

# Los Angeles Times

WINE & SPIRITS

## From Slovenia? Wild, wild wines

With idiosyncratic vintners and their experimental methods, the region is getting hotter by the minute.

By Corie Brown, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

January 30, 2008



**"ANARCHIC" winemakers.** Tiny ancient vineyards. Wines aged in clay jugs. Sacrilegious blends – Merlot, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon.

In the ever-widening world of wine, Slovenia – the Central European country bordered by Italy, Austria, Hungary and Croatia – is emerging as a promising new producer with an idiosyncratic personality. A generation of post-Soviet era vintners is reclaiming a lost tradition of family winemaking, and since Slovenia's 2004 entrance into the European Union, they're getting more of their wines into the hands of American wine lovers.

In the last year, Slovenian varietals – Refosk [Refosco], Sauvignon Blanc, Ribolla Gialla, Pinot Gris, Malvasia, an indigenous grape called Pinela – along with a few blends, have turned up on local wine store shelves and top restaurant wine lists across L.A.

Movia Pinot Noir, for example, is one of a dozen Slovenian wines on the list at Bastide in West Hollywood. Movia wines, the best-known and most widely available in the American market, are also at Osteria Mozza, Providence, Divino and other restaurants. A growing number of area fine wine shops carry limited production wines from producers including Movia, Simcic, Guerila, Batic, Santomas and Kogl.

"There are strong parallels between Slovenia and Burgundy," says London-based wine expert Jancis Robinson. Fresh from her first trip to Slovenia, Robinson is optimistic about the potential of Slovenian wines. "This is a land of small domains run by youngish, determined winemakers who also tend their vines themselves," she says.

"They are quite anarchic and individual in their use of oak and, to my mind, are making more distinctive wines than most of their neighbors in [Italy's] Friuli."

Bastide head sommelier Pieter Verheyde discovered Slovenian wines in 2001 while working at New York's Alain Ducasse restaurant. He was so enthusiastic about the wines that he returned to his home country of Belgium and began importing them there. When Verheyde overhauled the wine list at Bastide last year, he took the unconventional step of giving Slovenia a small section of its own.

On a recent morning at a coffee shop across the street from Bastide, Verheyde spread a map of Slovenia across a table to provide a quick tutorial on the country's three wine regions. The best-known region is Primorska, along the western edge of the country, abutting Italy and the Adriatic Sea. Brda, known as Collio in Italy, is a premier district within Primorska that straddles the Italian/Slovenian border. Podravje, a northeastern continental region, is influenced by Austria, Hungary and the Julian Alps. Posavje, the third major region, occupies the southeastern corner closest to Croatia.

Each of these ancient wine regions has produced wine since the Roman era. Today, Slovenian vineyards are mostly family owned plots smaller than 12 acres. When the region emerged from Soviet control in 1991, vineyard owners were released from a Soviet-era requirement to sell their grapes to the local cooperative winery. Independent wineries started opening across the country.

Few vintners produce more than 5,000 cases of wine. "It's a struggle for these winemakers," Verheyde says.

Outside of Slovenia, few wine enthusiasts have heard of their wines, and it is a rare producer rich enough to invest in marketing. Add to that the weakness of the U.S. dollar against the euro that is squeezing profits on all European products sold in the U.S. and it's easier and more lucrative for these small vintners to sell their wines at home.

Still, Slovenian winemakers want American consumers to learn about their wines, Verheyde says. It's a necessary step toward building an international reputation as well as an opportunity to create interest in other aspects of the Slovenian economy, particularly tourism. Already, "wine is bringing Americans to Slovenia," he says.

Verheyde's selection of Slovenian wines represents a tiny fraction of Bastide's 1,400 label list, proportionate, he says, the world right now.

"They bring diversity to the list," he says. They're lively and complex with unexpected flavors.



# Los Angeles Times

**"I pair the Santomas Malvasia with a ceviche of scallops; the red Refosk [Refosco] wine goes with dry aged beef. I have a Movia Pinot Noir I like to pair with Hawaiian sea bass."**

Movia winery's owner, Ales Kristancic, is the eighth generation of his family to farm his vineyard in Brda.

"Italy's Collio and Slovenia's Brda is one wine region. It was divided by bureaucrats after World War II," Kristancic says. Many local producers, including himself, have vineyard plots on both sides of the border. It's confusing for consumers.

"Everything -- the grapes, the region, the towns -- has two names, the Slovenian name and the Italian name," he says.

The elder estate

MAKING 10,000 cases of wine a year from 57 acres of vineyards, Movia is a tiny winery by American standards, but it is one of the largest of the country's 400 wineries, he says. And, established in the 1970s, Movia is one of Slovenia's oldest private wineries.

Kristancic took his first wine sales trip to the U.S. in 1988. For 10 years, he says, "it cost more to sell my wines in the States than we could ever make."

Now, it's a profitable business, he says. A strict adherent to biodynamic viticulture, an extreme form of organic viticulture that is increasingly popular in Slovenia, Kristancic has become a spokesman not only for Slovenian wines but also for the larger, international issue of natural winemaking.

Top-tier sommeliers and wine retailers are familiar with the wines. They no longer gasp at the idea of his red wine blend of Merlot, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon, called Movia Veliko Rosso. Instead, they're happy it doesn't taste like any other wine they stock.

Winemakers in the Brda district are open to experimentation, says Kristancic. "If you don't know the particular winery, you can be really surprised by the wines from Slovenia."

A wine made from Ribolla Gialla can be a crisp white with bracing acidity or a tannic rose-colored wine fermented in clay amphora with an extended maceration that can last for several months before barrel aging.

'Great food wines'

THE clay amphora? That's a trend started by idiosyncratic Slovenian winemaker Josko Gravner (whose vineyards straddle the Italian-Slovenian border with his winery in Italy). Gravner's wines, says George Cossette, one of the owners of Silver Lake Wine, have introduced many adventurous enthusiasts to Slovenian wines. The amphora project -- in which Gravner ferments his wines in clay jugs buried up to their necks in the ground in homage to ancient Roman tradition -- was explained to Cossette when he visited the winery a few years ago.

"Gravner is stripping away the human intervention to create minimalist art," Cossette says. The experience with Gravner led Cossette to seek out more wines from the Primorska region and eventually from across the country.

Peter Elias, an owner of Liquid Wine & Spirits in Chatsworth, was also hooked after tasting a few Slovenian wines. "They are well-made, great food wines with good acidity."

"It's a hand sell," he says, which means he has to spend time with customers to explain the wines. "I love different, exotic varietals, and that's what these are."

Wine importer Emil Gaspari is responsible for bringing several Slovenian producers to the U.S. A Slovenian who immigrated to the U.S. in the 1960s, he began importing the wines in 2001. His wines weren't available in the Los Angeles area until 2006.

"The quantities from any one producer are quite small, typically from two cases to 125 cases a year of any particular wine. . . . I bring in a total of 2,000 to 3,000 cases a year to the States," Gaspari says.

"You have to get people to taste the wines before they'll talk to you," Gaspari says. "Not many Americans know where Slovenia is, much less the story of the wines. It's a new region to explore -- a discovery wine, an adventure."

