

FOUR DAYS OF FIRSTS



Brda vineyards



CAROL BROWN

With snow-capped Alps as the backdrop, we cross the border of Friuli in the north-east corner of Italy and I'm in Slovenia for the first time. It's a border that I'll cross a few times over the next four days.

Moments into Slovenia, the charming Belica Hotel (www.belica.si) in the village of Medana has evolved over the last few years and a tour of the property takes us past the rooms where they cure their own delicious salami and prosciutto, as well as the wine cellar (their own wines and grappa).

I realise that it's hours since I've eaten, so enjoy a selection of local dishes in the restaurant, the influences in cuisine nod to both Italy and Austria. I'm glad it's my base for three nights and at breakfast I conduct a very unscientific tasting of their own range of jams.

Brda is part of the larger Primorska wine-growing region in Slovenia and borders the better known Italian region of Collio.

It's a region of rolling hills and forest protected terraced vineyards where both cooler Alpine and milder Mediterranean climates collide.

As well as the international Chardonnay, Pinot Gris and Merlot, there are less well-known grapes too - Rebula (aka Ribolla Gialla in Italy) and Sauvignonasse, which used to go by the name of Tokaj or Tokaj Friulano.

"Tokaj" was dropped as Hungarian

and some producers are now using the mirror-image name "Jakot" while others opt for Friulano.

After this trip, I have decided that it is one of my new favourite white grapes and one to look out for if you like crisp, fresh, apple, pear, almond and peach flavours and good body and texture in your wine.

We meet a number of producers and taste a wide range of wines in the tasting room at the historic Dobrovo castle. Producers to look out for include Simcic for their Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Noir and Merlot (Bancroft Wines, virginwines.co.uk) Scurek for their Rebula and their "Stara Brajda" an old vine blend of six different grapes.

Carga 1797 showed a good Rebula, a Jakot and a Cabernet Franc. Other producers with good ranges include Jaquin and Mavric.

Production generally across Slovenia is small scale so not all producers export to the UK, but I will mention them anyway just in case.

After a brief stop in Nova Gorica, we head towards the Vipava Valley (Vipavska Dolina). It's distinctive - a wide, flat valley floor with the Karst (or Kras) mountain range to the west and the higher Nanos mountains to the east.

Winds coming across from eastern Europe pick up speed coming over the mountains and form the forceful Bora wind which is strong enough to tip trucks over on the motorway.

It's a pretty area, think small hillside villages with a church at the heart.

We meet with a number of producers from the eastern part of the valley and taste at Faladur, a bright and airy tast-



At the border

ing room, and shop for wines of the region in the small town of Ajdovscina.

It's an excellent tasting and I find some new grape friends in the form of the local white grape Zelen which translates as green.

It nearly died out in the region and back in the 1980s there was only a hectare left. It's a small yielding variety and can be difficult to grow.

An example from the biodynamic producer Guerilla is floral with orchard fruits, notes of mineral and herb and a touch creamy.

I also had Pinela for the first time. The example from Guerilla is concentrated with apples, pears and grapefruit with snippets of apricot and nut. Other producers to try include Tilia, Pasji rep, Lepa Vida, Posestvo Burja and Sutor.

Istra Sloveno, or Slovenian Istria, is known for its Venetian towns of Koper, Izola and Pirano. The climate is milder, Mediterranean. There are vineyards very close to the sea and others more inland and higher.

Here, Malvasia Istriana is one of the main white grapes. For me, it's at its best when it's young and vibrant and without barrel age such as Vina Koper Malvazija Yellow Label 2014 which is lively, balanced and easy drinking and Rojac Istra Malvazija 2014, which is fragrant with citrus and pear with tangy, lingering flavours.

My introduction to the wines of Slovenia has left me wanting to explore this beautiful country more. In my feature next month, I'm hopping back over the border to Friuli in Italy.

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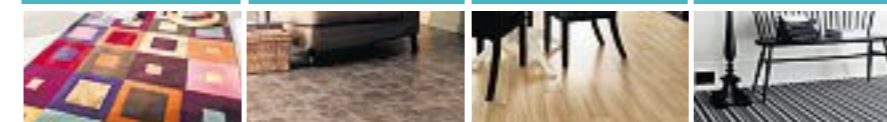
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