Istra's flagship red is Teran, known as Refosco Pedicolo Rosso in Italy, a highly tannic and acidic grape requiring extended aging for maximum enjoyment. Its massive level of polyphenols helps the heart with the more negative effects of red meats, with which it pairs so well. "Teran's good with steaks and stews with gnocchi; it should usually be decanted and served in larger glasses," says Sommelier Mladen Smolica of local restaurant Dvi Murve.

Istra is also home to some of the world's finest Malvasia; its Istarska clone is naturally oxidative, so most winemakers take great pains to retain its fine fruit flavors allowing it to age gracefully in both barrel and bottle. Whether for reds or whites, until the late 1990s barrels were once fashioned solely from native acacia and chestnut trees, although use of these continues today despite oak's current dominance.

Fourth-generation grower Franco Kozlović told me his great-grandfather was spurred to apply new technologies learned from visits to colleagues in Slovenia and Italy, winning a national award for best white wine with his first Malvasia from 1997, a variety until then widely disparaged. Half of his 55 acres are 50+ years old including the single-vineyard bottling Santa Lucia, complex with brisk acidity carrying the 15% load well. "We'd like to be closer to the sommeliers to explain what we're doing," said Kozlović's wife, Antonella, who proudly told me of their new vertically-integrated winery. (Imported by Vinum USA in NJ.)

Moreno Coronica's vines and winery are located a mere 1.5 miles from the sea. Coronica began making wine in 1992, previously working as an auto mechanic and a diver. "We must drink wines, not only put them on the table to talk about them. Wine is for enjoyment." Like many growers in Istra, save for non-systemic fungicides he adds no chemicals to the vineyards. His Gran Malvasia has aromas of light vanilla, sweet almond belying its year spent in oak, flavors of red apple and nectarine, grippy and a bit warm on the succulent finish. (Imported by Blue Danube in CA.)

Moreno Degrassi's fancied as the region's most precise user of oak barrels, preferring to use those made in Italy over those from Slavonia. A thoughtful guy who clearly works hard, Degrassi's house style is elegant, requiring time to come around. We enjoyed a three-course lunch he made of lightly breaded and fried local large scallops and calamari paired with his Terre Bianche Cuvee Blanc, risotto with baby scallops with his Terre Rosse Refosco. I teased his wife Alison by saying, "He kills the food then cooks it, grows and makes the wine, receives the guests—what's left for you?" (Imported by AP Imports in NY.)

After acquiring his viticulture doctorate in 1996 Ivica Matošević set about developing a winery in southerly Krunšići, though his vineyards are further north in the Buje and the newly planted Grimalda districts. With no family backdrop in wine to influence him, he also hadn't vineyards to inherit, and so his three contracted growers produce exclusively for him. "I've managed to control all the growing with steeply-terraced, dense plantings at a relatively high 1000-foot altitude." His Alba Malvasias, whether aged in wood or not, all age beautifully, with my favorite being his 1999 from barrique. I enjoyed his 2008 Grimalda red both in 2011 and 2014: a blend of 65% Merlot and 15% Teran, it sports a wide range of aromas and flavors all poised on an elegant, fresh palate. That's Ivica to my right in the photo. (Imported by Dalmata in IL and CroMade in CA.)

In 2009 New York restaurateur Joe Bastianich visited Istra's Degrassi, Kozlović and Matošević, determining he'd like each of them to contribute portions of Malvasia to represent Istra in his Bastianich Adriatica line. The first vintage of this ensemble wine, a 2009, won first prize at the 2010 Vinistra International Malvasia Competition. (Imported by Dark Star Imports in NV)

Other great Istrian wineries include Franc Arman, Marijan Arman, Kabola, Prelac, and top sparkling wine producer Peršurić, although they're not (yet) imported into the U.S. Cheers! David Furer

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