



OVER 100 BAROLOS RATED 90+POINTS

WINE ENTHUSIAST[®]

MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER 2011

THE
CHAMPS-
ELYSEES
COCKTAIL
PAGE 32

>>> FIND THE BEST
**PINOT
NOIR**

PAGE 38

WASHINGTON STATE
**CULT
WINE**

PAGE 44

Croatia
AN HISTORIC WINE
LOVER'S PARADISE

WINE • FOOD • TRAVEL

PAGE 62

GO TO **WineMag.com**

\$5.99 US & CANADA



CROA



**A CULTURE
THAT COMBINES
ASPECTS OF
ITALY AND
EASTERN EUROPE
AND A BEAUTY ALL
ITS OWN, THE LAND
OF MARCO POLO
REWARDS THE
VISITOR IN SEARCH
OF GREAT WINE AND
FOOD.**



The name Marco Polo is synonymous with world-wide exploration, yet little is known about the wine and cuisine of his homeland, Croatia. This beautiful country is a unique blend of Eastern and Western European cultures—its culinary heritage, for example, carries the imprints of nearby Italy and Hungary. Its vineyards boast a multitude of indigenous grapes (Plavac Mali, Malvasia Istriana, Debit, Teran and Pošip) as well as international varieties such as Syrah and Merlot. Croatia is a country begging to be explored by wine and food lovers.

A journey from north to south along the Adriatic

coast of this underexplored jewel by the sea offers rich history, splendid scenery and epicurean delights—starting in Istria, and then down the Dalmatian Coast,

with its 1,000 islands, including Korčula, Marco Polo's home. The intrepid explorer who brought back pasta from China and spices from India would be amazed at the revolution taking place in the vineyards and kitchens of his native land.

16th-century
Lovrijenac Fortress in
Dubrovnik, Croatia.

BY MIKE DESIMONE AND JEFF JENSSEN

ITALIA



IN
LIVING
COLOR





The Croatian National Theater.

Brtonigla

Hotel San Rocco (san-rocco.hr) in the charming stone village of Brtonigla is a perfect base from which to explore the Istrian Peninsula. The converted family estate houses 10 neorustic rooms, a spa and restaurant featuring excellent wines by Coronica and Kozlović (bluedanubewine.com). If you haven't had your fill of local black and white truffles, try the all-truffle pairing menu. A visit to Gianfranco and Antonella Kozlović's nearby winery brings old and new into stark contrast. Directly across a picture-perfect valley from an 11th century castle, this brand-new facility is built right into the hillside, and its covering of grasses, shrubs and vines provides a natural camouflage and renders it almost invisible to the casual observer.



Kozlović is a state-of-the-art winery hidden beneath energy-saving foliage.



Harvesting grapes at Trapan.



Lim Fjord

On the west coast of the Istrian peninsula is the pristine Lim Fjord and the Viking Restaurant, which features house-made pasta smothered in shrimp, lobster and shellfish. Giorgio Clai's Ottocento Crni 2009, a blend of Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and local favorite Teran, pairs well with ravioli covered with locally sourced white truffles. Istrian winemaker Ivica Matošević's floral wines made with Malvasia, a grape that has flourished here since Roman times, are also a natural match for the Italian-influenced seafood of this lush peninsula.



A waiter at Viking Restaurant offers mushrooms to add to fresh pasta.

Zagreb

The journey begins in Zagreb, the country's capital and largest city. Its luxuriously renovated Palace Hotel (www.palace.hr) was a de rigueur stop for passengers on the famed Orient Express. If you have only one night in this imperial city before moving to the coast, eat at Bistro Apetit (apetit.hr), where elevated cuisine is accompanied by a mind-boggling selection of Croatian wines, including those of Ernest Tolj's Saints Hills Winery (saintshills.com), whose affiliation with wine consultant Michel Rolland gives the unique wine global appeal.

Sisan

In Sisan, seek out the Wine Station Trapan (trapan.hr), a train depot-style structure of concrete and glass. Winemaker Bruno Trapan hosts appointment-only tastings of his Ponente, Levante and other labels alongside cheese and charcuterie plates, or a custom-designed five-course menu, all with a view of the barrel room.



At Le Mandrač restaurant, a waiter shaves a local truffle onto the plate of visiting Sisan winemaker Bruno Trapan.

Opatija

Before looping back to the "mainland" towards the Dalmatian coast, plan a lunch or dinner at Le Mandrač (lemandrac.com), in the tiny cove of Opatija. Glass walls, white leather chairs and dark wood floors create the setting in which you will enjoy updated interpretations of classic Italo-Austrian cuisine while gazing at nearby yachts and sailboats. Enjoy a grilled steak with foie gras and beet foam over braised radicchio with a glass of Coronica Gran Teran.

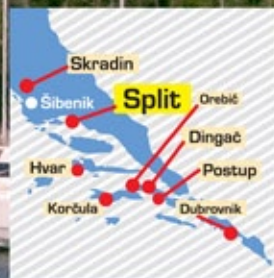




Skradin

On your way down the coast, stop in the bustling port of Skradin and make your way up hills reminiscent of Tuscany to visit Bibich Winery (bluedanubewine.com). It's well worth the trip for a tasting of Alen Bibić's award-winning wines made from local and international grapes.

At Bibich Winery, wine and olive oil are for sale in a rustic tasting room that was rebuilt after being burnt to the ground in the 1991 war.



Split

Continuing southward, you will arrive in historic Split, whose downtown is dominated by the Roman-era Diocletian's Palace, where ancient stone walls are now lined with shops and cafés. Just steps from the port you will find Nostromo Restaurant (nostromo.hr); its owner, Zlatko Marinović, is considered one of the best chefs in Croatia.



Top, pleasure boat harbor in Split. Above, Nostromo's, Chef-owner Zlatko Marinović and his presentation of langoustine; modern cafés built into Roman-era stone walls.





Hvar and Korčula

Whether by sailboat or public ferry, glide from Split to the pine- and vine-covered islands of Hvar and Korčula. Winemaker Zlatan Plenković is known country-wide for his award-winning wines made with Pošip, the native grape of Hvar, as well as his seafront restaurant—it has two marinas for guests who arrive by sea and an underwater wine cellar with windows for spotting the fish that might just end up on your plate. Korčula's Lešić Dimitri Palace (lesic-dimitri.com), an 18th-century archbishop's mansion-turned-hotel luxuriously refurbished with a mix of ancient and contemporary furnishings, sits near the ruins of a house said to be that of Marco Polo. Each of the hotel's eight suites is impeccably decorated in the style of one of the great explorer's destinations, including Venice, Ceylon and China.



Right, the island of Hvar. Above, the ruins of Marco Polo's house on Korčula; Town of Stari Grad, this tree appears on Zlatan Plenković's wine labels and is steps away from his underwater wine cellar.



Orebić tasting room of Korta Katarina Winery.



Orebić

From Korčula, a high-speed water taxi delivers you to Orebić and the just-completed Korta Katarina winery, owned by Lee and Penny Anderson of Minnesota. Tastings of their Plavac Mali and Pošip wines are held in a beautifully appointed vaulted gallery with sea views.



Dingač and Postup

Further down the Pelješac peninsula, in the vineyard region known as Dingač, Winemaker Marija Bura Mrgudić and her family have partnered with AIG Chairman Robert Benmosche, and are replanting Plavac Mali, a relative of Zinfandel, in seafront vineyards. A state-of-the-art winery and tasting room are planned on a stunning site that features a pre-Roman cave along with military bunkers and docks of the Austro-Hungarian era—and some of the oldest Zinfandel vines in the country, dating back approximately 100 years. The bright acidity of their elegant cherry- and eucalyptus-scented Plavac goes surprisingly well with a variety of the locally caught seafood.

Dingač and Postup are two of the better-known appellations here; a bottle labeled with either name will be primarily composed of locally grown Plavac Mali; the wines taste of plum, cherry, Mediterranean herbs and tobacco. Steep vineyards running down to the sea are owned by Saints Hills, Skaramuca, Mrgudić, and California legend Mike Grgich, whose Grgić (the original Croatian spelling) winery in Trstenik is one of the few to receive visitors for tastings.

Plavac Mali on the vine; the harbor and village of Trstenik on the Pelješac peninsula.



Top Wines of Croatia



Even amid generations of war, strife and Cold War geopolitics, Croatia's ancient traditions of winemaking have persevered. In recent years, a surge in tourism has revitalized Croatia's breathtaking beaches and stone-walled medieval cities—and turned the spotlight on Croatia's wines as well.

Croatia's best white wines are accessible to the palate yet uniquely multifaceted. Malvasia in the hands of Ivica Matošević is elegant and rich, exhibiting exceptionally clean fruit and mineral characteristics. The indigenous Pošip, made by Grgić Vina, (owned by Miljenko "Mike" Grgich of Napa Valley fame) are luscious and intensely powerful with glimmers of citrus and spice. Indigenous red grapes like Plavac Mali, a relative of Zinfandel, create rustic wines that are bold in both concentration and alcohol content, but also a fascinating study of wine's incredible ability to evolve in the glass.

Croatian wines are still relatively difficult to find in the U.S., but here are a few to seek out.

—Anna Lee Iijima

90 Grgić Vina 2009 Pošip (Korčula); \$25. Intriguing on the nose with aromas of hazelnuts and smoke veiled in orange flowers, citrus rind and resin. Dry and savory with hints of fruit and spice and a rich nut-skin finish. Imported by Vinum USA Inc.

90 Korta Katarina 2006 Plavac Mali (Pelješac); \$38. Rich with concentrated black fruit, but also glimmers of rose petal, espresso and chocolate under a spray of raspberry perfume. Big, ripe tannins subside to a smooth, finely grained texture. Imported by Katharine's Garden LLC.

89 Grgić Vina 2007 Plavac Mali (Pelješac); \$45. Certainly big and brawny, but also fascinatingly complex, with aromas of hay and grass, sweet and spicy red fruit, fig and toast. The long finish is marked by assertive tannins. Imported by Vinum USA Inc.

88 Agrolaguna 2009 Muškati Ruža (Istria); \$15. The rose petal aromas are so pronounced, this desert wine is almost overwhelming. Semisweet, it's rich and full-bodied, with rose petal jam, black cherry pie filling and a musky, dusty rose perfume. Imported by Tasty Wine Company.

88 Istravino 2008 De Mar Cu-vée Zenon Bordeaux-style Red Blend (Istria); \$13. Juicy red plums, vanilla and smoke are pleasant on the nose and palate, but gain freshness from layers of bramble, menthol and fresh herbs. Full-bodied, with exceptionally integrated tannins that are soft and round. Imported by Tasty Wine Company.

87 Matošević 2008 Alba Malvasia Istriana (Istria); \$20. Bright with freshly pressed apples and pears on the nose. Luscious, with a rich, toasted hazelnut note, it's balanced by a lemony acidity and brisk minerality. Imported by Oenocentric.



House-made pasta with langoustine as served at Restaurant Nautika.

Dubrovnik

Heading down the coast, you will come to Dubrovnik, which has been extensively rebuilt since the 1991 siege. Avoid the touts luring day-

trippers from cruise ships into subpar restaurants and aim straight for Restaurant Nautika. The glass-enclosed terraces boast



views of the old harbor, including the 16th-century Revelin Fortress, now used for performances during the city's UNESCO World Heritage summer arts festival. Highlights of the menu include langoustine on a bed of polenta and suckling calf medallions in Prosecco sauce. The wine list reads like a scrapbook of your voyage, featuring bottles from Istria, the Pelješac Peninsula, the islands of Hvar and Korčula and many examples of the local grape, Malvasia Dubrovnika, a relative of Malvasia Istriana.



Cavtat

A few kilometers south of Dubrovnik, the pedestrian-friendly town of Cavtat is a waterfront paradise. At the end of the pier, you will find Taverla Galija (galija.hr), a rustic restaurant serving fresh fish and crustaceans and locally raised meat and featuring an all-star, all-Croatian wine list.



After the clear blue water and bright sun of the coast, you may want to prepare your eyes to the relatively dim, commonplace light back home. Before boarding your plane, visit the prehistoric caves at Dubrovnik Airport in Čilipi, where you can taste local wines of Dubrovnik from producers such as Marinović, Andro Crvic and Karaman. It is always bittersweet when a won-

For Croatia's standout hotels and other travel tips, visit winemag.com/croatia-travels

derful adventure draws to a close, but here in the Skycellar, 75 feet below the runway, the best way to end a week of exploration is on a sweet note, with a luscious glass of Karaman Dubrovnik Malvasia, with notes of white peach, marzipan and jasmine that will linger in your mind, even as your glowing Adriatic tan fades to a warm memory. 🍷