "increasing interest in top Slovenian wines locally".

Next steps

There's little doubt that Slovenia has all the right ingredients in its wine industry – exciting wines, committed and charismatic producers, with unusual grapes and winemaking. Some excellent food and stunning scenery are a bonus too. With producers showing an increasing willingness to talk to each and work together, Slovenia has the potential to make it big. Of course, it won't happen overnight, but then it didn't for Italy or New Zealand either.