

Grape expectations

Croatia's winemaking history goes back to the ancient Greeks.
Mary Novakovich uncorks some of the best spots for a tasting

Think of Europe's wine producers and the big hitters – France, Spain, Italy – spring to mind. But, quietly in the background, Croatia has been producing high-quality, award-winning wines that remain under the radar of the average holidaymaker. The fact that the country exports relatively little of its wine means that clients are best advised to travel to Croatia themselves to taste its delicious grape varieties, many of which aren't found anywhere else in the world. Considering the beauty of Croatia's wine regions – not to mention its cuisine – this should take very little persuading. It's just a matter of narrowing it down.

KING OF THE REDS

Many holidaymakers make a beeline for the Adriatic, putting them in a prime spot for a pleasurable meandering wine tour along the coast. Just an hour north of Dubrovnik is the long thin finger of the Pelješac peninsula, where the indigenous red *plavac mali* grape produces robust *dingač* – king of the Croatian reds.

In the rolling vineyards that sweep along the sun-drenched foothills of scrubby mountains, boutique wineries are happy to open their doors to thirsty visitors who want a crash course in Croatian wine – usually accompanied by generous platters of local charcuterie and cheeses. En route, clients can take in

one of Dalmatia's most magnificent sights, the medieval defensive walls that link the villages of Ston and Mali Ston. Happily, for seafood lovers, the area around the two villages produces Dalmatia's finest oysters.

Southern Dalmatia's wine route has a few more delights to explore, one handily reached from Pelješac by ferry from the town of Orebić. After 20 minutes at

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sea, holidaymakers arrive at the island of Korčula, whose walled Korčula Town resembles a more intimate version of Dubrovnik. Just a few miles away is the fishing village of Lumbarda, where the vineyards produce an astonishingly good white wine called *grk*. This beautifully dry wine is made by just eight wineries in this otherwise sleepy village, where vineyards tumble down towards the sea not far from some of Croatia's rare sandy beaches.

Another indigenous Korčula white grape – the full-bodied *pošip* – is grown farther west in the villages ➤

ASK THE expert



Jenna Jones,
sales and
business
development
manager,
Grape Escapes

“Croatia is popular for sun and sea, but its wines and gastronomy are hidden gems. It’s well worth encouraging wine lovers to discover Croatia’s 130 grape varieties. We have found that the best practice is to be clear about what is and isn’t included in packages (and highlight any exciting activities) and offer a fair commission.”

of Smokvica and Čara. And, as in most of Dalmatia, lovers of red wine can try different wineries’ versions of *plavac mali*.

With a history of winemaking that goes back to the time of the ancient Greeks, perhaps it’s not so surprising that many of Croatia’s islands and regions have their own indigenous grape varieties. In central Dalmatia, the wine route carries on to the small island of Vis, whose *vugava* grape – one of Croatia’s oldest – ends up in the glass as a strong, fruity and yellow-hued white.

HVAR AND AWAY

Honey-pot Hvar is known to many holidaymakers for its beach bars and Hvar Town’s lively atmosphere, but not necessarily for its Stari Grad Plain of ancient vineyards. Here, on a vast and fertile plain, winemakers produce excellent *plavac mali* as



well as wines from indigenous whites including *bogdanuša* – literally translated as gift from the gods.

Back on the mainland, the Adriatic coast between Split and Šibenik reveals a few more liquid gems. Using the exquisite town of Primošten as a base, clients can visit

nearby wineries that specialise in the rich, heavy red wine that comes from the *babić* grape, as well as crisp white *debit* wines.

As the Adriatic Highway winds along the coast – with a brief detour across the bridge that connects Krk island, home of the smooth white



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LEFT: Lumbarda village, Korčula ABOVE: Bire Winery PICTURES: Adam Batterbee

Žlahtina wine from Vrbnik – clients eventually reach one of Croatia’s biggest wine regions. The heart-shaped Istrian peninsula is a magical mix of medieval hilltop towns, including Motovun and Grožnjan, and glittering coastal resorts such as the Venetian-style Rovinj and Poreč.

Within Istria’s serene landscape of vineyards and olive groves are wineries specialising in full-bodied teran reds and floral malvazija whites, along with varieties that have wandered over from neighbouring Italy, such as barbera and refošk reds and trebbiano and verduzzo whites.

Once holidaymakers leave the coast and head inland towards the capital, Zagreb, they enter Croatia’s continental wine-growing areas that are probably the least familiar but feature some of the country’s biggest producers. Slavonia, the region that spreads eastwards along the Danube, Sava and Drava rivers, is a land of handsome Habsburg towns and vineyards producing refreshing graševina white wine.

Fans of red wine can discover the Croatian versions of cabernet franc, syrah, merlot and cabernet sauvignon – all cultivated with the same care and high standards, just waiting to be discovered.

MORE BALKAN WINE SPOTS

Other countries of the former Yugoslavia also produce superb yet underrated wine. Head to Slovenia’s Vipava Valley to sample some crisp whites.

Montenegro was once the base of Yugoslavia’s industrial wine production, but now specialises in boutique wineries in the unspoilt lands around Lake Skadar.

And Serbia’s wine routes take in the mountains and monasteries of Fruška Gora near the northern city of Novi Sad. Also explore the Hungarian border around Subotica and the growing scene in the hills surrounding Belgrade. **TW**

BOOK IT

Grape Escapes has an eight-day wine-tasting tour of Istria from £3,734, including breakfast, two lunches, seven dinners, two winery visits and transport. grapeescapes.net

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