

Slovenian wines an exotic discovery

BY CORIE BROWN
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"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 South 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-Yugoslav-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.

Movia wines are the best-known and most widely available in the American market. "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.

Pieter Verheyde, head sommelier at Bastide restaurant in West Hollywood, Calif., 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.

Few Slovenian 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 United States 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.

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, owner Ales Kristancic says. And, established in the 1970s, Movia is one of Slovenia's oldest private wineries.

Kristancic took his first wine sales trip to the United States 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.

Peter Elias, an owner of Liquid Wine & Spirits in Chatsworth, Calif., was 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.

"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."