

Sipping the Pleasures of Istria



Filip Horvat for The New York Times

A waiter carries a glass of malvasia wine at a bar in Rovinj.

By ROBERT DRAPER

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On a recent afternoon, I found myself having lunch on a shaded patio about 20 feet from the banks of a placid river that empties out into the Adriatic Sea. The restaurant, Martin Pescador — named for the bird that skims the water's surface in search of food — is in Trget, a fishing village in the region of northern Croatia known as Istria. I'd arrived there after a rough drive down a 10-mile road that hugs the Rasa River and then traverses railroad tracks and freight depots and lumberyards before dead-ending in Trget. Docked nearby were about 20 boats, the same number as residents of the village.

Multimedia



Istria, Croatia

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Filip Horvat for The New York Times
The Kozlovic vineyards near Buje.

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Most of the other lunch patrons were locals with shaggy eyebrows and barnacled hands. At one point, the chef announced that more mussels were needed. A fisherman pushed himself out of his chair, strolled to the dock, hauled up two yellow nets full of the shellfish, and brought them into the kitchen.

The waiter presented me with a bucket of the day's catch. I selected the sarago, a sweet, fleshy white fish. It arrived perfectly grilled, following a chilled cuttlefish and squid salad and a bowl of tagliatelle with mussels, generously splashed with a brilliant local olive oil.

Oh, and he also brought out a carafe of white wine known as malvasia istriana, produced by a local winemaker named Frank Arman. Its color was limpid gold, and it possessed a subtle saltiness that rippled down my throat. In the sparkling little postcard world I found myself inhabiting that afternoon, the wine blended into the background — and that was its beauty: it was a peerless, understated accompaniment to the seafood, and it bound everything together. It was why I was in Istria in the first place.

Though I'd never been to this 267-mile-long coastal stretch of northern Croatia before, I had been drinking its most famous varietal for years, in the neighboring

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A view from Martin Pescador restaurant in Trget.

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Relaxing by the sea in Rovinj.

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countries of Slovenia and Italy, where malvasia istriana is also grown. (The malvasia wine family is a large and varied one, including red, dessert, Spanish and Brazilian wines that don't look or taste anything like the Istrian version.) Originally it hails from the Greek island of Monemasia, for which the grape is named, and how it got here is a source of vigorous debate. Shakespeare celebrated "malmsey" in Richard III; Venetian merchants dubbed their wine shops malvasie. What's undisputed is that malvasia took hold in Istria like nowhere else: here and here alone, if you ask for a glass of white wine, malvasia is what they'll bring you.

Like the grape, Istria has seen its share of coveters. The small, isosceles-shaped peninsula, 1,200 square miles, named after the Illyrian tribe known as Histrians who first settled there during the early Iron Age, bears the thumbprints of Greek, Roman, Venetian, Austrian and Titoist rulers. The Serbs — who like Croatians had been part of the former Yugoslavia before Croatia declared its independence in early 1991 — bombed Istria later that year. But peace came to Croatia in 1995 and Istria's status as a much-visited destination returned shortly thereafter.

Still, Istria's fame does not approach that of Dubrovnik at the southern endpoint of Croatia or of Trieste to the north. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves — Istria is not St.-Tropez," one of its winemakers told me, with characteristic modesty.

Fair enough: the coin of the realm here isn't decadent seaside resorts or wallet-hemorrhaging restaurants. Much like the grape that dominates its landscape, Istria is content with its own neon-free deliciousness.

From the Trieste airport, where I landed on a Saturday morning, I drove my rental car down smooth and uncluttered tollways, first traversing the rugged karst limestone corridor of northeastern Italy, then through a sliver of Slovenia. A half-hour into my journey, I could see the Adriatic shimmering off to the west and, from the opposite side of the road, valleys lush with well-tended vines. Forty-five minutes after that, I was in Porec and receiving my first glass of malvasia istriana.

Porec is a nearly immaculate town that is best experienced in the morning, before the busloads of visitors blot out the sheen of the stone pedestrian thoroughfares and descend on the 1,500-year old Euphrasian Basilica. From the handsome and acutely positioned Grand Hotel Palazzo, I began each day with a stroll along the harbor. Then I proceeded to the city's sports palace, where the annual three-day Istrian wine festival known as Vinistra was in full swing, serving malvasia by the gallon.

Wriggling through the hundreds of locals, journalists and visiting oenophiles who strolled among the booths of 130 or so producers with glasses outstretched, I marveled at the improbable spectacle of Croatia as a wine lover's destination. As recently as a quarter-century ago, the country was part of the Communist Bloc. Its only winemakers toiled in cooperatives or made jug wine for their family. Back then, the notion of traveling all this way in search of good wine would have struck even the locals as something of a sad joke. Only after Croatia gained its freedom did a viticultural revolution begin.

At Vinistra I met one of the country's winemaking pioneers, Moreno Coronica, who possesses a farmer's thick hands and sun-hardened face but an artist's sensitivity. He grinned appreciatively when I brought up the famed Istrian grape that he exploits to brilliant effect. "To describe malvasia," Mr. Coronica said, "is to describe the ideal wife: mother, cook, supporter. It's a very complete grape."

Though I knew Mr. Coronica meant no slight by his words — either to the grape, or to women who might find his sentiments archaic — they still struck me as faint praise.

Of course, not everyone shares my blind devotion to the malvasia grape. Neither as regal as chardonnay nor as gregarious as sauvignon blanc and pinot grigio, malvasia istriana instead calls to mind the young woman in the corner with her face in a book and her core beauty half-buried beneath sweater-layers of reserve. Its flavor is nonlinear, introverted, savory rather than sweet, and only at the bottom do you at last encounter



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its apricot tones. Without the fruit-bomb flashiness, you might overlook the energetic minerality, the austere elegance.

At least two dozen of the malvasias I tried at Vinistra were exemplary, as were several of the red wines. (The best of the latter is Coronica's famed rendition of the rustic Istrian varietal known as teran, kin to the refosco grape in Italy's Friuli region.) But as I would soon discover, wine is far from Istria's best culinary product. That distinction belongs to the region's olive oil, which is rich and spicy, arguably on par with that of Tuscany, and ubiquitous in the extreme. Nearly every Istrian winemaker I met also produces olive oil for sale. One evening I showed up to a wine bar called Piassa Grande in the coastal hill town of Rovinj, where I overheard the proprietress rhapsodizing about the bora, a fierce wind that periodically blows into Istria from the north. "It's like a pleasant brainwashing," she said as she offered me a seat at the outdoor table she shared with a local graphics specialist and wine label designer named Robert Radesic.

As we worked our way through a succession of Istria's best malvasias — Coronica, Matosevic, Kozlovic, Clai — Mr. Radesic let it slip that he made excellent olive oil, culled from a few olive trees on his property farther south near Pula. "I don't sell it — I just give bottles to my friends," he said. Mr. Radesic happened to have a few samples in his car and offered me a taste. The olive oil was almost searing in its peppery magnificence. After doing all that I could to convince Mr. Radesic that I was his friend, he relinquished a couple of small bottles.

Rovinj lies about 20 miles south of Porec and possesses the casual insouciance of the artist's burg it happens to be. I dined that night at Monte, an airy and theatrically lighted restaurant presided over by a striking platinum-haired Dutch woman dressed all in white. The seven-course meal began with semi-crudi of tuna, scampi and scallop heated with a propane torch and served on a bed of seashells, pebbles and rosemary sprigs. It reached its zenith with a slow-roasted suckling pig accompanied by pork rind and paprika foam. You can bet that great malvasia and olive oil (the latter served in test tubes) was within reach. All in all, Monte delivered an agreeably clever spin on the region's oceanic and inland staples, with flourishes indicative of Istria's portrait-of-the-artist-as-a-young-man status today.

Yet Monte was staid compared with the lunch I had the following day at Pepenero. The sleek restaurant sits on the waterfront of Novigrad, a charming fishing village. Its chef and owner, Marin Rendic, is — and I mean this in the most admiring way — a bit of a madman. He obliged my weakness for cuttlefish with homemade ebony-colored bread infused with its ink, and a crunchy (think popcorn) version made to look like the sponges at the bottom of the Adriatic. Other courses included a tuna carpaccio alongside pear cubes that had been dyed with beet juice so as to make the two main ingredients mutually indistinguishable, and a small pre-dessert mound of 15 different local herbs and wildflowers that was far more flavorful than I might have expected. Grinning devilishly, Mr. Rendic finally presented a coup de grâce: chocolate potato chips served in a tiny wooden coffin bearing the inscription, "The End."

After lingering on the coast for three days, I longed to make my way inland. From Istria's biggest city, the port town of Pula, I drove eastward on well-tended roadways through miles of olive groves until I arrived at the minuscule village of Trget and its inviting riverside restaurant Martin Pescador, which was as pleasingly straightforward as Pepenero had been joyously over the top.

Then I headed north across the plains, and within an hour's time the road was girdled with malvasia vines. The lush spectacle reminded me of how the handful of true malvasia specialists I've encountered in other countries — Dario Raccaro, Sandro Princic and Nicolo Manferrari in the northeastern Italian region of Friuli; Marco Fon, the impassioned craftsman in northern Slovenia's karst region; and America's only malvasia winemaker, the transplanted Friulan Enrico Bertoz of Arbe Garbe Winery — speak of the varietal with a lover's tenderness. They love it for its argent-colored leaves and its lasciviously plump grape clusters. They love malvasia's paradoxical character. On the one hand, its rootstock is notably hard and resistant to plant pathogens like peronospora; its grapes grow like a rash. But beneath its tough and fecund exterior lurks vulnerability: hot and dry summers can sap the grapes of all minerality while spiking their alcohol content, with the result that an inattentive producer can get stuck with an entire vintage of lifeless swill. "Where chardonnay is an easy grape, very direct like a train, with malvasia you don't know where it will go," says Ivica Matosevic, one of Istria's best producers.

In the stone-silent village of Brtonigla — over which looms the comparatively animated medieval hill town of Buje — I checked into San Rocco, Istria's finest boutique hotel,

and boasting one of its most inventive restaurants as well. Spent from the day's itinerary of doing pretty much nothing but eating and ogling scenery, I stretched out by the lovely outdoor pool and made no sudden movements for the entire afternoon. At sundown I composed myself and hit the road again. Just past Buje, signs directed me down an oxcart road, deep through the woods, and at last to what is surely the greatest country restaurant in Istria if not all of Croatia, Stari Podrum.

Housed in a former distillery (with three still-active bird nests tucked into the ceiling) next door to the seminal Koslovic winery, Stari Podrum is a mere five years old yet has the soul and the loyal clientele of a venerated institution. The place is run by a longtime restaurateur named Mira Zrnica along with her two daughters, Marinka and Ingrid, though the family patriarch also forages for the wild mushrooms that frequent the menu. I sat outside, within earshot of a churning stream, and happily buried myself in Istria's other culinary treasure: truffles. This being late springtime, the white version was not yet available, but pungent black truffles adorned both the pasta and the steak I ordered. Bracketing the flawless dinner was a wild asparagus soup and a quince-flavored tiramisù.

Stari Podrum would have been the highlight of an already momentous trip, except that I had one more destination in mind: the winery of Giorgio Clai. "I respect nature 100 percent, without compromise — and if you respect them, the vines will respect you," said Mr. Clai, Istria's malvasia maestro as he walked me through the 90-year-old mountaintop vines he tends with unyielding adherence to organic orthodoxy. Mr. Clai explained Istria's privileged climate with a parable: "When there wasn't any land left to give out, God said to the Istrians, 'Because you're so hard-working and humble, I'll give you the one piece of land I was saving for myself.' Thus we have our little paradise. A special terroir you cannot find anywhere else, lots of sunlight, closeness to the sea..." He gestured to each — and then, without apparent irony, to a nearby villa owned by the actor Anthony Hopkins.

At an outdoor table adjacent to his winery, with a soaring vista of vines and groves eventually tumbling into the Adriatic, the burly and voluble Mr. Clai brought out some of his famed malvasia wine accompanied by a neighbor's homemade cheese and — I should have known — a bottle of Mr. Clai's personal olive oil. He ferments his grapes with the skins on, a process known as maceration, for 70 days, imbuing the wine with a startling robustness, a malvasia on steroids that has caught worldwide attention and ensured Giorgio Clai cult status.

But, Mr. Clai insisted, the wine remained authentically malvasia. "Austere and aromatic at the same time," he said as he poured. "Un vino del mare." And there indeed, from the moment it hit my tongue, was the characteristic briny minerality imparted by the not-so-distant sea, just as the swirl of acacia and rosemary conjured up the shaggy organic garden that described his vineyards.

The two of us sat there for quite a while, reveling in the modest object of our affection. Then I bought wines and olive oils for the road. Fitting them all in my suitcase was tomorrow's problem. Today's problem was that I had less than a day left in Istria.

IF YOU GO

WHERE TO STAY

Grand Hotel Palazzo (Obala Marsala Tita 24, Porec; 385-52-858-800; hotel-palazzo.hr): a handsomely renovated century-old hotel with many rooms overlooking the city's port; doubles from 1,130 kuna, about \$205 at 5.5 kuna to the dollar.

Hotel San Rocco (Srednja ulica 2, Brtonigla; 385-52-725-000; san-rocco.hr): a quiet and sumptuous boutique hotel, with one of Istria's finest upscale restaurants; doubles from 1,120 kuna.

WHERE TO EAT

Monte (Montalbano 75, Rovinj; 385-52-830-203; monte.hr): theatrical and adventurous, with an outstanding Istrian wine list, atop Istria's most artsy town; 520 kuna per person excluding wine.

Pepenero (Porporela, Novigrad; 385-52757-706): wonderful Adriatic fare in Marin Rendic's seaside culinary playpen; 450 kuna per person excluding wine.

Martin Pescador (Trget; 385-52-544-976): a pleasingly obscure, rustic restaurant whose menu comes largely from the adjacent river; 225 kuna per person excluding wine.

Stari Podrum (Most 52, Momjan; 385-52-779-152): Istria's best representation of its inland treasures, including white and black truffles and excellent steaks; 373 kuna per person excluding wine.

WHERE TO SIP

Coronica (Koreniki 86, Umag; 385-52-730-196): maker of both Istria's best classic malvasia and its best reds.

Clai (Brajki 104, Krasica; 385-52-776-175): daring, powerful malvasias.

Piquentum (Cesta Sveti Ivan, Buzet; 385-91-527-5976): the half-French winemaker Dimitri Brecevic is one of Istria's emerging young talents, particularly evident in his silky malvasia.

Robert Draper is a contributing writer for The New York Times Magazine and National Geographic and a correspondent for GQ.

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