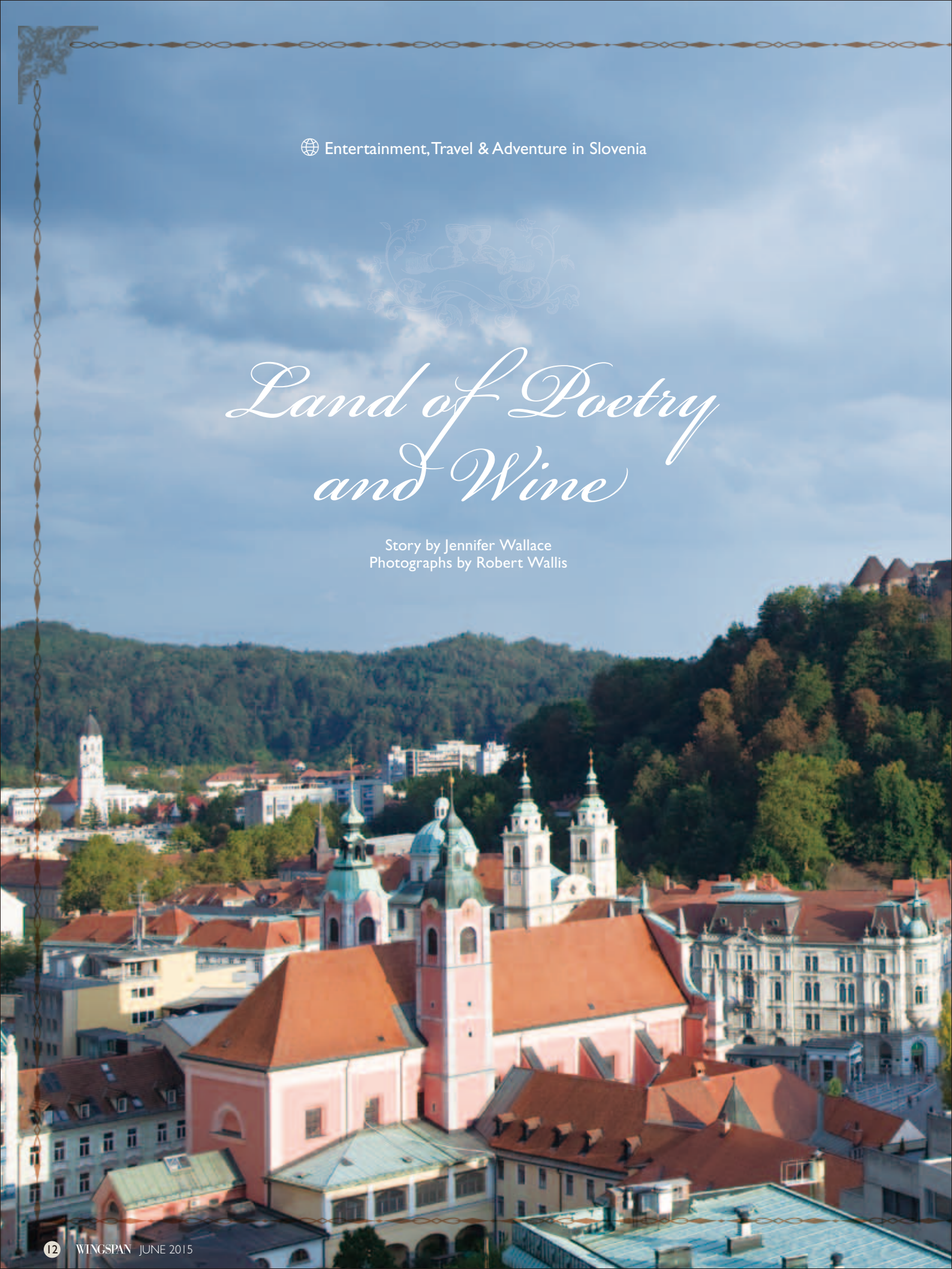




🌐 Entertainment, Travel & Adventure in Slovenia



Land of Poetry and Wine

Story by Jennifer Wallace
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lovenia is a tiny country. Its inhabitants are fond of telling you that they can cross the nation by car in three hours.

They can be in the Alpine mountains in the morning, on the Mediterranean coast in the afternoon, and in the sophisticated capital Ljubljana by night. They can climb up to the summit of Mt. Triglav (2,864 meters) one day and the next scramble down into the abyss of Škocjan Cave, one of the world's largest underground canyons and

supposedly the inspiration for Dante's *Inferno*. Tucked in between Italy, Austria, Hungary, and Croatia, the country is only 20,000 square kilometers with a population of two million.

Yet this small size and variety of terrain are crucial for the wine and food revolution that Slovenia is currently enjoying. As Breda Petelin-Durcik, owner of a farm and vineyard in Pliskovica, in the southwest Karst region, explains while chopping her highly cherished peppers, "our farms are so small compared to other coun-



View of Ljubljana's old town and castle (overleaf) hints at sophisticated life below in Slovenia's capital, from which natural and agricultural wonders are a few hours' drive away. One is Movia Vineyards, run by Aleš and Vesna Kristančič, Aleš here decanting their flagship wine, Lunar, among the biodynamic wines they grow with passion. Another is Škocjan Cave, southwest Slovenia, one of the world's largest underground canyons and said to be the inspiration for Dante's *Inferno*.

tries that it means we have no need to spray. Everything is organic." Increasingly, farms such as Klinec in Medana and Lenar in Logarska Dolina (see sidebar) are opening themselves up for tourism, offering bed-and-breakfast and natural, traditional meals: home-cured prosciutto, fresh ricotta cheeses and yogurts, herbal teas gathered from meadows and mountain slopes.

Meanwhile, the variety of terrain can be seen not only within the one country but within individual vineyards. Marjan and Valeria Simčič own 18 hectares on the Slovenian-Italian border, in the Goriška Brda region: 12

hectares in Slovenia and six in Italy. “We have so many different varieties of grape because of the location and the different altitudes,” Valeria says as we look at the vines zigzagging across the green hills below her terrace. “It’s only 25 minutes to the seaside in one direction and 25 minutes to the Alps the other. Like Slovenia in microcosm.” The results are some exquisite wines: a perfectly balanced Chardonnay, a complex, harmonic Merlot and the particularly outstanding Rebula Opoka, a golden nectar from carefully selected grapes. “When I taste the Opoka, I sense the terroir, the soil vaporizing in the sun after the rain,” says the quietly spoken, thoughtful Marjan.

In the same village of Ceglo is the more flamboyant couple behind Movia wines: Aleš and Vesna Kristančič. The family has been making wine here for eight generations. Aleš, a cross between rock star and mafia boss in appearance, is an evangelist for biological, biodynamic, wild wines, naming two of his flagship wines Puro and Lunar. His conversation over our degustation on his terrace is a bravura performance: electric, poetic, scattergun, funny. “We have to capture the moment when the wine decides to accept the bottle. It’s still alive in the bottle, but it’s calm. Like marriage: there’s less sex, but it’s better!” Vesna blushes and pours us Movia’s premier wine and best





The pleasures of savoring wine as well as poetry are many and varied. In the western region of Goriška Brda, Marjan (left) and Valeria Simčič work vineyards in Slovenia and Italy for their Simčič Wines, while in the east a tasteful buffet lunch is served at Hlebec Winery. The Days of Poetry and Wine festival in Ptuj brings in poets and musicians from around the world for readings, concerts and wine tastings, filling the town square each festival evening with citizens eager to hear international poets read their poems with translations projected on a screen.

export, the red Veliko, a blend of Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinot Noir, and we settle into its velvety depths.

Holy Land

While there is a great range offered by each vineyard, particular regions in Slovenia have developed a reputation for particular wines. Goriška Brda on the Italian border is renowned for its Merlot (look out also for Kramer's Merlot and that of Bagueri 2009). The southwest Karst region, on limestone that results in amazing sinkholes and caves, produces Teran, a blood-red earthy wine best consumed with the local, ubiquitous prosciutto. The Dolenska region in the southeast offers the sweet Rumeni Muskat. And the Štajerska region in the northeast





DAYS OF POETRY AND WINE

“I want to show that you mustn't be too timid to speak out about what you believe in and what you love,” says Aleš Šteger, 42, the leading Slovenian poet of his generation (www.alessteger.com/en). For the last 18 years, he has organized the Days of Poetry and Wine festival in the last week of August, inviting leading poets from around the world to read, mingle with local audiences and writers, and drink excellent Slovenian wine.

Since 2010, the festival has been held in the medieval town of Ptuj, in the eastern Štajerska region of the country, famed for its white wines. “Ptuj is becoming the European capital of poetry,” smiles Šteger, pleased to have been awarded a big European grant to support the festival for the next three years. “And it even has an ancient Roman monument to Orpheus, the god of poetry, in the town square.”



STONE

No one hears what the stone holds in.
Insignificant, all its own, an affliction
Caught between the foot's sole and the shoe.

When you release it, leaves whirl in the bare avenues.
What once was will never be again;
And piles of other decomposing meanings.
The smell of clinics nearby. Mute, you continue.

No one hears what you hold in.
You're your own stone's sole occupant.
You've just thrown it away.

— Aleš Šteger

Translated by William Martin and the author

(reprinted, with permission, from author's website, noted above)

"Wicked Tastings" in the afternoons of the Days of Poetry and Wine festival host a winemaker and a poet in creative conversation. One site is Ptuj Wine Cellars, where its renowned winemaker Bojan Kobal (center) holds forth. Ptuj is one of the country's oldest towns, perched above the Drava River in a delectable perspective. Also delectable are the varietals of Milan Hlebec, owner of Hlebec Winery and farm in a region famed for white wines. Gostilna Na Gradu, the Ljubljana Castle restaurant, serves a dessert of blueberries and ice cream with a Prus Muscat.

grows Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling, and Šipon, a local grape variety so named because when Napoleon's army was crossing the region and tasted the wine, the soldiers commented "*C'est si bon*" ("that's good") and the locals assumed they were calling the wine "*šipon*."

One of the best places to taste Šipon is at Hlebec farm in the village of Kog near Jeruzalem, where Milan Hlebec, a former cab driver, has been making wines for 22 years but seems to have a magic touch—or nose. His Šipon, which has a picture of Napoleon on its label, is complex and elegant, evoking lemon, fruit and pine resin. The local area of Jeruzalem derives its name from the Crusaders. The story goes that when they stopped in the area on their way to the Holy Land, they were so seduced by the beauty of the landscape and the quality of the wine that they felt no need to travel any farther and decided that these hills should be the new Jerusalem.

Certainly the place seems increasingly divine as we work our way through a tasting of Milan's Sauvignon Blanc, Renski Rizling, and semi-dry Yellow Muscat, accompanied by homemade buckwheat-and-cheese flan, and later as Milan takes us down to his new cellar for Cognac (which he has called Kognac), an experiment this last year.

While Hlebec is the new kid on the Štajerska block, the Ptuj Wine Cellars, producers of Pullus wines, are the oldest winery in Slovenia, dating back to 1239. Its young, dynamic oenologist, Bojan Kobal, who comes from a family that has been making





wine for generations in southeast Slovenia, points out that while they now use modern technologies, such as stainless steel tanks, the concept of winemaking remains the same as it has been for centuries. His Sauvignon Blanc has just won two Decanter World Wine Awards. “Wine is the most noble beverage in the world,” says Kobal. “The taste comes from the vineyard itself, you can’t add anything. It’s very sincere. What you can see, you can feel.”

But he admits that what he calls the philosophy of the winemaker plays a role in the production. Almost like Plato, he argues that “the winemaker has an Idea of the taste. Then he goes to cut the grapes and makes the wine and sees if it is close to the Idea.” But if he’s a philosopher, he is also a poet. “Wine is like a book. Just as you can sense the voice of the author, so it’s





MYSTICAL MOUNTAINS

They say that nobody is a true Slovenian until he or she has climbed Mt. Triglav (2,864 meters), the country's highest peak, and indeed the silhouette of the mountain's summit appears on the national flag. But to clear the mind after much wine and poetry, there is nowhere better than Logarska Dolina, ringed by the formidable Kamniško-Savinjske Alps near the Austrian border.



This hidden valley, now just 90 minutes' drive from Ljubljana, was only made accessible by road in 1894 and still retains a mystical, Edenic quality. Green meadow pasture, thick fairytale forest through which bears still roam, gushing waterfalls and ancient farms, some located at dizzying heights up twisting roads, give way to what looks at first like an impenetrable wall of mountain: the peaks and

pinnacles of Ojstrica (2,350 meters), Planjava (2,394 meters), and Turska Gora (2,251 meters).

August Lenar, whose family has farmed in the valley for generations and who owns the forest on the high eastern slopes, has climbed them all and considers each peak an old friend. He and his wife, Minka, who grew up in the adjacent valley Robanov Kot, and daughter, Ursa, take guests to stay at their farm with a welcoming glass of homemade schnapps and can give hiking advice as well as tales of the region's history. If you don't feel like summiting, there are walks to the traditional mountain huts, where shepherds live during the summer months and hikers can sleep overnight between peaks.

We hiked to the hut at the top of Robanov Kot, where Andraž Grudnik cooked us some fresh wild mushroom soup. A picture of local poet Joža Robanov (1900–1973) looked down at us as we ate. "He was a great poet and naturalist who loved nature and loved these mountains," Rebernik grew quite emotional as he told us. "My great-grandmother used to cook for him in this hut each summer."

the same with wine. The taste tells you the story: of the terroir, the grape, the winemaker.”

City of Philosophy, Poetry and Wine

Bojan Kobal’s recourse to philosophical and poetic metaphors is not surprising, since Slovenia is a very literary, cultural country. “We are a nation of writers and poets,” says poet and stand-up comedian Boštjan Gorenc. “It’s one of the myths of our national identity. Out of a population of two million people, we publish three hundred books of poetry each year and one-hundred twenty novels.” Then he adds, with typical Slovenian self-deprecating humor, “Ninety percent of it is crap, of course!” Meanwhile, the country is home to world-



This land of poetry and wine has a vibrant culture felt just about everywhere, from a popular Ljubljana cafe and cocktail bar atop 13-story Nebotičnik, a 1933 art deco building overlooking the capital’s old town and Ljubljana Castle, down to Prešernov trg, the city’s central square with a statue honoring Slovenia’s revered poet France Prešeren (1800–1849) and the 17th-century Franciscan Church of the Annunciation in the background.





While conversations in Ljubljana's old town restaurants offer food for thought, delightful Slovenian dining includes venison medallions accompanied by *štruklji* with tarragon and a Kramer vineyard Merlot (below), served at Ljubljana Castle's Gostilna Na Gradu restaurant; cod fillet with asparagus and cherry tomatoes on carrot puree served at Špajza, one of the old town's top restaurants (opposite top); and, in the Goriška Brda region, Dobrovo Castle's traditional Slovenian dessert.

famous postmodern philosopher Slavoj Žižek, leader of a group of thinkers known as the Slovenian Lacanians.

This heady mixture of lyric and logic is palpable in the nation's capital, Ljubljana, where numerous cafes under willow trees along the banks of the Ljubljanica River are filled with young people reading or discussing books. The city has the romance of Paris, without that city's traffic, a throwback to Jean-Paul Sartre and *À Bout de Souffle*. Above it all, the ancient castle casts a magical spell while those who want 1930s art deco can take an elevator up the 1933 building Nebotičnik ("skyscraper") to the stunning newly renovated rooftop cafe and cocktail



bar. Ljubljana's top restaurants are leading the country's slow-food revolution, buying in the best ingredients and wines from the different regions.

While the food in the countryside is traditionally hearty—*jota* or thick soup with sauerkraut, dumplings sprinkled with bacon flakes, meat such as veal, venison, or even horse and bear—Ljubljana is taking those traditions and giving them a modern—or postmodern—twist.

Gostilna Na Gradu, the restaurant in Ljubljana Castle, which only uses ingredients sourced directly from Slovenian farmers, serves us melt-in-the-mouth sea bass carpaccio, washed down with a Malvazija wine from Istria, near the Karst region, and small medallions of venison accompanied by *štruklji* with tarragon (traditional savory roulade), together with a Merlot (from the Kramer vineyard) to die for.

Another evening, we dine at the intimate, old restaurant Špajza, on more carpaccio, gnocchi with nettle sauce, and lamb fillet with mashed parsnip. We walk back from the restaurant along the cobbled streets beside the river under a full moon, buoyed along by one of the best Pinot Noirs I've ever tasted (Tilia 2012, from Vipavska). It's a perfect combination of beauty, romance, Bacchus, and poetry which lyric poets dating right back to Anacreon in the sixth century BC have rightly celebrated. 



With special thanks to Slovenia tourist board (www.slovenia.info), Lenar Farm (www.lenar.si/en/), and Days of Poetry and Wine festival (www.versoteque.com/en/2015/).

Getting There

ANA serves Munich with daily flights from Tokyo (Haneda). Flights from Munich to Ljubljana take one hour.