

Croatian Wine

Boats provide the ideal environment to meet people. Their rolling decks, the fresh salt air and the warm rays of the sun relax all temperaments. After all *The Love Boat* was set on one - not a bus or a train.



Not affected by the limited sleep we had the night before, Hugh, a fellow Aussie working as a photographer in New York, struck up a conversation with the girl next to him, as we sailed on a Jadrolinija ferry towards the Croatian Island of Vis, population 3,500. Something about the way she sat with her coffee and cigarette - the staples of any Croatian girl's diet - had struck an aesthetic chord within him and he fumbled in his case for the correct camera and lens to record her look.

Vis was to be the last stop on our ten-day take-no-prisoners tour through the local vineyards.

For me Croatia has always meant Dalmatia, the country's southern coastline. It has numerous appeals – an unpracticed atmosphere, the unperturbed attitude of the locals, summer after-beach parties, excellent coffee and seafood – but gliding on the sea about five kilometers from land, Dalmatia's main attraction becomes obvious – the untouched tranquility. On one side more than a thousand islands, many uninhabited, float like green olives touched with erratic marks of creamy limestone upon the blue Adriatic Sea; on the other side the rocky coastal wall of the monstrous Dinaric Mountain Range glows purple in the afternoon sun. The clear waters are always warm and the sun shines incessantly in a cloudless sky. For an all-over tan, nothing beats the million hidden coves along the coastline to which bronze, buff and sometimes too hairy-bottomed-and-backed bodies flock to dot the water's edge.

But we wanted to experience the full spectrum of Croatian wine and cuisine so our trip included northern, Continental Croatia as well, and I must admit I was rendered speechless by its charms - not surprising since my mouth was usually full of first-rate wine and food.

Storm-surges of competing empires eroded Croatia into its present form and left their influences on bordering regions as they receded. They gave Croatia, a small country of about four and a half million people, a remarkable variation of traditions. As the Austrians and the Hungarians ruled the north for many years, the wine, along with other cultural manifestations, was styled towards their northern European tastes.

We were firstly shown the wineries of the rich Pozeske Kotle (Pozega Valley), in Slavonia, which is famous mainly for its Grasevina (Welschriesling), being 70% of the

crop. The Romans, who called it the Vallis Aurea (Golden Valley), were the first to perceive the wine-producing potential of the valley's sunny, south facing slopes. Its latitude happens to be the same as other great wine producing regions such as Piedmont, Cotes du Rhone and Bordeaux. The combined production now totals some 200,000 liters of wine; arguably the best drop produced by the Krauthaker Winery, winner of a gold medal at last year's Chardonnay du Monde.

Corbanac, a shepherd's stew of lamb, pork and venison with spices, chili, and hot and sweet peppers, accompanied by zimnica (pickled condiments), was easily my favorite epicurean pleasure from the valley.

Next we visited the auburn quilt of farms stretched out on the undulating hills of Medjimurje; consuming Moslavac - of which Napoleon was a fan - a young, fresh dry white wine, and Zeleni Silvanac (Sylvaner), a white wine softer in color, bouquet and palate, as well as food, such as Meso s Tiblice (dried pork with white fat), Turos (cottage cheese with garlic and peppers) and duck confit, that would have made Rudolf Steiner, the great-grandfather of organic farming, born in the area, proud.

We then flew from Zagreb, Croatia's capital of busy people-crammed trams, tree-lined avenues, flower-filled parks and painted palaces, to Dubrovnik.

The differences between the north and the south were dramatically magnified by the quick 45-minute flight. The sunlight, pastel in Zagreb's autumn skies, in the south became blindingly white, and the temperature rose about 15 degrees.

After spending much of summer indoors escaping the heat and tourists the locals had emerged to relax, people-watch and gossip at the numerous small restaurants, cafes and bars, which give the town a feeling of comfort and familiarity and left us feeling as though we had been invited into an old friend's living room. Within solid walls, which have protected it for centuries from maritime depredations, the town, sitting proudly upon its rocky outcrop, is narrow flagged streets, tall orange-tiled houses, Baroque palaces, churches and monasteries - George Bernard Shaw best described Dubrovnik in 1929 when he said that those who seek paradise on Earth must visit.

After leaving Dubrovnik, we drove up the Peljesac Peninsula, passed vineyards that dive at 70 degrees directly into the Adriatic, to Korcula Island, birth-place of Marco Polo, and then island-hopped our way north by ferry.

By a remarkable coincidence Neda, the girl Hugh was now photographing on the Vis ferry, was a nanny working for the owner of Bar Sedam, the nightclub in which we partied during our first night in Zagreb more than a week ago. It was only fitting that our trip had turned full circle like this. Croatia is a country of close associations, not only between people, but also between people, their history and land.

As we bobbed across the sea a fantastic historical vista opened before us - Salona, the ruins of a first century Roman city; Diocletian's retirement palace, built at the beginning

of the fourth century, now the heart of the old town of Split; Klis fortress, the frontline between the Ottoman and Venetian Empires for more than one hundred years; the quarries on Brac, source for the White House's marble; Omis, home of the Hajduk pirates who loved to attack the treasure-laden Venetian galleys; Trogir, the former refuge for Hungarian royalty as Budapest was being ravaged by Mongols; and in the far-far-distance, Korcula. These edifices - the flotsam and jetsam of the numerous conquerors that have washed across this area - provide connections to thousands of years of history, in which anyone with a European or Central Asian heritage has a stake.

Beside these still-inhabited ruins, clinging to the small patches of fertile soil, are farms owned and worked by nearly every Dalmatian family. This contact with the land gives all an intimate appreciation of their food. This familiarity relates to the wine as well. Wine is not just the latest fashionable product, as it may be in Australia or California. It has always been created here, since the Greeks first planted vines more than 2,500 years ago; it's intertwined in the legends, literature and lifestyle of the country.



I'm intrigued that history is not an abstract concept in Croatia. The locals are touching it, working it and re-forming it everyday.

As the ferry docked at the pier of Vis town, Hugh and I jumped down to the car level to start-up our Vespas which, when combined with ferries, are definitely the best way to see the islands of Dalmatia. They can transport you to the beach in morning, the cafes in the afternoon and nightclubs at night on any of the islands. This day the scooters were going to carry us to Nic and Valerie Roki's winery in the middle of Vis.

Hugh and I raced our Vespas through the valley that cuts through the center of the island. Vespa is Italian for wasp, but our scooters sounded more like over-grown mosquitoes with their high-pitched drones, which seemed attractive to the other insects meeting a swift death against the visors of our helmets. We turned into the dusty track of the winery and were greeted by gray bearded Nic at the stoop.

Nic migrated to Australia in 1960, where he met Valerie, a Maltese girl. After the birth of their son in Perth, Western Australia, the family returned to Vis in the mid-1970s to work Nic's family's land. Though he's Croatian, when he speaks English the years he spent Down Under are still evident. Now, as well as producing 60,000 liters from their ten hectares of vines, Nic and Valerie attract visitors to the vineyard with gourmet food, including prsut (cured ham), sheep's cheese, viska pogaca (a pie with salted sardines) and

meat or fish baked in a peka (cast iron dome) with vegetables served in a relaxed atmosphere.

The end of genocidal conflict in the Balkans and Croatia's continuing liberalization since its emergence from beneath the communist state of Yugoslavia have produced changes throughout its society. These changes are very evident in Croatia's winemaking industry.

No longer able to rely on selling their product to large state-owned wineries for the production of bulk table wine - wine usually served in cafes as either gemist (wine and sparkling mineral water) or bavanda (wine and water) - viticulturalists are learning to rely on their own initiatives and are attempting to break into the boutique wine business. Yugoslavia never adopted the strict collectivization of other communist countries so vineyards have always remained in the hands of their traditional owners. Growers have always worked their own land and now they are learning how to produce and market their own wine.



Vis' own rebirth parallels that of the wines produced upon its shores. It was the first island liberated from the Nazis by Tito's partisans during World War II and was his base of operations for the remainder of the war. An outline of an airstrip from this period, used by damaged Allied aircraft if they could not make it back to their bases in Italy after raids into Yugoslavia, runs through Nic's backyard. Interestingly, Winston Churchill's personal representative to Tito was Brigadier Fitzroy Maclean, whose exploits during and after the war, including many on Vis, were Ian Fleming's inspiration for James Bond, Agent 007.

Following the war a large army base remained on the island. For security only relatives of villagers could visit Vis until the army left in 1989. The island was, therefore, saved from unsympathetic attempts to attract tourists. It is now trying to use

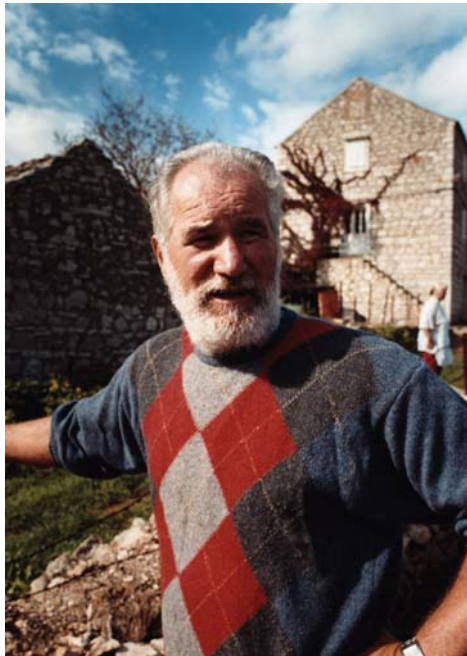


tourism to complement its local industries without letting visitors ride rough shot over the serenity of the island. Its unpolluted waters and abundant sunshine are natural magnets for the yachtsmen of the Adriatic Sea and divers from around the world.

Dalmatia is famous for its production of red wine - Plavac.

Plavac and the other wines of Coastal Croatia, of which Dalmatia is a part, are big and brassy (mmmmm... just how us Aussies like them) when compared to the finer, more acidic wines from the cooler Continental Croatia. This is due to the hot Mediterranean climate of the region. The summer sun is so harsh that to prevent it from scorching the

ground, rocks are often piled around the vines to reflect the heat and help the soil retain its limited moisture. Dalmatian wines usually contain 13% to 16% alcohol, while those from the north have a 10% to 12% alcoholic content.



As we watched the sun set across the valley from his porch, sipping on a glass of his 2000 vintage, I asked Nic why he was not exporting to America. In his considered manner he replied there are two reasons. Firstly, the romantic image of Croatian families working their small plots of land has created less romantic ramifications for the wine industry as it is difficult for serious viticulturalists to buy land to assemble an estate large enough to produce exportable volumes of wine.

Secondly, in Coastal Croatia, there are many microclimates because the valleys are small and the soils varied, making it is difficult to grow quantities of similar quality grapes. He said that 80% of their wine was sold at their four vinotekas (wine stores), three on the island and one in Zagreb, leaving little to send overseas.

It was not always like this. Croatia previously had grown more than four times the present 40,000 hectares of vines, exporting wine to all of Europe to high praise. Then phylloxera struck. By the start of the 20th Century the vineyards were destroyed and many destitute Croats migrated to the US, Canada, Australia or South America. Numerous expatriates, such as Mike Grgic in California, now make wine in their adopted homelands, many deciding never to return to the old fields.

It is possible to buy Plavac in larger wine stores in the United States and Australia. But most people do not think of Croatia as a class wine producing country. But what a misconception! More than 700 registered wines and at least a dozen premium varieties are made in Croatia. Dalmatia, for example, has a winemaking tradition closely resembling that of the Italians, as the Roman and Venetian Empires and the Italian Republic have at various times, controlled it. The Plavac Mali (small blue) grape is the same as the Sangiovese used in Tuscany, as well as being related to the Zinfandel used in California. The dialect on Vis has many Italian words.

Some of the Plavac tasted was almost brown in color and so tanniny that I thought my face would implode, while others fell flat, but the good Plavac has a balance of pepper, berries and leather. Plavac improves with cellaring for up to for seven years. Other great Plavac is made at the Mlicic Winery on the Peljesac Peninsular and the Zlatan Otok Winery on the island of Hvar.

Local cuisine also has an Italian flavor. The fresh seafood is often grilled on small barbeques and drizzled in olive oil, garlic and herbs, just prior to being served with a salad or sautéed blitva (marigold). The risottos are also mouthwatering, made with mixed shellfish, scampi or cuttlefish and squid ink.

Vis' indigenous white wine grape is Bugava – issuing a full-bodied, very dry wine. It is similar to Posip, produced on Korcula, and apparently linked to the Viognier and Furmint varieties. As well as Nic, Antonio Lipanovic makes a good drop and Korculansko Vinogorje in the town of Cara is known for its Posip.

Many other growers are now experimenting with grapes not typical to Croatia, but Nic is a traditionalist, content to refine local wines, seeing no reason to plant foreign vines. He has though recently had a crack at late harvest wines. His dedication meant that last year he was able to finally bottle more top quality wine (vrhunsko vino) than table wine.

Croatians imbibed another Italian habit – their penchant for grape-skin spirit. Into rakija, their version of grappa, Croats throw a hundred different flavoring ingredients, such as herbs, carob, walnuts, blueberries, cherries, strawberries, honey or blackberries. Their thirsts not being slaked by these, other fruits are also utilized spirit-sources; plums make sljivavica and pears, kruskavac.

On top of all else, Croatia is inexpensive. With Italy, Greece, Spain and Portugal adopting the Euro, the greenback is more elastic in Croatia than any other southern European country; the best wines are all under \$15 in the local stores.

After a quick barbeque, Hugh and I clambered on the Vespas as the clouds parted and the waxing moon cast its blue-silver light across the valley to light our way. We had decided that dessert for the night was to be a slice of Rozata, a baked custard flan, with a glass of Prosek, a port-like red dessert wine, beneath the date palms in the 16th Century Gariboldi gardens of Goran Pecarevic's restaurant, Villa Kaliopa, in Vis Town. It ended up being the perfect denouement for the vacation. The next day, after a swim and with the Croatian toast "May God grant you as many years as there are drops of wine" still in our ears, we ferried it back to Split for the flight to the US.