

THE SOMMELIER DIARIES
Words Quentin Sadler

SLOVENIA

A BIG LITTLE PLACE WITH LOTS
OF STYLE & GREAT WINES

I LIKE SLOVENIA, IT'S A BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY WITH
LOTS OF DIFFERENT LANDSCAPES AND INFLUENCES.
THE PEOPLE ARE CHARMING AND THE FOOD AND WINE
ARE VERY HIGH QUALITY AND INCREDIBLY VARIED.

CHEF
A Restaurant

Photo by Henry Kormarik on Unsplash

Lake Bled



Piran



The Ljubljanica River flows through central Ljubljana.



Predjama Castle near the Postojna Caves.



Piran Cafe society

Slovenia is a tiny country. At 8,000 square miles it is slightly smaller than Wales and New Jersey, but with only just over 2 million inhabitants it is less populous than either of those. Indeed as the capital city, Ljubljana, only has around 280,000 inhabitants, it cannot even claim to be the largest Slovenian city in the world – strangely it seems that honour is held by Cleveland, Ohio – depending on your definition of a Slovenian of course.

Slovenia enjoys a broadly continental climate, but as you might imagine, Slovenia's tiny coastal zone brings a distinctly Mediterranean influence.

Historically, Slovenia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire up to 1918 and a republic of Yugoslavia after World War Two before becoming an independent state in 1991. Between the two wars the coastal strip of modern Slovenia was actually annexed by Italy as the region traditionally had a large population of ethnic Italians and enjoyed an Italian culture.

All of which helps to explain the wonderful variety you find. Germanic, Hungarian, Italian and Slavic influences can be found in different parts of the country, making touring it an exciting experience – it often feels like travelling around Europe in miniature.

A visit to this beautiful country is always a delight. It might be small but there is a great deal to entertain the traveller. The Julian Alps and Kamnik-Savinja Alps provide stunning scenery, idyllic lakes, fast running trout streams and excellent skiing. The country is dotted with attractive towns where the weary traveller will find a welcoming inn where they can try some of the local cuisine and wine.

A really fascinating insight into cultural and climatic differences is that in the cool, wet north east of the country the tradition is to smoke meat and sausages in order to preserve them. The coastal area has a dry Mediterranean climate and there they dry their hams to make Pršut, the Slovenian word for prosciutto.



Slovenia wine map

Ljubljana, the delightful capital city was largely destroyed by an earthquake in 1895 and was rebuilt in the Austrian Secessionist style, so resembles parts of Vienna and Prague. Although traditional Slav and Germanic dishes are widely available, Ljubljana has become a real melting pot over the last 20-odd years with a huge variety of culinary styles being widely available.

After Ljubljana, perhaps my favourite places to visit in Slovenia are Bled, Piran and Ptuj.

Lake Bled is beautiful, complete with an island and a castle on a cliff high above the lake and the town. The surrounding area is very Slav with traditional cake shops and timber framed inns where schnitzels, dumplings and cream cakes are on all the menus.

Piran is very different. Once an outpost of the Venetian Republic it covers a tiny peninsula and is a vibrant sea-side town that retains a very Italian feel. It is full of lively squares, superb seafood restaurants and beautiful beaches.

Not too far away from Piran you will find the Lipica Stud Farm where the iconic Lipizzaner Horse – of Vienna's Spanish Riding School fame – has been bred for over 400 years. Also nearby is the extraordinary Postojna Cave system which is one of the top tourist attractions in the country.

Just as exciting is the delightful little cobbled city of Ptuj – pronounced P-two-ee. It is the oldest town in the country and has Roman ruins in the main street, while an imposing Hapsburg Castle sits on the hill above the town. This part of Slovenia was mainly ethnically German before 1918 and was actually part of Austria itself.

All this variety affects the wines too, as you might expect. Those from Istria, on the coast, often have an Italian and Mediterranean feel to them, while the wines of North Eastern Slovenia generally share that sense of purity that defines the wines of their Austrian neighbours.



Vineyards in Brda

photo courtesy of Marjan Smitčič

Slovenia has three main wine regions, Primorska, Posavje, and Podravje, which are then further divided into districts.

Podravje is in the north east of the country, it borders Austria and Hungary and includes the important wine districts of Jeruzalem-Ormož and Ptuj.

Primorje means coastal and incorporates all the districts near the sea and the Italian border in the west of Slovenia, including the districts of Goriška Brda, Vipavska Dolina (Vipava Valley), Kras and Istria.

Under the Socialist system of the Yugoslav times, there were no, or at any rate very few, private wine producers as everything was supposed to be sold through the cooperatives. That has completely reversed now with the co-ops in retreat and private estates dominating production.

Primorje Region Wines – Goriška Brda

Goriška Brda was named after the local capital of Gorizia. This city, however, was awarded to Italy in 1947, so Tito's regime built the

replacement Nova Gorica right on the border. Brda is a sub-region, or district, of the Primorje wine region which enjoys a broadly Mediterranean climate, although there is Alpine influence in Brda too from the Julian Alps. The sheer range of wines produced in Brda is quite bewildering, especially when you realise that the estates are all pretty small, normally between 4 and 20 hectares. The area consists of gentle hills that have terraced vineyards in order to combat soil erosion.

Brda has a long tradition of fine winemaking and is the most famous wine district in the country. The style here is often to make very complex and rich wines with long maturation in oak. In recent years spontaneous fermentations and extended ageing on the skins has also become important, so a lot of producers make Orange wines.

Brda means hills in Slovenian and is simply a part of Italy's Collio region that was detached when the border was fixed in 1947 – Collio means hills in Italian.

As a consequence of that history, many estates have vineyards on both sides of the modern border – which made life very difficult during Communist times and right up until Slovenia joined the EU.



Vineyards in Medana, very near the border in Brda

photo by Quentin Sadler



Aleš Kristančič in the barrel cellar at Movia

Recommended wineries:

MOVIA

One of the most famous estates in Slovenia, Movia has belonged to the same family since 1820, eight generations of winemakers so far. Since the force of nature that is Aleš Kristančič took over from his father – also Aleš – a few years ago he has taken Movia in a new direction, towards natural wines. It isn't a big estate, just 15 hectares – 7 of which are actually over the border in Italy – but it is now farmed organically and bio-dynamically. The passion, some might say manic exuberance with which Aleš assaults everything, really shines through in his wines. Like him they have something to say and have a vital energy about them. He is a dedicated winemaker with great attention to detail and all his wines are good, many are astonishing.



Aleš Kristančič have just disgorged some Pure Rosé on the terrace at Movia

Try: Their magnificent Puro sparkling wines. The white is a blend of Chardonnay and Rebula, while the rosé is pure Pinot Noir. For both there is a long spontaneous fermentation followed by four years on lees in oak barrels. Once bottled it undergoes a second fermentation, but is not disgorged. Instead the consumer disgorges it themselves using a tub of water. It's quite alarming the first time you do it but the complexity of the wine makes it a knack well-worth acquiring. Just imagine how theatrical the dining experience would be to have a magnum of this disgorged in front of you at the restaurant table!

Also try: Movia Sivi Pinot Ambra – an orange wine fermented in barrels on the skins, with no added sulphur or yeast and then aged for 18 months in oak. This is a great wine and shows just what complexity can be achieved with Pinot Grigio.

Movia's wines are distributed in the UK by Meadowdale Wines.

photo by Quentin Sadler



The cellars at Marjan Simčič, complete with wooden eggs

photo courtesy of Marjan Simčič



Simčič Vineyards

photo courtesy of Marjan Simčič



Marjan Simčič

photo courtesy of Marjan Simčič

MARJAN SIMČIČ

Just a stroll away from Movia, you come to Marjan Simčič's winery and Marjan could not be more different from his neighbour. Where Aleš Kristančič is loud and gregarious and turns every tasting into a karaoke party, Marjan is quiet and unassuming. And yet he is equally passionate about his wines and it shows too. Again this is not a big estate, just 18 hectares that the family have tended since around 1860 and again half of them are in Italy. Marjan farms organically and bio-dynamically and does not fine or filter his wines and only uses the natural yeasts.

Marjan's reserve bottling are called Selekcija, while his top tier wines are labelled Opoka after the local marl soils.

Try: Simčič Sauvignon Blanc Selekcija, Barrel fermented Sauvignon is not to everyone's taste, but this is a great wine. The oak and the lees ageing and the spontaneous fermentation have all worked together to make this a richly textured wine. There is fresh acidity here too and a powerful varietal character with a rich blackcurrant leaf note.

Also try: Simčič Pinot Noir Selekcija, this Pinot was fermented in stainless steel tanks with a long skin maceration and then aged for 28 months in French oak. It is wonderfully concentrated, wild and intoxicating with rich, ripe cherry fruit, smooth, velvety tannins and a plump, sumptuous feel to the palate. Nothing like a Burgundy, but a magnificent wine.

Marjan Simčič's wines are distributed in the UK by Orbit Wines.



Vineyards in Brda

photo by Quentin Sadler

Primorje Region Wines – Vipava Valley

The Vipava Valley is a beautiful place just south and east of Brda. Strong winds rip through here, tempering the conditions and making a sub-Mediterranean climate and allowing them to make some stunning light and fresh white wines as well as some very elegant reds. Excitingly there are two indigenous white grapes here, Zelen and Pinela, which grow nowhere else and there is an increasing amount of world class Pinot Noir produced too.

BURJA ESTATE

Primož Lavrenčič comes from a long established wine family, but in 2009 he set out on his own. Now he organically and bio-dynamically farms 6 hectares of vineyards in an estate named for the Bora wind that roars down the valley tempering the summer heat. Primož is a precise winemaker who has a deep attachment to his land, with even the name making a statement about the place. Primož sticks just to the indigenous local grape varieties and his wines genuinely seem to speak of the land in which they grow.

Try: Burja Bella, the main white wine of the estate is a blend of Laski Rizling/Welschriesling, Rebula and 'other varieties', I assume some Malvasia, Pinela and Zelen. Fermented in upright wooden casks with 8 days maceration on the skin. Spontaneous fermentation with the wild yeast, 18 months ageing in oak barrels and no filtration. The nose is attractively waxy and smoky with some sweet spices and nuts. The palate is smooth and soft, but mouth filling, with cream and



Primož Lavrenčič of the Burja Estate talking about his wines

photo by Quentin Sadler

rich peach together with a seam of fresh grapefruit acidity keeping it all balanced and thrilling. This is very fine, with a long satisfying finish.

Also try: Petite Burja Zelen, which is aromatic and fresh with some light creamy notes. On the whole this is a zesty wine – Zelen means green after all – and has citrus flavours, green apple and something saline and mineral about it. A perfect aperitif or great served with shellfish.

Burja Estate wines are distributed in the UK by Les Caves De Pyrene.



photo by Quentin Sadler

Vineyards in the beautiful Vipava Valley

TILIA ESTATE

My friend Matjaž Lemut learned his wine making in Switzerland before returning home to his beloved Vipava Valley in 1996. Today he farms 10 hectares on his Tilia Estate. Tilia means Linden or Lime trees, which surround the house and winery.

It was in Switzerland too, that Matjaž fell madly in love with Pinot Noir. He does grow other grapes and make other wines, but Pinot Noir remains his focus and his passion, so much so that he calls his estate the House of Pinots.

Matjaž is a great winemaker, a great character and a real force of nature. That energy and passion seems to flow into his wines making them feel vibrant and vital.

Try: Tilia Estate Pinot Noir is a generous wine, made from very ripe grapes which are then further enriched by having 20% of the juice bled off. It's fermented in stainless steel before being aged on the lees in Slavonian and French oak. It is a fruit forward style, with even a glimpse of black cherry richness, a creamy ripe palate and sweet tannins.

Also try: Tilia Estate Pinot Gris, lees ageing and stirring for four months gives the wine a creamy richness and complexity that can be surprising. The wine has lovely brightness and freshness too and so the overall effect is to be really well balanced and very, very drinkable.

Tilia Estate wines are distributed in the UK by Solaris Wines.



photo by Quentin Sadler

Matjaž Lemut in his vineyards in the Vipava Valley



photo by Antoine de Marion Blanche

Bojan Kopal's Sauvignon Blanc vines

Podravje Region Wines

Slovenia's largest wine region, Podravje enjoys a continental climate and has much in common with neighbouring Austria. Indeed the main sub-region is Štajerska Slovenija, which means Slovene or Lower Styria. It is simply a continuation of the Austrian region of Styria and until 1918 they were the same place. As a consequence there is an Austrian feel to much of the architecture, the culture and the wines - indeed some Austrian producers have vineyards on both sides of the border today, most notably Weingut Gross.

A group of medieval Crusaders arrived in a beautiful village near Ljutomer and were so taken by the area, its people and wines, that they

decreed that they must have arrived at Jerusalem, the Crusade's goal, so changed the name of the village and stayed put! To this day Jeruzalem is an important wine village and produces some great white wines and dessert wines, including botrytised wines and ice-wines.

The conditions here are very like neighbouring Austria and so the emphasis is overwhelmingly on white wines, although good examples of Pinot Noir are produced.

The most important white grape is Furmint as it has been grown here since Roman times. Locally it is traditionally called Šipon and legend has it that a French officer during the Napoleonic Wars was heard to comment enthusiastically about a wine '(C'est), ci bon!'



photo by Quentin Sadler

The old Sauvignon Blanc vines on this slope make one of Bojan's single vineyard wines

KOBAL WINES

Bojan Kobal is another good friend of mine who is a very talented winemaker. Bojan grew up surrounded by vineyards and wine and went on to study oenology, which led on to a series of senior winemaking

jobs to hone his craft before he returned to run the family vineyards and to create a new estate of his own too. His vineyards are in the beautiful Haloze district of Štajerska, which is a stretch of hills along the banks of the Drava River near the charming city of Ptuj.

Bojan is a very precise and scientific winemaker and that is how his wines feel, tight, precise and pure - a style that I love.

For some reason Bojan's wines are not yet available in the UK, which is strange, because they are really very, very good. If any importers are reading this, do yourselves a favour and bring in his wines. Lately he has branched out into natural wines including a pair of very tasty Pet-Nat sparkling wines called Bajta.

Try: Kobal Sauvignon Blanc, this is amazingly fresh, bright and zingy, but also has real depth, concentration and richness as well as that lovely refreshing cut of acidity that Sauvignon does so well. There is grapefruit, mandarin, passionfruit and lime on the nose and palate, while there is also a lovely creamy texture from ageing on the lees.

Also try: Kobal Family Estates Blaufränkisch. Blaufränkisch is known as Lemberger in Germany, Kékfrankos in Hungary and in Slovenia it is more properly called Modra Frankinja, while Bojan uses its Austrian name. Blaufränkisch is also known as the Pinot Noir of the East, because it produces wines with similar weight to Pinot, this is a rich and spicy take on the grape.



Bojan Kobal at the door of a 16th century house on his estate

photo by Quentin Sadler



photo courtesy of Verus

Beautiful Vineyards at Jeruzalem Ormož

VERUS

Meaning truth in Latin, Verus is a joint venture that combines the vineyards owned by three families. It was created in 2007 by Rajko Žličar, Danilo Šnajder and Božidar Grabovac who met and became friends while holding senior positions in the influential Jeruzalem Ormož cooperative winery. In these parts it is completely normal for families to own some vineyards, so pooling their precious resources into a commercial quantity was a very sound idea.

Today the company farms twenty-five hectares of steep vines between Ormož and Ljutomer. The friends aim to produce wines of purity and precision, very much in the Austrian tradition, and they succeed admirably with a range that includes Furmint, Sauvignon, Riesling, Pinot Gris, Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

Try: Verus Furmint, a dry style of the grape that is much more famously grown in Hungary's Tokaji region.

10% barrel fermenting and lees ageing adds a gentle texture, but overwhelmingly it's a bright and vibrant style with plenty of white peach, melon, honey and crisp, lively lemon and green apple.

Also try: Verus Riesling, a fresh, floral and incredibly refreshing take on this exciting grape. It is dry and zingy with lime, basil, pear and green apple.

Verus wines are distributed in the UK by Astrum Wines.



Božidar Grabovac, Danilo Šnajder and Rajko Žličar at Verus

photo courtesy of Verus and Vinus

As ever, my selection barely scratches the surface of what Slovenia has to offer, or indeed what my selected producers have to offer. Slovenia is a country that produces excitingly different wines in a wide array of styles from a huge range of grape varieties and is not afraid to blend.

Slovenia offers so many high quality and enjoyable wines that they deserve to be more widely available on restaurant wine lists.

Quentin Sadler is a wine writer, wine educator and mapmaker.