

Now he devotes his time to making mostly sparkling Teran in a cistern built for the former rail station into the hillside. The tannins are hardly noticeable in the current 1996 release, except to provide a hint of structure.

Ivan Batic's family has been making wine in the village of Sempas since 1592. Batic's long-haired son Miha said of attending wine school: 'My dad said that, since we're organic, there's nothing more to learn.' Though Sivi (Pinot) Gris is Batic's favourite grape, his much-celebrated local Pinela will become increasingly important in coming years, with all wines being aged in Slovenian barrels.

The brothers Lavrencic are two of Slovenia's fastest-rising stars. At their Sutor winery, they make top-quality Ribolla, Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Merlot and old-vine Malvasia from extremely low-yielding vineyards. The wines are treated to extended fermentation in new French barriques in the cleanest small winery I saw in Slovenia.

Slovenia's first co-op was established in 1894 in the Vipava Valley. Now privately owned as Agroind, it has 400ha under vine and produces two-thirds of Vipava's output. I tasted a commendable Chardonnay and Merlot from 1997 and a firm and aromatic Sauvignon Blanc 2002 harvested along the nearby historic Zemono Castle. Agroind also produces indigenous rarities such as Picolit, Pinela, Rumeni Muscat and Zelen.


Posavje

After a six-month stay in Champagne in 1968, Janez Istenic returned to produce his own sparkling wine in this method while keeping his day job as winemaker for the Avia brand. Today he and son Miha are Slovenia's leading producers of sparkling wine. Vineyards of Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc, Pinot Gris and Pinot Noir are grown on nearby hills, while the winery boasts an advanced vacuum-sealed press and must-concentration process that reduces their dependence on SO₂, a heat exchanger for cooling musts, all the while maintaining cool fermentation at 16°C to 18°C in all base wines. 'People here are drinking less but better,' says Miha. To further this point, their home and winery also feature guest rooms for hire and a restaurant with a French chef.

One of Slovenia's more interesting characters is Janez Sekoranja of Graben Wine Cellar, a former pharmaceutical company manager who uses rare yeasts culled from former business contacts to experiment with 24 varieties. The most memorable wine I tasted was a 1992 Tramin low-pressure sparkling wine still fermenting in bottle and requiring storage under 10°C. The Krcko co-operative received its ISO 9001 certification in 2000, and has been gradually upgrading its facilities. Krcko is famous throughout Slovenia for the very light red wine Cvick, but also makes a clean Beli Pinot (Blanc) and an appetizing Modri Frankinja (Lemberger/Blaufränkisch).

Podravje

Not far from the Austrian border is the district of Stajerska. Joze Protner, along with his sons Bostjan and Gregor, fashions dry wines, while their neighbours are still leaving 10g/l to 25 g/l of sugar in theirs – a hangover from the Communist days. The Protners excel in Riesling of varying levels of residual sugar, Pinot Gris and Chardonnay, all at reasonable prices.

No overview of Slovenia is complete without mentioning the man whose commitment to preserving the country's great sweet wines is legendary. Stanko Curin works with vines first planted on the Kog hills by his grandfather at the dawn of the 20th century. In 1972, with the help of his daughter and her husband, he expanded cultivation and development of one of Slovenia's few private wineries. 'We can only prosper through quality' is their motto, even in times when quantity, and not quality, was of primary concern. Curin's warmth and generosity have earned him the unflinching respect and admiration of all members of the Slovenian wine community. His grandchildren continue in the family business. Great dry and off-dry wines abound, but to taste the full range of Curin's sweet wines is an experience comparable to tasting the best of the rest of Europe. 

DAVID FURER is a wine consultant, international wine judge and sommelier

Recommendations for dining out

Slovenian hospitality is professional and friendly. Expect to pay 40% to 75% of what you'd pay for comparable meals in the UK.

Hisa Franko Casa (pictured)

Staro selo 1, Kobarid

+386 (0)5 389 4120; www.hisafranko.com

A family affair. Franko Kramar took over this restaurant in 1970 and now works the vegetable garden; son Valter runs the show with his mother, Ana, ruling the kitchen. Worth the detour.

Hlebec Vinicultural Farm

Kog 108, Kog

+386 (0)2 713 7060; www.hlebec-kog.com

The Hlebecs's winery/restaurant/guest house has seven comfortable, modern rooms and a restaurant serving Verica's traditional menu of local meats, veggies and remarkably silky egg noodles.

La Subida

Commons, Italy

+39 (0)4 816 0531; www.lasubida.it



What is arguably the world's best Slovenian restaurant is across the border in Italy. It offers seasonal dishes prepared in a traditional, elegant manner. A formidable wine list full of verticals of the region's finest wines completes the picture.

Pri Lojzetu

Zemono-Vipava; +386 (0)5 368 700

Katja Kavcic and her son Tomaz oversee this

eclectic restaurant in the historic Zemono Castle with sweeping views of the Vipava Valley and one of the best wine lists in the country. When weather allows, sit outside under the chestnut trees.

Pri Narobetu

Mengeska 37, Trzin; +386 (0)1 564 2089

Located on the main road between Ljubljana and its airport, Narobe also allows you to eat a seriously good meal late at night and then stay over. Owner Maja Breznik is a national treasure and has hosted many dignitaries – government meetings are said to take place here over famed horsemeat dinners.

Restavracija Pikel

Vipavska 94, Rozna dolina, Nova Gorica

+386 (0)5 302 262; www.pikel-gasparin.si

Since 1980, the Gasparin family has been running Slovenia's best fish restaurant specialising in local products. Sommelier Tadej maintains a strong wine orientation with a wide variety of glasses and a calligraphied wine list. A small sushi restaurant is due to open on the ground floor soon.