Looking East

Croatia, Slovenia and Turkey are increasingly recognised as fertile territory for wines offering real points of difference, as Justin Keay reports.

One of the unexpected bonanzas of the break-up of former Yugoslavia is the vast and still ongoing improvement in the wines produced in its successor republics. Generally, small or medium-sized – hence the complex land restitution process and relatively high land prices – family and boutique producers dominate. Many are focusing on local grape varieties, of which there are many, with single varietal wines dominating both white and red production. With UK consumers increasingly wanting wines beyond the mainstream, both on and off-trade buyers are taking notice.

To the south, Montenegro and Macedonia continue to focus on the tannic, polyphenol-packed Vranac grape, with the former’s biggest producer Plantaže stressing its heart healthy properties with a hearty full-bodied wine called Pro Corde.

Macedonia has made more inroads into the UK market: its wineries sell into M&S and other supermarkets while a range of whites, roós and reds, including two Vranac from producer Stobi’s (based in the Tikveš region) are available through the on-trade and independents.

Unsurprisingly however, most interest has been focused on Slovenia and Croatia. As one might expect from a region that was unified for centuries (before 1918 and Yugoslavia, this whole area, like Trieste and north east Italy, was part of the Habsburg Empire), there are a lot of commonalities, and not just in grape varieties.

In both countries white wines dominate at around 70% of the total production, although pink, sparkling and sweet wines are becoming more common as producers attune to the international marketplace.

Wines are quite expensive, reflecting high local demand, high prices and generally small production – however as producers wake up to their export potential, less expensive wines are coming through, with the Wine Society now selling a Slovenian and a Croatian white for less than £10 each (respectively, Benedict White 2005, a delicious four-grape blend made by Benedictine monks and Vina Lagurna, a crisp, modern Mabula izmeria). And more wines are becoming available to the on and off-trade, with Bancroft Wines and Liberty Wines among those listing wines from Slovenia and Croatia.

Both countries lay claim to Istria on their wine labels, which is geographically indistinguishable. However, there is bitter contention over Veron, the dark tannic grape used on both sides of the border (and in Italy) for which Slovenia won PDO status from the EU, having lodged its claim before Croatia became a member. As a result, Croatian producers should describe their wines as Rofalk (Refosko) a genetically similar but perhaps not quite identical grape. The dispute grumbles on. This is the Balkans after all.
Slovenia
In tiny Slovenia, smaller producers rule in all three wine regions: Primorska to the west includes the Istrian coast, which produces the most trendy wines, but also Goriska Brda, which makes some great white Ribolla (Ribolla) Pinot Grigio and Pinot Noir; Podravje is home to the once ubiquitous Ladi or Weisweinprodukt but also Traminac, a dry version of Gewürztraminer and some other international varieties; and Posavje, the smallest region.

Unsurprisingly, given the geography, many of Slovenia's wines share characteristics with those made just over the Italian border in Friuli-Venecia. Varieties include Pinot Grigio and Ribolla Gialla, and red Teran (Turan).

A prime example of the accessible, premium-style wines come from Marjan Simčič, based in Istria. His Pinot Grigio 2015 is crowd-pleasing but with a great deal more depth and character than most of the Pinot Grigio made just over the border in Italy. His Ribolla 2014 is understated but with a strong sense of place, while his Pinot Noir 2013 is surprisingly showsy, full of dark berry fruit. All are very well made.

"The winemaking skills are self-evident yet in small producing nations like this, the risk is of falling off the international radar. Our on-trade customers in particular love these wines, because of the heritage but also the great quality," says James Walmont, marketing coordinator at Bancroft Wines.

"Flying winemakers are adding Croatia to their itineraries"

Craig Duggan

Croatia
Croatia is also having its moment in the sun. According to Craig Duggan of Croatian Fine Wines, UK demand was fuelled at first by Brits returning from Split or Dubrovnik or Istria, wanting the wines they enjoyed while on holiday. But now British importers and distributors are selling Croatian wine encouraged by the increase in quality, its greater variety of style, interesting and tasty indigenous varieties and better winemaking techniques.

"Last month I attended a wine fair in Istria and was struck by the huge advances. Producers are learning from what they've seen abroad and in some cases their children are coming, armed with new ideas and techniques, to apply to the business. Meanwhile flying winemakers are adding Croatia to their itineraries," he says.

As in Slovenia, it is the native varieties that are most interesting, with white Malvazija Istreka and red Rebula dominant in the north (Istria), white Graševina (Welschriesling) and Vranac in Slovenia, to the east, and white Polk and red Plavac Mali to the south, in Dalmatia, where the famous Dingač and Postup wines are produced.

Verdalja Winery is a good example of the new wave of wine, its red - made from local variety Rebolk - is like summer in a glass, off-dry but full of bright red fruit, with plenty of structure and wonderful balance ($12, Croatian Fine Wines), while the red Rebolk (C59) is a sophisticated and multi-layered wine that has won many international awards. Istria-based Damjanović, from near Poreč, is another good modern-style producer, while Marusko is more traditional, specialising in well-made food-friendly heavy reds.

Although single varietals dominate, blends are making headway into the UK market. Respected Istrian producer Ivica Marušić produces Grizalka white and red from his low-yielding Ribelo vineyard in central Istria, the former a 13 month aged blend of 50% Chardonnay, and 25% each Višnja and Malvazija Istreka, the latter a 15 month aged 55%/35% blend of Merlot and Teran (white £5.95, red £6.95, Bancroft Wines).

Chris Wilson of Hallgarten Drati & Novum Wines, which stocks a range of Vina Konavi wines including several Malvazija Istreka, says they do well in the on-trade, particularly among high-end restaurants, and are very popular with sommeliers.

"These are very well made, clean and modern wines by a small producer. They have become an integral and valued part of our portfolio - which given the quality, is unsurprising," he says.