

Worldly Delights: Wines of Croatia

Alison Kent opens the cellar door to this vibrant viticultural region



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Croatia has all the ingredients to be the ultimate wine and food lover's paradise. Take a climate comparable to that of Italy and southern France, combine with a countless array of high-calibre wineries, restaurants and hotels, add 2,000 years of winemaking tradition maintained through the perseverance of savvy, passionate winemakers, toss in a complex and uniquely Croatian terroir for good measure, and you've got a winning recipe for a country that's steadily gaining international recognition. Among the wine cognoscenti of New York and beyond, word about Croatian wines is spreading like hot cakes, or *palacinke*.

Located in central Europe, Croatia borders the **Adriatic Sea** to the west, **Slovenia** to the north, **Hungary** to the northeast, **Serbia** to the east, and **Bosnia and Herzegovina** to the southeast. With a population of approximately 4½ million and with a relatively small geographical area of just shy of 57,000 square kilometres, Croatia produces an impressive 50 million bottles of wine each year. Since the Homeland War ended in 1995 and with

those tumultuous times behind it, Croatia now welcomes legions of tourists, and winemakers have been able to return to a focus on quality over quantity. And oh, what quality wines they are!

Croatian wines have been generating much excitement, thanks in part to having won a momentous eight gold medals at the influential **Decanter World Wine Awards** in 2009. Following that with 53 wins at the Decanter Awards in 2010 and a whopping 65 wins in 2011 is no small achievement. Croatian-crafted wines have scooped up many more awards along the way, and have garnered much attention from such prestigious publications as *La Revue du vin de France* and U.S.-based *Wine Enthusiast*. Much of the fanfare may be credited in part to Croatia's most famous winemaker, **Miljenko (Mike) Grgich**. Grgich and his team did much to build interest in the native Croatian red wine variety, **Plavac Mali**, through proving its DNA-tested connection to the Zinfandel grape – previously thought to have originated in Italy.

Elegant and full-bodied with flavours of ripe figs, black cherries, herbs and chocolate, Plavac Mali has been called 'the ambassador of Croatian wines' and is perhaps the candidate best suited to rival other well-known red varieties in the world. But Croatia is home to more than just this one stellar wine. While 32 percent of the wine produced in Croatia is red, a full 67 percent of production is dedicated to white wine, with the remaining 1 percent to rosé. There are two main wine-growing regions: **Continental Croatia** and **Coastal Croatia**, divided into 12 sub-regions and further splintered into *vinogorje* or wine-growing hills.

Continental Croatia is located in the northeastern interior of the country and is home to the capital city of **Zagreb**. Here, Austro-Hungarian and Slovenian wine influences are evident with mainly white varietals being produced, including Gewürztraminer, Pinot Gris and Riesling, while Grasevina, the most widely planted grape in the region, yields crisp, light and refreshing wines.

Stretching along the Adriatic coast from **Istria** in the north to **Dalmatia** in the south, the true winemaking excitement lies in Coastal Croatia. More than 1,100 islands dot the azure waters of the Adriatic Sea, while a diverse range of territory and a myriad of microclimates help showcase the unique styles of the region.

The Istrian peninsula boasts the ideal terroir for Istrian Malvasia or *Malvazija*. Crisp, dry and aromatic, this white wine pairs beautifully with locally caught fish and seafood, while red, full-bodied Teran, grown in Istrian *terra rossa*, or red earth, is high in lactic acid and rich in iron.

Travel south along the **Dalmatian Coast**, where the islands enjoy hot, sunny summers, little rainfall and steep, rocky slopes – ideal conditions for the styles of wine produced here, including the celebrated Plavac Mali. Here, the Mediterranean climate speaks volumes about the vast array of outstanding culinary options available, with seafood, lavender and wild herbs, olives, artisan cheeses and cured meats featuring prominently.

If you're fortunate enough to be travelling in Croatia, most wineries offer tours, but many are by appointment only so be sure to call ahead to make arrangements. In Istria, visit **Kozlović Winery** (kozlovic.hr). In **Orebić** on the **Pelješac** peninsula, Cliff Rames of winesofcroatia.com recommends **Korta Katarina Winery** (kortakatarinawinery.com). On the incomparably beautiful island of **Hvar**, where steep slopes carpeted in grape vines overlook stunningly crystal blue waters, **Zlatan Otok Winery** (zlatanotok.hr) has a restaurant, hotel and marina – not to mention an undersea wine cellar!

If wines are an expression of the land, culture, history and people who make them, Croatian wines embody this sentiment with heartfelt conviction. They're on the scene, and as excitement continues to build it's only a matter of time before outstanding Croatian wines become more widely available in Canada – a prediction that can't happen soon enough for this enthusiast. ▣

BUYING GUIDE

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(available by private order or consignment) miruswines.com

Miloš - Stagnum: This blockbuster of a wine has tremendous aging potential, with rich and complex dark fruit flavours along with notes of Mediterranean herbs.

Kozlović - Malvazija: With aromas of wildflowers and flavours of citrus and almond combined with a tangy minerality, this dry white wine is produced from grapes grown near the Adriatic coastline in Istria.

Kozlović - Momjan Muscat: From the Istrian region, this winner in the semi-sweet Muscat category at the 2010 Zurich Wine Expo has aromas of elderberry, with fresh acidity balancing floral, honey flavours.

Tomić - Plavac: A full-bodied barrel-aged dark ruby-coloured red wine that's well balanced with ripe, spicy fruit, toast, soft spice flavours with assertive tannins.

Zlatan Otok - Pošip: With aromas of apricot, fig and tropical fruits on the palate, this extremely likeable golden-hued white wine has good acidity and a lengthy finish.



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inglewoodwine.com

Bogdanuša - Vinogorje Hvar: An ancient white variety indigenous to Hvar, this wine has tropical notes with deep lemon aromas and colours.



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Kastelet - Dalmacijavino: This dry-yet-fruity red table wine has good depth, balanced acidity and tastes of bright cherry compote and cocoa-dusted raspberries.

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