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From Slovenia's Ancient Hills

By **ERIC ASIMOV**

EASTERN EUROPE IS HOME to an ancient wine culture, though it's not always obvious from the wines today. Just as Prohibition largely severed the modern American industry from its nascent origins, Communism separated countries from centuries of winemaking traditions. The post-Communist rejuvenation of these traditions, and their adaptation to the modern world, are among the most exciting stories in wine today.

Some of these countries, like Georgia in the Caucasus, were cradles of winemaking history, and though they are less well-known and understood, they are nonetheless beginning to make new marks. Benefiting from international investment, Hungarian wines, both sweet and dry, thrill once again. Croatia, too, is beginning to establish a global presence with its dry wines. But perhaps none of the former Communist countries have come quite so far as Slovenia in redeveloping a vibrant wine culture.

In Slovenia, at least in its western region of Primorska, wine and regional identity transcend politics. In the green hills where the country abuts the northeast Italian region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, little physical evidence of a border exists besides a few empty guard posts. The vineyards of the Italian Collio continue into the Slovene Brda, the rows of vines heedless of political divisions.

Loyalty to the land is perhaps bred into a people whose territory has been fought over for centuries. The Hapsburg Empire and Napoleon have ruled the region, and the 20th century brought one war after another, along with disease and famine. Throughout the political and social tumult, the vines have been constant.

As much as with any Eastern European wines, those from Brda have made an impression on the west. **Friuli-Venezia Giulia** has been a hotbed of creative experimentation. There, producers like Gravner and Radikon have explored ancient traditions and adapted them to the 21st century. Other producers like Miani and La Castellada are painstaking artisans whose wines are uncommonly deep and articulate. The ferment stretches into the Brda, where producers like Movia and Edi Simcic seem very much a part of this particular culture, though distinctively Slovene as well.

Beyond Primorska, the wine industry is growing in the regions of Podravje in the northeastern end of the country and in Posavje to the southeast. The wines are different from those in the west, generally made from other grapes and in other styles. While Slovenia produces plenty of red wines, whites are far easier to find.

To explore what is available these days from Slovenia, the wine panel sampled 20 bottles of

white wine from recent vintages. For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Joe Campanale, the beverage director and a proprietor of four New York restaurants, including L'Apicio in the East Village, and Chris Cannon, a veteran restaurateur who is working on projects in Manhattan and Morristown, N.J.

Naturally, in a generalized tasting like this, we expected a diversity of styles and types of wine, and we were not disappointed. Some were in a clean modern style, not so different from any mass-market Italian white wines. But others were particularly distinctive, in the Brda style. The panel was most definitely drawn to these wines.

Our top four bottles were all, to one degree or another, made using ancient techniques more typical of reds. Unlike modern white wines, in which the grape juice is almost immediately separated from the skins for lightness and clarity, in these wines the juice and skins are left to macerate together. This gives the texture an often pleasing tannic rasp and the wine a rosy, sometimes amber, hue.

In recent weeks, this style, sometimes called [orange wine](#), has come under quite a bit of criticism. Some wine [writers have assailed](#) what they see as faulty, oxidized wines that nonetheless have gained a faddish popularity. Well, the style is most definitely polarizing. As with natural wines, mainstream wines and any other genre, good and bad examples can always be singled out. But I remain a fan, fascinated by the textures and subtle flavors that the best practitioners are able to achieve.

Our top wine was an excellent example. The 2006 Kabaj not only qualified as an orange wine, it was also given the full Gravner treatment, fermented over many months in clay amphorae, or Amfora, as the wine is labeled. The resulting wine, a blend of ribolla gialla, tocai friulano and malvasia, was rich and amber, with lovely, complex textures and flavors. It was also by far the most expensive wine in the tasting at \$83.

A second wine from Kabaj, the 2009 Sivi, was a little more conventional, though it retained the hue of skin maceration. Sivi is the Slovene term for pinot grigio, yet this wine, with its layered, lightly honeyed mineral flavors, still seemed exotic. It was our No. 3 bottle and, at \$20, our best value.

Our No. 2 bottle was one of three wines in our top 10 from Movia, the superstar producer of the Brda, with vineyards that actually straddle the border with Italy. We very much liked the 2007 Veliko, a blend of ribolla gialla, sauvignon blanc and pinot grigio that was juicy and supple with long, lingering flavors of herbs and tropical fruits. The second Movia wine, No. 4 on our list, was the 2008 Rebula, the Slovene spelling of ribolla gialla. It was deeper, richer and more textured, with a not unwelcome touch of oak.

The third Movia wine, the 2008 Lunar, also made of ribolla gialla, was completely different and highly unusual, a natural, orange wine with no sulfur dioxide, which is typically used as a preservative, fermented in oak barrels and bottled unfiltered. The bottles must be stood up for an extended period — the producer recommends a week — [then carefully decanted](#), or the

sediment in the bottle will create a cloudy haze. It was complex and fruity with just a hint of funk.

Kabaj Goriska Brda, \$83, ***

Amfora 2006

Rich, complex and distinctive with a raspy texture and herbal, anise flavors. (Blue Danube Wine, Los Altos, Calif.)

Movia Brda, \$32, ***

Collio Veliko 2007

Perfumed and juicy with lingering herbal and tropical fruit flavors. (Domaine Select Wine Estates, New York)

BEST VALUE

Kabaj Goriska Brda, \$20, ** 1/2

Sivi 2009

Complex, textured and layered with lightly fruity, slightly honeyed flavors. (Blue Danube Wine)

Movia Brda, \$26, ** 1/2

Collio Ribolla 2008

Deep, rich and textured with well balanced flavors of flowers, apple and a touch of oak. (Domaine Select Wine Estates)

Marof Prekmurske Gorice, \$19, ** 1/2

Renski Rizling 2007

Maturing, with inviting aromas and flavors of flowers and minerals. (Weygandt-Metzler, Unionville, Pa.)

Movia Brda, \$37, ** 1/2

Collio Lunar 2008

A natural wine, bottled with sediment, so must be carefully decanted; complex and fruity with a touch of funk. (Domaine Select Wine Estates)

Traviata Brda, \$16, **

Ribolla Gialla 2009

Dry and straightforward with floral, mineral aromas and flavors. (Laureate Imports, Kennesaw, Ga.)

Crnko Maribor, \$13, **

Jarenincan 2011

Oily texture with flavors of flowers, herbs and apples. (Blue Danube Wine)

Crnko Maribor, \$16, **

Yellow Muskat 2011

Easygoing and refreshing with orange and tropical fruit flavors. (Blue Danube Wine)

Traviata Brda, \$14, **

Pinot Grigio 2009

Soft, herbal and lightly fruity. (Laureate Imports)

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: January 28, 2013

An earlier version of this article referred incorrectly to Slovenia's former political status. Although it was a Communist-led republic when it was part of Yugoslavia, it was not an Iron Curtain country.