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October 2006

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Slovenian Wine Routes
Interview: Karl Erjavec
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Wine Routes

Windows to the Slovenian Soul

Drago Medved, photo: Robert Zajc

There are twenty wine routes in Slovenia - some fully fledged, while others are still trying to find the key to success. The names of most of them reveal which wine-growing district they are situated in, or designate the wine-growing regions where the numerous tastes of fine Slovenian wines can be discovered. The common features of all wine routes are genuine wines along with local culinary specialties and their cultural and historical backgrounds. The wine routes are true pilgrimage destinations of this picturesque land.

The Dreamy East and Its Aromatic White Wines

Let us embark on a journey, starting in the extreme east of Slovenia, and moving westward from the Lendava Wine Route, which has a lot in common with two nearby routes, the Prekmurje and Goričko Wine Routes; all of them are in the Prekmurje wine producing district. Their common characteristics are wines made of white grape varieties, mainly Italian Riesling, followed by Chardonnay, Sauvignon, Rhine Riesling, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, Traminer, and Muscatel. Recently, some red grape varieties have also been introduced, such as Pinot Noir, Blue Franconian, Zweigelt, and even Cabernet Sauvignon. Each wine cellar also offers one or more types of blended wines, i.e. wines which are a blend of different varieties, which are known

internationally as cuvée. All three wine routes also boast characteristic culinary delights: the ubiquitous Prekmurje ham, the indispensable bograč goulash, dishes made with buckwheat and millet porridge, dödöli (white potato žganci) and, of course, the Prekmurje koline with a wide variety of sausages (black and white pudding) and bujta repa (pork stew with sour turnip). As for the sweet dishes, the Prekmurje gibanica reigns supreme.

Whoever wanders into the heart of these three wine routes will also observe the rich cultural heritage: from the Holy Trinity Church overlooking Lendava, with the mummy of Mihael Hadik, to architect Plečnik's church at Bogojina; from the Romanesque/Gothic church at Martjanci and the Romanesque rotunda at Sela on Goričko hills, to the mighty castle overlooking the village of Grad.

The East of Slovenia is crisscrossed with wine routes. The wine-growing districts of Srednje Slovenske Gorice, Radgona-Kapela, Ljutomer-Ormož and Haloze represent the Haloze, Ptuj, Ormož, Jeruzalem and Kapela Wine Routes, which are home to the most eminent vineyards of Styrian white wines. Recently, red varieties were introduced, namely Pinot Noir and Blue Franconian. The owners of picturesque

Old Cultures and Merry People

It is little wonder then that a visitor to these wine routes will come across many old wineries and cellars. The local people are friendly and merry. From the Assumption Day onwards, the vineyard hills echo with the distinctive sound of the klopotec wind-rattles.

The Ptuj wine cellar is the oldest of its kind in Slovenia: its origins are traced back to the Middle Ages, when it was part of the monastery of the Order of Friars Minor Conventual. Its vaults store the oldest existing wine to be produced in Slovenia, dating from 1917. A few vintages from the four years of the Second World War and preceding it are missing, while the subsequent vintages are all present in the archives. A visit to the cellar is a memorable experience: the slideshow presentation and wine tasting leave a lasting impression.

The picturesque town of Ptuj is a treasury of Slovenian cultural heritage in its own right; it is crowning feature of the Ptuj wine route. The visitors to the castle towering above the town are in for a treat: they can admire the important cultural and historical collections, but also discover archaeological excavations from the distant past, notably from the Classical antiquity. A stroll through the streets of the old town reveals many treasures, such as frescoes and the rich decorations of the town's churches and other architectural monuments. A trip along the winding roads of the Haloze wine route offers fine sights of wine-growing slopes, where visitors can also discover the architectural heritage of the countryside and small churches, gems of religious architecture. At Shrovetide, it is here, in the village of Videm pri Ptuj and its surroundings, that one can meet the genuine kurent (also: korant) carnival figures, and have a taste of the scrumptious local food. The Haloze gibanica is one of the best-known specialties, but there are also other traditional dishes.

The town of Ormož is yet another veritable treasure trove of natural and cultural heritage. Vineyards, the wine-making landscape and, of course, wine all fall into both of the above categories. Ormož Castle is just one of the landmarks of this rich cultural heritage. Visitors to the Jerusalem-Ormož cellar can enjoy the inspiring majesty of the excellent

vineyard cottages and wine cellars will gladly offer their fresh, fruity varieties, some of which are also aromatic. This is the country of the famous Šipon (Furmint feher), whose claim to fame is its exceptional quality, especially the good vintages. As a young and entirely dry wine, it is an ideal complement to the many regional culinary delights, and it is an excellent grape variety for the production of QmP wines, i.e. the late harvest wines, wines from hand selected grapes, wines from vine-dried grapes, and ice wines, and also as a base for sparkling wines. A rather special white variety is the domesticated Radgonska Ranina (Bouviere Frühtraube), which produces interesting dry and semi-dry whites, as well as mature QmP's. Other white varieties also yield excellent results along these wine routes. The bouquet of the local Italian Riesling wines is reminiscent of apples or the scent of the lemon-tree, while mature Italian Rieslings can be truly outstanding, with a higher dry matter and alcohol content. But the true king is the Rhine Riesling, which in the good vintages is becoming what it used to be: a wine of character, harmony and exceptional structure. Another specialty is the Pinot Gris, with its full body and strong taste. The region also produces fine Chardonnay wines, and good vintages provide dry, as well as sweet QmP wines, which are well suited for a long ageing process in the bottle.



COVERSTORY

wines found maturing in the cellar and originating from the famous vineyards at Malek, Mali and Veliki Rebrovnik, Runeč, Jeruzalem, Svetinje and the surroundings. Apart from the white varieties already mentioned, the Muskat Ottonel also yields excellent results. A beautiful winery at Malek offers a display of vine-growing and wine-making traditions, and they also offer wine tasting. Next to Malek, amidst the Kupljen vineyards, lies the Taverna inn offering hearty home fare. And just before the lower-lying village of Svetinje lies the large Kupljen wine cellar featuring a wine academy and a wine bank.

The journey then continues towards Jeruzalem, with its beautiful small church and a gigantic wine cellar, leading past Železne dveri on to Ljutomer. The people of the Prlekija region know how to treat their guests with good wine and interesting dishes. If you have never heard of ajdovi krapci, Prlekija is the place where you can taste this sweet or savoury buckwheat dish. The region also has its own version of gibanica and, above all, prleška tünka (meat cured in pork fat).

The towns and villages along these wine routes are also known for certain handicrafts, especially pottery. Some places are undergoing considerable change, as is the case at Svetinje: the most prominent elements of the village's architectural heritage are being renovated, while it maintains its typical outline, enhanced by vine-covered terraces.

The First Sparkling Wine and the Oldest Vine

At Gornja Radgona, the town's celebrated wine cellar bids welcome. In 1852, the first sparkling wine of Slovenia was produced in this very institution. But it has also won much praise for its distinguished Traminer and Ranina wines. The latter variety is linked with a 19th Century owner of the cellar, Bouvier. Another very well known and loved product of the Radgona cellar is the blended wine named Janževc. At Gornja Radgona there is an annual International Food and Agriculture Fair, which includes a Wine Competition. We could say that this wine route hosts the state championship in the tasting of Slovenian wines.

At Janžev vrh, visitors can see one of the largest wooden wine presses in Slovenia. Not far off is a place called Kapela,



with a very well known wine cellar in which excellent Traminer wines are matured. It is surrounded by the vineyards of Traminer vines which were planted a few decades ago. In the Kapela wine cellar, the walls of the tasting room are adorned with a triptych by Ante Trstenjak, a renowned painter from Prlekija. The painting presents work in the vineyard and grape harvesting.

The Podravje wine region also includes wine routes around Maribor, beneath the Pohorje Mountains, and towards the Austrian border: the Maribor, Pesnica and Podpohorje wine routes. The latter comprises vineyards above Hoče, around Slovenska Bistrica, Ritoznoj and Kovača vas, and around Slovenske Konjice, chiefly at Škalce.

The Lent quarter of Maribor is home to the world's oldest vine. The plant is over 400 years old and is a favourite site for celebrations accompanying vine pruning and grape harvesting. Its descendants have been planted around the world, including several royal households, the Vatican and, since this spring, in front of the French National Museum of Viticulture in Paris. In the centre of Maribor, there is an immense wine cellar, one of Europe's largest: the corridors are almost three kilometres long. The vineyards at Piramida, Kalvarija, Melje, Celestrina, and Šempeterska gorca are part of the picturesque Maribor wine route. On the left bank of the River Drava, excellent vineyards can be found at Kamnica and Bresternica. The route is home to choice wines made of Italian Riesling, Grüner Silvaner, Riesvaner (Muller-Thurgau Blanc), Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris, Chardonnay, Sauvignon, Rhine Riesling, Kerner, Traminer, and Muscatel. Out of the red wines the Pinot Noir, Blue Franconian and Zweigelt varieties are most widely produced. There are plenty of cultural sights, ranging from the aforementioned old vine, protected as a cultural monument, to other Maribor landmarks, such as the





wineglasses and wine carafes, while the winemakers produce excellent wines, which can be tasted, among other places, in the Rogatec Wine Shop in the precincts of the beautifully restored Strmol Castle. They will also serve erpica, a special type of bread with pork cracklings. Not very far off is Donačka gora, with an open-air museum at the foot of a mountain.

And now, let us travel towards the south of the country, into the wine-growing region of Posavje. The region is divided into three wine routes: Bizeljsko, Dolenjska, and Bela Krajina – each is precious in its own right. Winemakers at Bizeljsko pride themselves on fresh white wines and excellent reds, the best known being the white and red Bizeljčan blends. The exquisite red wines are made from Blue Franconian and Pinot Noir grapes. The Vino Brežice wine cellars store many precious wines, especially the cellar located inside Brežice Castle. At Stara vas, the Istenič family has been making traditional method sparkling wines for more than three decades. Bizeljsko is known for the so-called repnice, wine cellars dug out of siliceous sand.

The Dolenjska wine route is best known for its reddish cviček wine, which is a blend of red Blue Franconian and Žametna črnina varieties with the white Kraljevina and Italian Riesling. A trip through Dolenjska is like a pilgrimage route passing amidst vineyard cottages, churches, and other landmarks marking the vivacious everyday life of this astonishingly beautiful land. The people of Dolenjska reflect the characteristics of the countryside: they are merry and open people. The best known vineyards can be found in and around Krško, Podbočje, Gadova peč and Kostanjevica na Krki, with its art galleries in a former abbey, its forma viva exhibition and the forests of Krakovski gozd. Also worth mentioning are the town of Šentjernej and the nearby Pleterje Abbey, with its wonderful wine cellar and fine wines, not forgetting Šentrupert and Trška gora overlooking the town of Novo mesto.

From Bircher, over the Stony Lands of the Bora Wind and on Towards the Sea

The Bela Krajina wine route presents an image of a fairytale land. Dotted around countryside covered with birch-trees and eagle fern brush land lie the exquisite vineyards in and around Drašiči and Vidoviči (in the surroundings of Sveta Ana). The Metlika Wine Cellar offers a prime example

city cathedral. In its crypt rest the remains of the blessed bishop Anton Martin Slomšek, the first patron of Slovenian wines and winemakers.

The town of Slovenska Bistrica is proud of Klet Bistrica, its fine wine cellar, and of its eminent wines, the best known being a blend named Ritznojčan. Close to Slovenske Konjice, the wonderful Škalce is a welcoming site, beneath which there is a golf course, situated literally amidst the vineyards. Not far off is the quiet Valley of St. John, which used to be the home of Carthusian monks who lived in the monastery at Žiče. The buildings are being carefully restored. You are in for a treat at nearby Gastuž, Slovenia's oldest existing inn, dating from the middle of the 16th Century.

On the border with the Slovenian Wine Region of Posavje lies the Virštajn wine route. It runs through beautiful places along the River Sotla and towards the heart of the Kozjansko Hills. The grapes growing in this area produce fresh whites, while the reds are full of flavour and very drinkable. The Virštanjčan red and white blended wines are well known. The Sotla basin and Kozjansko Hills with Kozjansko Park are very rich indeed in cultural and historical landmarks, including archaeological sites, castle ruins, numerous churches, chapels and roadside religious signs, and the beautifully restored market town centres at Podsreda, Kozje and Podčetrtek. The Olimje Valley, with its ancient monastery, pharmacy and the Church of the Virgin Mary is like a path full of interest, including golfing.

Culinary trends have sparked off a new interest in traditional dishes such as fresh-water fish, various types of porridges and pulses. Lamb and goat's meat are back on the menus, as is goat cheese. The Rogaška wine route is among the more recent routes in this wine-producing district. The master glassblowers at Rogaška manufacture top-quality





of the viticulture of Bela Krajina, which produces both white and red wines, the best-known white wine being the Belokranjec blend, while the best-known red is the Metliška črnina blended wine. You might be pleasantly surprised by the soft Muscatel wines, while Šturm Chardonnay and Blue Franconian will introduce you to a world of potent wines with character. The Prus Sauvignon, especially its sweeter OmP variants, will pamper you. The Museum of Bela Krajina in Metlika features an exhibition on viticulture, and there is also an enocheque. At Drašiči, Soseska is the name of a special wine house owned by the village community, and they are proud to show it to visitors. Many wineries will be happy to welcome visitors and let them taste their wines and culinary delights: of course, we must not forget to mention belokrajnska pogača (a type of bread) and roast lamb.

And here we are in the Vipava Valley, in the wine-growing region of Primorska. The Vipava wine route is one of Slovenia's oldest. The parish priest, Matija Vrtovec from Šentvid nad Vipavo, who lived and worked in the area, wrote the first Slovenian book on viticulture in 1844, entitled *Vinoreja za Slovence* ('Wine-Making for Slovenes'). The upper part of the Vipava Valley offers fruity whites with pronounced bouquets: Zelen, Pinela, Klarnica, Italian Riesling, Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris, Chardonnay and Sauvignon. A well-known

white blended wine is Vipavec. In the lower part of the valley they grow Rebula, Točaj (Toccai Furlano) and Muscatel vines. But the entire Valley is renowned for its excellent reds, from Merlot, Pinot Noir and Barbera to Cabernet Franc and Cabernet Sauvignon. The Vipava Wine Cellar will kindly welcome those who wish to taste their wine, as will the many winemakers from all around the valley. Visitors to the valley will also enjoy the local architecture and some interesting panoramic views of villages, such as Goče or Vipavski Križ, to name but a few.

From the Vipava Valley, the Karst is just a stone's throw away. And there is plenty to experience on the Karst wine route. It is home to the kraški teran (Terrano Carsico), a red wine made from Refosco grapes, but the winemakers of the Karst also produce Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot wines. The white wines include the indigenous Grganja or Vitovska variety, as well as Malvasia, Sauvignon and Chardonnay. The Karst prosciutto is the most representative culinary specialty of the area around the wine route, but there are other interesting dishes, such as various types of toč (a sauce in which bread or polenta is dipped), šelinka (a vegetable broth made with celery), and vrzote (a hearty stew made with shredded kale, potatoes and beans). Stanjel with its castle and the architectural heritage of the village as a whole, the villages of Kobdilj and Kobjeglava, important for the production of prosciutto, and Komen are just a few places which are not only cultural monuments, but also the centres of the bustling everyday life of the people living on the picturesque land known as Karst.

But let us continue to the Istria Peninsula and visit the Istria wine route. From the village of Črni Kal towards the sea we shall see numerous vineyards. The grapes are used to produce the white wines of Malvasia, Chardonnay, Pinot Gris and Muscatel. The undisputed king of the red wines is the Refosco, followed by Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and, recently, Shiraz. The Vinakoper Wine Cellar has had a positive effect on the development of viticulture and on the preservation of local or domesticated grape varieties. Many individual winemakers have followed its example, and today, they are able to offer every imaginable thing that has to do with the wine culture and other genuine elements typical of Istria, not to mention the cultural landmarks: the church of the Holy Trinity at Hrastovlje, old-world villages in the Istrian hinterland, and the towns of Koper and Piran. The Istria wine route encompasses everything – from the fish in the sea to the vines high up on Labor Hill.

Let us end our journey along the wine routes of Slovenia in Goriška Brda, on the Brici wine route. Goriška Brda is a world unto itself, and words cannot describe its beauty in all seasons. Picturesque villages amidst vineyards, olive groves and orchards of cherry and peach trees offer exquisite white wines made from Rebula and Točaj grapes - two local varieties - and also from Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris, Chardonnay and Sauvignon. The excellent reds include Merlot, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz. The wine cellar at Dobrovo reflects the strength and importance of the Brda vineyards, while Bagueri Castle and the monument to the poet Alojz Gradnik symbolise the cultural poetics of this land, including the traditional international meeting named Days of Poetry and Wine held at Medana. All of Brda's winemakers personify the nobility of their mission. This is why the Brici wine route is nothing short of a pilgrimage, following and tasting natural beauty and discovering cultural heritage.

Few wine producing countries can compete with Slovenia's rich viticulture tradition. In this small area, you will find a luxurious selection of premium Slovenian wines of different aromas, described so well in the cover story by Drago Medved. And that is only the beginning – one can explore Slovenia's rich natural and cultural heritage in the broadest sense of the word, and what's more, meet Slovenes and learn about their characteristics. Trips along wine routes allow visitors to take a quick look at all of this, and are also an important tourist activity in Slovenia.

When did it all begin? In 1992, the Slovenian Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food devised and launched Slovenia's Wine Roads, which includes 20 wine routes from the three wine making regions of Slovenia. Since that time, the wine routes have seen times of great success, as well some less successful periods. This is a part of life, a part of growth and development. There is no doubt that the Slovenia's Wine Roads project is complex, but it is my opinion that this market opportunity for the Slovenian countryside has still not fully realised its potential.

Why? Preparing an attractive and diverse tourist package that includes a wine route region means combining the entire region and all its activities into a living product, which is constantly developing and growing. The wine producing landscape provides the opportunity for specific marketing of the local produce, products and services. In order to do all this, however, new partnerships need constantly to be established, particularly public-private partnerships; they need to establish associations, collaborations, dialogue and, last but not least, agreements. And we are not always the best at doing that. But this is no tragedy. What matters is that we are moving forward and getting closer to reaching our goals: to be good, to be the best, to realise our full potential, and to be able to offer it to those interested in our culture, history, landscape, crafts, and our ability at any given moment to make the best of the good natural conditions at our disposal with our hands and innovative minds.

What have we observed? Yes, there is no doubt that Slovenes are good producers, growers and craft workers. We are also a highly innovative nation; but we still lack skill and knowledge in marketing, especially joint marketing. This is what made the initiative launched by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food to create and implement a joint project, Slovenia's



Photo: Valteo Palčić

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SLOVENIA'S WINE ROUTES – AN OVERLOOKED MARKET OPPORTUNITY FOR SLOVENIA AND ITS COUNTRYSIDE

Wine Roads, so good, so encouraging, and so welcome. A corporate identity was created for Slovenia's wine routes, and then a marking system for wine routes was developed, inspired by the wine route in Vipava, a process in which I was actively involved. It is a shame we had to abide by the 'dry' bureaucratic rules of marking and were unable to present the diversity of Slovenia's 20 wine routes referred to by Mr Medved. This would undoubtedly tell the tourist, our consumer, a more interesting story about the characteristic features of the 20 different areas covered by Slovenia's wine routes. Regardless of that, however, today's wine routes are still marked more or less uniformly, and you can see what they offer in detail by visiting the website www.slovenia.info (the Wine Roads section). One interesting highlight is VINO, a quarterly magazine for lovers of wine, culinary delights and other pleasures. While this is good, it is natural that some of the wine routes have already realised much of their market potential, and some have still to do so.

Because of our shared interests and benefits, we should tighten our

cooperation further and make joint appearances in target markets, pursuing a common goal, so that consumers seeking premium quality, new experiences, adventures, relaxation, and other pleasures will visit our wine routes and return home happy, as so many guests have done in the past. And they will come back.

But we should also look outwards, to the international arena, and prepare international projects involving our wine routes. There is so much to gain from this. It is a fact that we have a lot to offer others, but it is also a fact that we can learn a great deal from others as well. Because it all boils down to this: cooperation, wisdom and responsibility, the growth and development that comes from mutual understanding, and the respect that strengthens the bonds of friendship between different nations and cultures.

And why should not wine, this fundamental and magical product of any wine route, serve as a link connecting different nations, and why should not wine routes become galleries of the Slovenian spirit, where the very best we have to offer is displayed for others to see?