

Diner's Journal

Notes on Eating, Drinking and Cooking

May 4, 2006, 1:08 pm

Expanding the Borders

By ERIC ASIMOV



Ales Kristancic of the Movia estate in Slovenia.

(Alice Fiorilli for The New York Times)

Last night I had the pleasure of dinner with Ales Kristancic, who with his father, Mirko, runs [Movia](#), one of my favorite wine estates.

Never heard of Movia? I'm not surprised. Movia is in Slovenia, just across the Italian border from Friuli-Venezia Giulia. Movia's vineyards, in fact, are on both sides of the border, and it is a measure of the strong Slovenian sense of identity that Movia could easily enough call itself an Italian producer, but chooses not to do that.

In any case, the political border is somewhat meaningless to people who have lived there for generations and endured savage wars for control of the region. Whether in the Collio, as the hilly region is called on the Italian side, or Brda, as it is known in Slovenia, the land is the same. It is home to [some of the most interesting winemakers in the world](#), like Gravner, Radikon, Kante and La Castellada.

When thinking of great winemaking, we are conditioned in this country to confine ourselves to France, California, and maybe Italy, Spain and Germany. It is a bias that seems silly when you consider that Ales's family has been making wine in Brda for eight generations.

The fact is that I have met very few winemakers, if any, who know more than Ales about the journey from earth, roots and vines to what you taste in your glass. To call him intuitive is condescending, yet what he has absorbed by literally growing up in vineyards gives him a sort of innate understanding of viticulture that is hard to match by learning in a classroom.

The proof, of course, is in the bottles. All the Movia wines I've tasted are marked by liveliness, depth and purity of flavor, whether in whites like pinot grigio, sauvignon blanc and ribolla gialla or reds like merlot, cabernet sauvignon and pinot nero, as pinot noir is called in Italy. By the way, if you wonder what these French grapes are doing in this part of the world, they came with Napoleon's army 200 years ago.

On this night, Ales recommended reversing the usual arc of white to red. We began dinner with a 1999 Veliko rosso, a blend of the three red grapes that was balanced, subtle and deliciously aromatic. We then moved on to a couple of wines that Ales is experimenting with but has not yet released.

The first was a '99 sparkling rosé made entirely of pinot nero that had a pronounced berry scent. Ales aged it on the lees in the bottle, and so he decanted it to avoid pouring sediment into our glasses. He also had not filtered it, so the wine had a cloudy, cidery appearance reminiscent of one of Josko [Gravner's](#) wines, yet completely without any of Gravner's oxidative character. Wonderful, and made without the addition of sulfur, a preservative that is pretty much always necessary unless you handle and transport the wines very carefully.

We then had a 2003 ribolla, also unfiltered and unsulfured. It, too, had an unconventional, cloudy appearance, yet it was marked by great acidity and a captivating texture. Ales fermented this wine in new oak barrels, but the flavor of oak was undetectable. He also experimented with leaving the wine for an extended period on its skins and pits, which helped to give it the power to withstand the oak. Fascinating.

Speaking with Ales for a couple of hours is like having a graduate tutorial in grape-growing and winemaking. Movia quietly practices [biodynamic agriculture](#), a subject that tends to polarize people in the industry into either passionate believers or [scornful nay-sayers](#).

I don't know what the truth is about biodynamics, but in listening to Ales, and having had the opportunity to walk with him through his vineyards in Brda, it is hard to believe that it is anything other than a rational approach to grape-growing based on generations of experience. Certainly, nothing is more convincing than tasting Movia wines for yourself.