

## **Wines of the Croatian Coast - Istria & Dalmatia**

The shimmering blue-green waters and touristic appeal of the Adriatic Sea have long replaced people's mental image of Croatia as a war-torn country crawling out from the disastrous breakup of former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Following their independence was heavy privatization and modernization of the wine cellars. But despite this little country of 4.5 million people producing nearly the same amount of wine as all of Canada, the wines that emerge from Croatia continue to be a "discovery" for those who encounter them.

Croatia has two main zones of production. There's the interior, continental area that stretches from the hills around Zagreb to the border of Serbia. Then there's the coastal area that nearly touches Trieste, Italy were it not for Slovenia's 40km of coastline and arrives all the way down to Montenegro. These two regions are vastly different in every single aspect of winemaking and given that most people encounter the coastal wines more often when visiting the country, it's best to take a look at the coast and specifically, the two main regions of Istria in the north and Dalmatia in the south.

### **A bit of History**

Situated as they are, both Istria and Dalmatia have been ruled by a vast variety of kingdoms and republics. An Istrian will often joke, "My grandfather was born in Austria, my father in Italy, me in Yugoslavia, and my son in Croatia, all without ever leaving our village." Dalmatia was perhaps a bit more stable for several centuries being its own Ragusan Republic (no relation to the commercial pasta sauce) and then being absorbed into the Venice city-state.

The winemaking history, like most all of Southern Europe, stretches back even further with strong evidence that the Greeks were cultivating vines in the region, followed by the Romans, and then everyone else who came after them. Dalmatia saw a great boom when phylloxera ravaged France and then saw a great decline when the root louse arrived to their shores.

The 20th century hasn't been terribly kind to Croatia's coast either, with various wars passing their shores and aerial bombardments destroying their villages. And while the collectivism of Yugoslavian times helped to reinvigorate production and planting of vines that fed into central cellars, they were for lack of a better word, "wine factories" and did very little to improve the quality.

Then of course there was the Yugoslavian Civil War or as it's known in Croatia, "The Homeland War" which has a lasting legacy of some old vineyards still untouchable due to lingering landmines in the Northern Dalmatian region. The Istrians fared better as no conflicts arrived to their peninsula.

### **Understanding Croatian**

The Croatian language is part of the Southern Slavic dialects and suffice to say, is not easy to pick up for Anglophones. If you avoided studying Latin because it seemed impermeable, then Croatian's three genders and declensions won't be very friendly to you either.

That said, it's important to know a few basic elements of the language to understand how to read the labels, starting with the alphabet. Thankfully for English speakers, Croatian uses the Latin alphabet but a number of letters have shifted in pronunciation.

C - pronounced as the 'ts' in 'cats'

J - 'y' like in German, thus Yugoslavia is actually spelled Jugoslavija

R - rolled shortly like in Spanish and often takes on vowel tendencies such as in the word for 'square' which is 'trg' but sounds like 'terg'

Then there are characters special to Croatian

Č/Ć - these are both a 'ch' sound. Č is harder and Ć is softer but even a lot of native speakers can't hear the difference so don't worry about it.

Š - this is 'sh'

Đ - This can also be written 'dj' and is like the 'dg' in 'judge'

Ž - this is 'zh'

There are only the five vowel sounds.

A - the English 'ah' sound

E - like the soft English, 'eh' sound

I - this is the hard 'ee' sound

O - always a long 'oh' sound, never the softer 'uh'

U - always a 'oo' sound

While the alphabet is disarmingly easy in that once you know it, everything is pronounced as it's written, many words will appear quite difficult due to the amount of consonants in a sequence and the 'r' twisting one's tongue up. Don't sweat it too much as any effort to pronounce the words correctly will be met with open arms. Just keep in mind that wine is neither the male nor female gender in Croatia, but neuter.

## **Croatian Wine Terms**

There are a number of terms and classifications that Croatia inherited from former Yugoslavia which are still used, although there are most definitely trends to do away with them. The main batch revolve around a rating scheme when the wines are assessed in Zagreb before they are sold. This assessment is based upon scientific analysis including Density, Alcohol, Total dry extract, Total reductive sugar, Sucrose, Ash, Total acids, Volatile acids, pH, Free SO<sub>2</sub>, Total SO<sub>2</sub> but then also taste, sight, smell, and 'tipicity' to their region and grape variety. The resulting rating is then placed upon the label.

Many hate this system as it allows no flexibility, is based upon antiquated premises and often a wine with the lowest rating can be better than one with the highest. Despite this, you still encounter it:

Stolno Vino - literally 'table wine' which is the lowest rating and shouldn't be confused with 'vin de table' (now 'vin de France') as it has no bearing on provenance, just the ratings.

Kvalitetno Vino - a 'quality wine' which presents the generally-accepted medium grade.

Vrhunsko Vino - an 'excellent wine' as viewed by the official tasting panel in Zagreb

Arhivo Vino - This is rarely seen but denotes a wine of excellent quality to be aged long term

You will also find 'Barrique' on the label as Croatian winemakers really want you to know that the wine has spent time in oak. But, the more important words are 'Suho' and 'Slatko' as these are respectively 'Dry' and 'Sweet' wines. 'Pola Slatko' is the rather odd 'Half Sweet'.

## **The Wines of Istria**

Geographically, Istria is located in the far west of Croatia and is something of an independent entity from the rest of the country. While still very much Croatian, the people there are Istrian first, Croatian second. They have their own dialect that is Croatian tinged with a bit of Italian, and a unique cuisine that shows off the best aspects of their being under many different flags throughout history.

Despite this, there is a definite Italian leaning towards their food, language (all children are educated bilingual in Croatian and Italian) and of course, their wine. While a few French varieties have filtered in over the years, they have two dominant grapes in the region: the red, Teran and the white, Malvazija Istarska. There are also two main soil types which are the white soils of limestone and then the iron-rich red clay soils which produce distinctly different wines.

### **Istrian Grapes**

There is a great deal of confusion about Teran in terms of its name. Many have said that it and Refošk (known as Refosco in Italian) are different grapes but then others, including the Wine Grapes book state them to all be the same grape with minor clonal differences including those in the nearby Kras region of Slovenia. Wherever the truth may ultimately lie, it's a grape that produces a wine with good tannins that responds well to barrel aging. With around 500ha of vineyards under cultivation, it is the second main grape of the region.

Malvazija Istarska is spelled as such to distinguish it from the dizzying amount of other Malvasia grapes in the world, including one that's completely different in the south of Dalmatia. By far, this is the main motor in viticulture for Istria with well over 3,000ha planted with the grape. As such, it's hard to pin down an exact style of this grape. It can range from powerful, oaked versions to more basic, fruity young version that are lively and refreshing. In hot years, it can often reach rather high alcohol levels without much of a problem.

Given how much of a backbone this Malvazija has, the association of Vinistra (something of a private appellation body as Croatia has yet to fully define its appellations) created "IQ" or "Istrian Quality" in 2005 to offer a mark of quality for producers who reached a set of stringent quality assessments. This has been followed up by a version of the qualification for wines made from Teran as well.

### **Notable Istrian Producers**

I've been following the progress of the wines from Istria for 10 years now and there is a definite upward trend in quality. While there still are a number of very large cellars producing the greater volume of wine in the region, the smaller, boutique cellars are showing what is potentially possible.

Matošević  
Kozlović  
Piquentum

Trapan  
Coronica (pronounced Koronika, as if it was an Italian word)  
Roxanich

This is but a sample and some of the more typical producers to be found outside of Croatia. With more than 60 cellars in Croatian Istria, not to mention several more in Slovenian Istria, there's a good wealth of wine to explore.

### **The Wines of Kvarner**

While there are some wines produced in the coastal Kvarner region between Istria and Dalmatia, the industry pales in comparison to these other two in terms of volume. The well-known grape of this region is the white, Žlahtina which is considered native to the region. On the island of Krk, you can find the highest amount of wine production with Šipun Estate being a notable producer commonly found outside Croatia.

### **The Wines of Dalmatia**

Out of all the 1,800km of coastline in Croatia, it's the Dalmatian portion that's the most famous. The waters are warmer and clearer. The towns of Split and Dubrovnik are extremely appealing and featured in Game of Thrones. And then of course there are the islands, all 1,200 of them, with each one seemingly more remote, rugged, and unexplored.

Contained within stony and unforgiving karst soils that plunge in to the Adriatic is a viticulture treasure trove of old and very much native Croatian grape varieties that are still to be cataloged and analyzed to see how they connect to the rest of Europe.

Production is centered in the northern and southern portions and many new vineyards are being planted more inland, away from the traditional location on the sloping shores. There is also a great deal of wine production on the islands including, but not limited to: Hvar, Korčula, Brač, Vis, Pag, Šolta and Lastovo.

### **Dalmatian Grapes**

Red production is dominant in Dalmatia and of that, the main grape is one called Plavac Mali. There are of course many others including Babić, Plavina, Lasina, Vranac, Dobričić, and Tribidrag. These last two are quite curious as it was discovered that they are actually the parents of Plavac Mali which has adapted well to life in this hot climate. It was established in 2000 through DNA testing that Tribidrag (also known as the much more unpronounceable Crljenak Kaštelanski) is the exact same grape as both Primitivo in Italy and Zinfandel in California.

A decade ago Tribidrag was found in extremely small numbers but there has been work to recuperate it in recent years with bottles coming on to the market labeled as, Crljenak, or even Zinfandel. It can indeed hold similar characteristics to what you find with a bottle of Californian Zin or for that matter, of Primitivo from Puglia but these wines are in their infancies and more time will be needed to see how they evolve.

Plavac Mali on the other hand is very well-established. It can be found in many, many variations and is generally quite fruit-forward with eucalyptus being a common trait in those wines from the far south. In the past, wickedly potent extraction was de rigueur and the wines were a wall of brute flavor as the established local market preferred this. As time has gone on, like many regions throughout the world, extraction and new oak have been dialed way back on most of the wines and the characteristics of Plavac are coming through a great deal more including the typical limestone notes that serve as the bedrock of what soil there is.

It needs to be noted that some of the most promising takes on Plavac Mali (and for that matter most of the grapes of Dalmatia) are coming from the slightly interior regions of Dalmatia that are a bit buffered from the direct exposure to the sun and sea with larger diurnal shifts. Also, up in the more northern areas near the towns of Skradin and Zadar, there is more soil variation which naturally can affect the profile of the wines as well.

After Plavac, Babić is another red grape with heavy production but is more typical in the mid to northern regions basically from Split on up. Quite thick-skinned, deeply-colored, and with bountiful tannins, many think there is a great future for the grape and are working on making wines designed to age.

In terms of white grapes, those that are most notable are: Rukatac/Maraština, Debit, Pošip, and Malvasija Dubrovačka (yes, Malvasia returns again.)

Rukatac and Maraština are the same name for this grape which, unsurprisingly are just the local names for yet another Malvasia which is, Malvasia Bianca Lunga. It appears that Bianca Lunga is very close genetically to the Malvasija Istarska found up in Istria. It exists throughout Dalmatia both on the mainland as well as islands such as Hvar and Vis, and a little on Korčula although in total there is at most 500ha planted throughout Dalmatia.

Debit is something of an unsung hero in terms of white wines. You will often encounter it in the middle and northern regions of Dalmatia despite the fact it can be planted throughout all of Dalmatia. Quite often bold and full-bodied it can take well to oak aging.

Pošip is a star on the island of Korčula, where it was heavily planted during Yugoslavian times although it can now also be found on the mainland in good quantities. Again, like Plavac Mali which can vary a great deal in style, it's often the case that quite elegant wines can be made from this grape despite the heat of the region. Due to early export pushes by the cooperative on Korčula the varietal versions of this wine are often found in the US under the label, 'Marco Polo' as the Croatians believe him to be born on the island. Just note that some antiquated references out there still confuse it as being a synonym for Furmint even though it has been proven to be native to Croatia via DNA analysis.

Malvasija Dubrovačka is yet another Malvasia but it's better known as Malvasia di Lipari which is found throughout the Mediterranean and even out in the Canary Islands. The origins of the grape are unknown but it's been documented in Dalmatia back to the 14th century when the area around Dubrovnik was the Ragusan Republic. This is the area that it's still found in today although not in great quantities despite being relatively easy to farm and growing well in the more fertile regions of Konavle just to the south of Dubrovnik.

## **Dalmatian Appellations**

While a truly functional appellation system in Croatia has yet to take hold, there do exist several PDO appellations in Dalmatia which are recognized at a state level unlike the voluntary IQ system which is fully private. It isn't to say that these are a guaranteed mark of quality wine but they do show provenance.

#### Dingač

This was the first appellation to be recognized in Croatia and it's still regarded as one of the top regions for grape production. Located just on the other side of the coastal mountains via a long, narrow tunnel from the village of Potomje on the Pelješac Peninsula north of Dubrovnik. It's a steeply-inclined slope that tumbles down to the water with a southwest orientation.

There is often confusion due to how Croatian wines are labelled in that people think 'Dingač' is a grape when it's actually the case that all of the red wines produced from this appellation are made from the grape, Plavac Mali. The resulting wines can often be quite high in alcohol, reaching 16% but this is slowly being changed by those who approach the region with a more gentle touch.

#### Postup

Similar to Dingač with its coastal orientation, it's just 10km up the coast and sees a much more southern orientation. Also like Dingač, the grapes in this region are fully Plavac Mali. It doesn't hold quite the fame as Dingač but it is still a well-regarded region.

### **Notable Dalmatian Producers**

Again, in the last decade of watching this region evolve, I've seen a massive evolution. Early on, there were few truly quality-minded producers and Brett was a rampant issue in addition to massive vintage variance. This has leveled out considerably and some new cellars have been established with fully modern foundations from that start as opposed to the younger producers who had to break their backs dragging their old family cellars in to the 21st century.

Bibich

Boškinac

Čara PZ

Duboković

Gracin

Kiridžija

Krajančić

Saints Hills

Senjković

Stina

Zlatan Otok

In total there are over 100 wineries that dot the lengthy Dalmatian coast. To read about the vast majority of wineries in Dalmatia, please have a look at my e-book in the Vinologue series: [<http://www.vinologue.com/guides/dalmatia/>]

### **Concluding the Coast**

As anyone can see, there is a great deal to discover along the coast of Croatia and it makes a most interesting point when moving eastward in wine explorations across Europe. What starts out more familiar and Italian-esque in Istria soon descends into a realm very unfamiliar yet still approachable in Dalmatia and opens up any number of new possibilities for the wine curious amongst us.