

Vina Croatia, Vina Mosaica



PHOTO: DECANTER

Three years ago my colleague Oz Clarke and I, accompanied by Tony Hodges of brand consultancy BrandStory, who was working with the Croatian government to create a recognisable image for their very diverse and hardly-known wines, arrived in Zagreb to taste a massive range produced by Agrokor, the largest agricultural business in the country, alongside many of the competition. We were not very impressed by the high alcohols and lack of freshness on the whites and the roughness of the reds and gave our opinions quite bluntly. We returned in a freezing January the next year to find a lot of changes.

So far, neither of us had been to the vineyards and Oz went this May and I followed in October. Tasting the 2012s, especially the whites, was day and night compared to the 2009s on my first visit. Of course the international grape varieties—Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot—are there, but these, with the exception of Merlot from Istria, are not the names to look for. What Croatia is best at are its indigenous grapes, cousins or brothers to other middle European varieties, perhaps not surprising from a country with such a long, if turbulent, history. Now that it is joining the modern world both in the vineyard and in the cellar, there is much to look for. So much was plain was further proved by Vina Croatia's annual tasting in London the following week.

Modern Croatia is located where the hot Mediterranean climate meets the cold Alpine climate and where, historically, East meets West. Due to its unique shape, with a substantial northern part on the Austro-Hungarian border, and a long coastal part on the Adriatic Sea, but no real centre, Croatia has extreme variations in climate and is separated into four main wine regions.

Slavonia and the Croatian Danube

To the northern right of the map, these vineyards like on the fertile Pannonian plain that offers a continental climate of cold winters and hot summers. The prize grape here is the white Grasevina (Welsch Riesling in Austria and Riesling Italico in the Friuli), which produces refreshingly full-bodied wines, both dry and sweet, with an ability to age. Also very interesting is the Traminac, Croatia's version of Gewürztraminer, and more and more, Frankovka, Austria's Blaufrankisch. Tasting over 40 wines at Agrokor's Vina Belje ultra-modern winery with a potential eight million bottles production, it was these that stood out, with Grasevina

becoming more and more this region's calling card. Two other names to look for are Galic and Krauthaker, with Grasevina and Chardonnay for whites, Pinot Crni (Noir) and a Cabernet-Merlot blends for the reds.

The Croatian Uplands

To the east, this is Croatia's coldest region, surrounding the capital Zagreb, characterised by ranges of hills and picturesque little vineyards. Sauvignon Blanc, Riesling and Pinot Sivi (Gris) do well here, as they do in neighbouring Slovenia to the north, also Moslavac, known as Furmint in Hungary. By far the best source is the 25-hectare biodynamic Bolfan, whose 2012 Rajnski Rizling and Primus Pinot Sivi very much suited my palate, as did his vibrantly fruity 2011 Pinot Crni.

Istria and Kvarner

On the Adriatic coast, Istria has the mildest climate and it deemed, from its beauty of its landscape as well as its local food and wines, to become Croatia's Napa Valley. The standout grape here is Malvazija (France's Rolle, Italy's Vermentino), a varietal that I have paired with Cabernet Franc as my strongest bets for the future. The local Teran red (Italy's Refosco) is high in acid and perhaps best in blends for the faint-hearted, while Oz Clarke feels that Istria is Europe's number-two terroir for Merlot. In-depth tastings at Agrokor's Vina Laguna proved the strength particularly of Malvazija but also of two red blends: Terra Rossa (Teran, Frankovka, Merlot) and Castello (Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah). Some smaller wineries showed marvellously individual wines of international stature: Cattunar, Kabola (Croatia's first organic winery) with a stunning Malvazija 2007 aged in amphoras and 2010 Teran, Kozlovic whose wines are imported by Vinum, USA and above all Matosevic (in my view Croatia's best winemaker) and Trapan whose brilliant wines are imported by Winebow.

The Dalmatian Coast

The pride of the region is the island of Hvar whose vineyards have been continuously cultivated for 2,500 years and are now protected by UNESCO. The warm climate is perfect for Crljenak, discovered to be Zinfandel by Professor Carole Meredith of Davis (CA) in 2002, when there were just nine vines surviving. There are now 350,000 and the numbers are growing fast as Dalmatia embraces its almost lost child. Plavac Mali, Zinfandel's cousin, is the major red varietal and Posip, related to Viognier, makes fine dry and semi-sweet whites. The winery to look for is Jako Vino.

Croatian wines may never make big inroads into Californian, but they have certainly impressed me. Perhaps the best is to visit the country and, as Tony Hodges of BrandStory advises, "Taste the Place." ■■