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# Aleš Kristančič:

## Real wine is art

Polona Prešeren, photo: Katarina Krmelj



A WINDING ROAD, ALSO PARTLY RUNNING THROUGH ITALIAN TERRITORY, LEADS TO GORIŠKA BRDA - THE MOST SOUTH-WESTERN PART OF SLOVENIA. WHEN THE PHOTOGRAPHER AND I WERE LEAVING LJUBLJANA, IT WAS SURROUNDED BY A CLOUDY SKY AND AUTUMN MIST. IN BRDA, WE WERE WELCOMED BY A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT SIGHT: A MAGICAL COUNTRY OF VINEYARDS, PEACEFUL AFTER THE GRAPE HARVEST, BATHED IN SUNLIGHT, AND WITH THE SMELL OF THE SEA THAT THE WIND CARRIED FROM AFAR. ALREADY AT FIRST SIGHT, OUR DESTINATION, THE MOVIA ESTATE, GIVES ONE A FEELING THAT IT IS A HOUSE WITH A LONG AND SUCCESSFUL TRADITION. ON THIS ESTATE, THE KRISTANČIČ FAMILY HAS BEEN MAKING HIGH-QUALITY WINES SINCE 1820, WHICH TODAY RANK AMONG THE VERY BEST IN THE WORLD. ALEŠ KRISTANČIČ HAS CONTINUED THE WINEMAKING TRADITION AND HAS CARRIED THE NAME OF MOVIA ALL AROUND THE WORLD. THE WINE IS SOLD UNDER TWO BRAND NAMES: MOVIA, FROM OLD VINEYARDS, AND VILA MARIA, MADE FROM THE GRAPES OF YOUNG VINES.

The harvest has just ended. Harvest time is said to be quite important for good quality. How do you know when the time is right for picking the grapes?

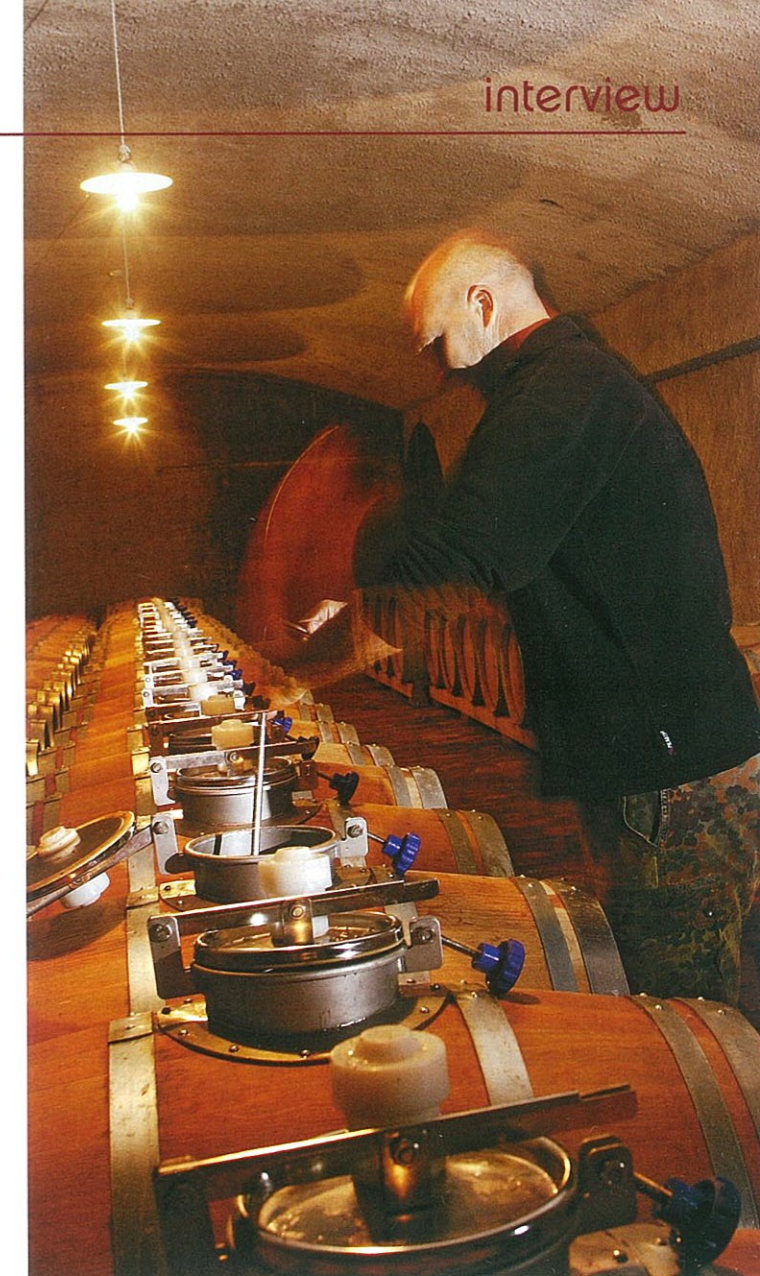
That is true. It is best to pick grapes when they are best to eat. It is exactly the same criterion. Wine grapes must be at their most delicious, which comes with ripeness, and they are best just before they start to rot. Because ripeness gives grapes specific characteristics that are more perceptible to our senses, which is even better. The same holds for wine, which is why we have to pick the grapes just before they start rotting; but this means a great risk: one day the grapes are beautiful and ripe, and you think they will be even better the next day. But then it rains during the night and what you get has already crossed the line. Yet, without a good share of risk, there is no great wine. If you want to play it safe, you will have wine that is far from what you could have made. This is why real viticulture is not classic wine production, but wine production as more of an artistic concept. It is often removed from business and economic decisions.

**So, real viticulture is not only a business, but more a feeling?**

Precisely: a feeling. Today, viticulture is generally 99 per cent pure business. But the small share of world wine production in which the viticulturist is also the cellarer and usually also the one who sells the wine is an art. If we wait to harvest and risk it, we will not make more profit. We risk in order to maintain the level of quality. If we look at this through business eyes, it is quite an unreasonable decision. No economist or business school would teach us that.

**It seems to me that in your case, it is more about this feeling than business. Still, years ago, when you were the Slovenian Entrepreneur of the Year, wine makers from near and far came to you, wanting to see your perfected technology of wine aging.**

Every wine maker in the world today would probably like to come here and see how we make wine. And similarly, I would like to take a look at lots of other cellars. But it is always difficult to apply this to your own territory, to your



own wine production. Everyone is better at some things and worse at others. This is because of the simple natural givens that are quite different. You have the possibility of maximally developing things to their end. Many producers come to have a look, but only one in ten thousand can do something similar. It is not a procedure tied to success, to a formula that can be learnt. There is only the feeling, and someone who does not believe in his or her feelings does not take risks. Or they can take a risk, fail several times and then do not take any more risks.

**Your cellar, as we have just seen, has very modern equipment.**

Of course. I am not a producer who thinks that what goes back centuries is better than what we have today. People develop and they have to use their heads for their own development. If I know that the fermentation can be better, if I can control the heating, above all with temperatures, and by not adding anything, for example, yeasts, I do that. Of course, with the natural influences and conditions surrounding the wine such as, for example, temperature or the lowering of carbon dioxide in the cistern, the rising of sediments, letting the air in...These are the things that make the fermentation quicker, more volatile, more volcanic and that later slow it

down. Or they make it constant from start to finish. If you have a feeling for these things, you can create wine with style, and natural wine by using positive technology. So you are surer, have greater control, and can therefore risk more. The more I can control, the braver I can be.

**In October, in New York, you presented for the first time a wine which contains no sulphur, which is especially revolutionary. What is this method?**

Every wine, i.e. the yeasts in it, naturally produce some sulphur during fermentation. I mean, the yeasts change sugar into alcohol and as a by-product, carbon dioxide and a certain amount of sulphur, which is minimal. In this way, nature sees to it that this newborn is poorly protected at that moment. So we cannot say that there is any wine that is completely without sulphur. Every natural wine naturally contains a little sulphur. But various studies differ greatly. Some say that there can be up to 30mg of natural sulphur per one litre of wine. I think that there can be even less than 10mg. In the standard methodology of determining sulphur in wine, a sodium base is added, and with the help of an indicator the amount of sulphur is measured. With this method, one can see already after the first drop whether or not sulphur has been added. We can thus say that there is no added sulphur in wine, because this means that the concentration of sulphur is less than 10mg a litre. Our wine has 4.5mg of sulphur, and is thus considered to have no added sulphur. The hardest thing to do in countries where for ten years now they have been labelling wine as sulphur free, is to get a permit and a certificate to be able to state on the label that the wine includes no added sulphur. We have worked a lot on this and we had a presentation of this wine in New York.

**How did you go about producing this wine?**

During the making of this wine, we have no contact with it. During the harvest, we meticulously handpick only the best grapes, which we place in barrels, and the fermentation inside the grapes begins. It is as if we actually took the wine from nature. Besides water, wine is the only beverage we can find in nature. Genuine. As it is. When the grape ripens, the connection holding the grape on the stem is broken. Thus an entrance is made into the grape for yeasts on its surface, and slowly the fermentation begins. The first 'barrel' is actually the grape itself. Grapes also have seeds, of which approximately half are reproductive. The unproductive seeds contain much more tannin than the reproductive ones. Tannins are antioxidants, which means that nature thus ensured that we get wine not vinegar. My idea was to make wine by copying this natural method. I created all the conditions so that the wine starts and happens by itself. This is why I adjusted the holes in the barrels proportionally to the openings in individual grapes. I developed this idea slowly, until I found the first cooper prepared to even listen to me. We then made a special drip and a check valve in the barrels. Last year, we made this wine for the first time, and against my expectations it matured much faster, since natural wine reaches stability by itself.

With natural wines, one has to ensure that everything in it, the entire bacteriological world, thrives under the same conditions. Well, against my expectations, this wine became stable practically in seven months, even though I thought I would have to wait twice that long. When it is stable,



you have to bottle it. So we bottled all that wine at once. I connected all twelve barrels together and bottled the wine without filtration.

**The wine is tellingly named Lunar.**

That is right. Except the contact during harvest and at the end, during bottling, I had no work or contact with the wine. The only force in constant contact with the wine was the moon. So the name Lunar actually comes from the cellarer. I mean, the moon has two different influences a month: one is upwards, when it approaches the new moon, meaning life; the other is downwards, when it wanes and approaches the full moon. When it goes upwards, the grapeskins rise and, conversely, when it goes down the grapeskins start sinking. So, if I want a clear wine, I have to bottle it at the end of the full moon. It is clearest then. And that is what I did. The name Lunar is actually the lunar cellarer.

**You only sell an insignificant amount of your wine in Slovenia; you export the rest. Such wine surely needs certain conditions for export. How is it with the transporting of high-quality wine?**

As has been said, all our wines contain very little sulphur (under 30mg), which is why transporting it is quite demanding. The wine is perfect and can last an eternity if all the conditions are taken into consideration: that is, it is sensitive and has to have its cellar, its environment, darkness, and the right temperature. If this is taken into consideration, then the wine stays precisely the same or becomes even more durable. In this way, there are significantly more living things and more life in a wine, which means greater durability. Wine is not supposed to have an expiry date, and traditional wine in particular has to last. But at the same time, it has to change during its life in the bottle. This is why, already years ago, when we started working with more distant countries, we always demanded controlled air-conditioned transportation. Wine was transported in cooling containers, and every time we demanded that the shipping company issue a bill of lading specifying delivery days and temperatures. Only then could we assume responsibility for the product delivered. At the beginning, this seemed quite strange, as only a few producers in the world were granted such a condition, i.e., to sell the wine only on the condition that the transportation be such and such, but therefore costing three times more. If you come from a famous wine region, then there is no problem.

But if you come from Slovenia and you demand this, you must be really good, and someone must really believe in you. Consequently, such wine is much more expensive. It is easiest to produce a wine that can be on all the shelves around the world and stay unchanged, but it would be unchanged bad wine, without life. It is much more difficult to make a wine that is more sensitive, but completely different. Real wine is art.

**How was it when you moved from Slovenia into the international market?**

Very difficult. At first, it was sometimes connected to luck, sometimes with having to persuade people. Of course, no one even blinks if they do not like the wine. But they did like it, and then I had to persuade them that it was worth making an effort and creating something. Today, there is an enormous number of wines in the world, a great many importers, and it is very difficult to find an importer that accepts you, a little known wine maker from an even less known country. You have to persuade them that in the next ten years they will be investing in the Movia story, and that is the most difficult part. If you put together a team ready to do anything, you are closer to success. Abroad, our wine is sold in restaurants where wine is offered by sommeliers. This means that you have someone in between who can help; but, of course, you first have to win them over with your wine. Only when the bottle is opened and emptied, is it sold. I can sell everything in five minutes, but if in the next year everything stays put, then I have the money, but not a new order. You have made a sale when someone decides to put that bottle of wine in their cellar.

**Goriška Brda is a special part of our country that has walked a long and hard path of survival. How do you see the future of this wine region? Can it become a sort of Slovenian Bordeaux or Burgundy?**

It can. When Bordeaux, Burgundy and Tuscany were developing, there was much more space, because then there were no regions famous for wine, soil, and beautiful places. Today, every place is trying to be Bordeaux, Tuscany or Champagne. Nowadays, the competition is much greater. In places with a lot of money, they do everything possible to make the place much more beautiful. We can hardly say that we have done everything to make this place more beautiful. Nowadays, this measure of wildness and purity can probably also be an added value. The other problem is that we do not have foreign neighbours; our neighbours are not English, French, Spanish, Russian or Japanese. I mean the people coming with money and buying. These people then multiply the situation, raise it and ensure that the value of the place rises. This is a decidedly easier path. Let us just consider how in the last thirty years the value of Tuscany went up when the world started buying old houses. There are no foreigners in Goriška Brda, which is bad, on the one hand (if we would like to be among the top wine regions in the world), but on the other hand, it is also good if we want to do it more slowly and we want the country to preserve its strong connection to nature. Then we are on the right path; only it is longer. Among connoisseurs, Brda are already making their name, but we must stay realistic and take care of nature so that it stays clean. This is the main outlook for the future. I hope that in future years Brda will turn more

## interview

and more to ecological growing. This would give the place extra strength, and the only real outlook for the future. I think that there are no better country workers than wine makers. It takes many generations. The wine producer tends to the vines through the whole year and cultivates the vines and takes care that the soil is clean and good. Only good soil produces good wine.

**Recently, you have also been working on Slovenia's image, and you are also working with a state jury on the new slogan and image. According to your experience of introducing trade marks, what would Slovenia need for better recognition?**

Slovenia has to follow the path that is more or less set. But we must still perfect it somewhat. If we say that Slovenia is beautiful, we must really see to it that it is beautiful. This must reach the awareness of every citizen. We are so small and this smallness is a great advantage if we want to set ourselves tasks. There are not many of us and we can put our heads together and all follow the same path forward. I would say: "Dear Slovenes, if you see litter and go past it, it means you are not Slovenian. Do pick it up." That really is not difficult and it could be a general action, a recognisable sign. In view of there being so few of us, we too often waste our time on negativism, and that is what I have against politics. I like the president because he is positive and tolerant, and the prime minister because he has a broad outlook and a positive influence. This has to be transferred to the citizens. When there is too much criticism, do not waste your time trying to react to this negative spirit, since you will only help to spread it. If you can simply ignore it, it is better to do so. You let it be and walk away. And you can thus say "Feel Slovenia", because you really do feel something different.

When, after the interview, we sat on the pleasant terrace of the Movia estate with the view of the vineyards, we started talking about everyday things. Sharing a glass of wine, Aleš told us that he was once very interested in football. "How tiresome it seemed to me at first, when instead of going to the football field, I had to work in the cellar because the moon, as my father said, was in the right position," explains Aleš, whose hands are used to hard work in the vineyard. He will certainly pass the knowledge and willingness to work on to the younger generation. And one last thing at the end, after visiting the Kristančič family, I understand completely why Movia has friends all around the world.

