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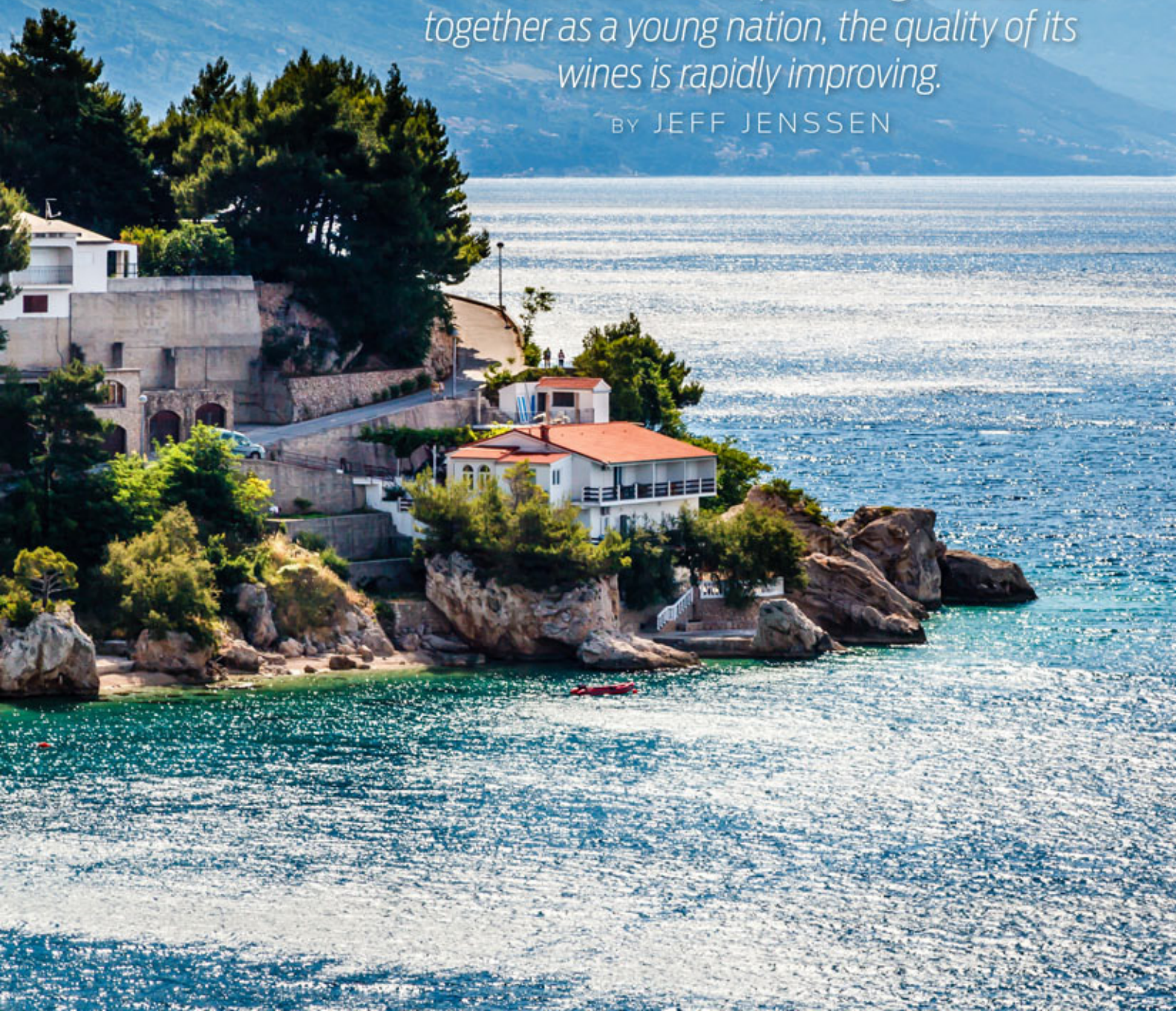
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CRAZY FOR CROATIA

As this Old World wine-producing area comes together as a young nation, the quality of its wines is rapidly improving.

BY JEFF JENSSEN





If asked to name the countries that made up the former Yugoslavia, most Americans would be hard-pressed to answer. But if they could, Croatia would likely top the list. With 1,118 miles of stunning coastline, more than 1,000 islands and regular visits from

cruise ships to the pristine walled city of Dubrovnik, Croatia is an increasingly well-known travel destination for adventurers with a love of history, culture and dramatic scenery.

Now, it's also becoming known for its high-quality wines.

Croatia's winemaking history began around 2200 B.C., when Illyrian tribes made wine in the area now known as Dalmatia. Greek colonization in 390 B.C. helped spread the craft, while the introduction of Christianity under the Roman Empire in the 4th century A.D. firmly rooted production for sacramental purposes.

Winemaking flourished in Croatia for centuries. However, it was curtailed by myriad events—Ottoman invasions, phylloxera, world wars, the rise of communism and, most recently, conflicts between former Yugoslav republics.

To aid the resurgence of winemaking after all of this adversity, the Association of Winegrowers and Winemakers of Istria (Vinistra) was created in 1995. In 2010, the Croatian Chamber of Economy established the Association of Croatian Wineries.

For years, Croatian wine production was simply divided into two designations, Coastal and Continental.

However, in 2012, a group of Croatian winemakers, sommeliers and wine experts created a new system that highlights four regions: Dalmatia, Istria & Kvarner, the Uplands, and Slavonia & Danube. These have been divided into 12 subregions, with 66 appellations.

Croatia boasts 64 indigenous grape varieties, resulting in a wide range of wine styles. Wine is also made from "international" varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, and Chardonnay.

Despite Croatia's relatively modest size, it boasts 17,000 registered vine growers with vineyards totaling over 59,000 acres, growing grapes for over 800 wineries. White wines account for 60 percent of production.



Dalmatia

The southernmost wine region in Croatia, Dalmatia is bordered to the west by the Adriatic Sea, the east by Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the south by Montenegro. It encompasses the towns of Dubrovnik, Split, Sibenik and Zadar.

The warm, sunny climate is ideal for the cultivation of rich and fruity white wines made from Pošip, Debit and Maraština grapes. Red wine varieties include Babić and Plavac Mali. Some of the most important appellations are the Pelješac peninsula and the subregions of Dingač and Postup.

Notable producers include **Grgić Vina Winery**, owned by Dalmatian-born winemaker Mike Grgich. After immigrating to California, Grgich rose to stardom in 1976 when his Chateau Montelena Chardonnay won first prize at the “Judgment of Paris.”

Americans Lee & Penny Anderson founded **Korta Katarina Winery** after visiting war-ravaged Dalmatia to help rebuild schools and infrastructure. The winery is named for their daughter Katharine and the Croatian word for garden.

Ernest Tolj founded **Saints Hills Winery** in 2006 and enlisted consultant Michel Roland to make wine from Croatian and European grape varieties in an international style.

Suha Punta and **Pilizota** are known for their wines made from red Babić grapes, and **Bibich** is known for producing excellent wines from European varieties. **Zlatan**, on the island of Hvar, makes crisp, clean whites and full-bodied Plavac Mali reds.

Istria & Kvarner

Istria sits just below Italy and Slovenia in the northwest corner of Croatia. Once part of the Venetian Empire, it's often called “The Other Tuscany.”

Castles and fortresses sit atop rolling hills. Italian is spoken in many homes, and the cuisine is decidedly reminiscent of Italy, incorporating local foodstuffs like olive oil, white truffles and *pršut* (ham). The wine region includes the islands and area surrounding the Kvarner Gulf, located between the Istrian peninsula and the mainland.

Istria is best known for refreshing, sea-food-friendly white wines made from Malvasia Istriana and Žlahtina. Red wines are made from Teran, as well as a number of



Top: An aerial view of Grgić's vineyards on the Dalmatian coast. Left: Inside Saints Hills Winery.



international varieties.

There are many noteworthy producers here. Bruno Trapan's **Wine Station Trapan** in Šišan is cleverly designed to resemble a train depot. Trapan makes highly regarded wines from Malvasia Istriana and Teran, as well as Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah.

Franc Arman and his son, Oliver, continue the family tradition of crafting well-made wines. Founded in 1850, **Franc Arman Vineyards and Winery** encompasses 20 acres, growing Malvasia, Pinot Gris, Chardonnay, Teran and Cabernet Franc.

Ivica Matošević opened his namesake winery, **Vina Matošević**, in the quaint village of Krunčići and focuses on Malvasia Istriana, Chardonnay, Merlot and Teran. He's one of the first winemakers to age white wine in acacia wood, rather than oak.

Franco & Antonella Kozlović's beautiful **Kozlović Vina** winery in Momjan is known for delicious Malvasia Istriana, Teran and rosé.

Croatian Uplands

The Croatian Uplands lay in the center of the country, bordered to the north by Slovenia and Hungary and to the south by Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Uplands are nearest to Zagreb and include the northernmost wine-growing areas.

In addition to aromatic and refreshing whites made from Sauvignon Blanc, Muscat, Riesling, Pinot Gris, Sylvaner, Gewürztraminer and Chardonnay, elegant Pinot Noir is produced here.

Sweet wine lovers can also enjoy well-crafted botrytized and ice wines.

Notable producers include **Korak Winery**, whose Chardonnay and Pinot Noir exhibit a traditional Burgundian style, and **Drago Rezek Winery**, whose wines trend toward a more modern taste profile.

Tomac Winery's Chardonnay and Riesling—aged for many years in terra cotta amphorae buried into the hillside—are a wine geek's dream. From Medimurje in the north, notable white wines made from Puspipel, Furmint, Traminer, Muscat, and Riesling are produced by **Jakopić**, **Kunčić** and **Stampar**.

Bolfan Winery makes distinctive wines using Pinot Gris, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Riesling. Aficionados of sweet wine should seek out **Bodren's** ice wines made using Müller Thurgau, Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Blanc.



Left: Ivica Matošević, whose innovative white wines age in acacia barrels. Below: The depot-like Wine Station Trapan. Bottom: Drago Rezek's vineyards in the Croatian Uplands.



Slavonia & Danube

Slavonia and the Croatian Danube are situated to the east of the Uplands and are bordered to the north by Hungary, to the east by Serbia and to the south by Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Slavonia is highly regarded for white wine made from Graševina, known elsewhere as Welschriesling and Riesling Italico. It's crisp, clean and has bracing minerality, perhaps from the volcanic elements in the soil.

The town of Kutjevo is considered the heart of Graševina cultivation, and the cooperative tasting room here is known as Kolijevka Graševina—The Cradle of Graševina.

Wine is also made from other white vari-

eties, including Chardonnay, Pinot Gris and Sauvignon Blanc. Red wine is made from Blaufränkisch and several other international varieties.

One of the best-known producers is Vlado Krauthaker, who started modestly with two acres. Today, his **Krauthaker Vineyards and Winery** encompasses 70 acres. He also buys grapes from 135 neighboring acres. Other quality producers include Čamak, Enjingi, Galić, Mihalj and Markota.

Sitting directly on the banks of the Danube River, **Iločki Podrumi**, the second-oldest winery in Europe, had its wine served at the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II in 2012. 🍷