

By Deborah Crossman

Compared to Napa Valley, Croatia is a minor league player in wine tourism. Was this eager-to-emerge region relevant to those seeking unique wine experiences?

Curled on the couch a few days later, I heard Anthony Bourdain summarize his view of the country's gastronomy during his "Croatia's Adriatic Coast" episode of "No Reservations" on the Travel Channel.

"The next big thing is Croatia," said the peripatetic chef. "If you haven't been there, you're (expletive deleted)."

The words resonated to me and his huge fan base. I found evidence of his popularity from Frank Dietrich, the importer of Bibich wines where Bourdain visited. Traffic to Dietrich's Blue Danube Wine Co. website increased 20-fold in the two weeks after the show aired.

Yet for vacationers, the word is already out that Adriatic Croatia is the "The Other Mediterranean."

I avoided the coastal roads jammed with tourists bee-lining to the beaches and headed for Continental Croatia's wine country. From picturesque towns near Zagreb to the contrast of old wine cellars and modern technology in the eastern regions, I discovered young, dynamic winemakers producing notable wines and culture-rich, EU-designated wine roads.





Grgich earned his winemaking chops in a country where wine has been made since the 5th century B.C. But multitudes of invaders – Romans, Turks, Hapsburgs, Hitler, the former Yugoslavians – have disrupted the country's grape growing, economic and social well-being. The physical scars of the mid-1990s war remain, but the Croatians I encountered were resilient, broad-minded and open-hearted.

In Samobor, a 30-minute drive from Zagreb, I met Toni Filipec, the youngest-ever Croatian Rally Champion. Trading racing for winemaking, lively Filipec (age thirty-six) crafts the local bittersweet aperitif called Bermet his family has sold for 200 years. To see Filipec's passion for the family business, watch the Croatia episode of "Three Sheets" reality show with comedian Zane Lamprey on SPIKE TV. I added Filipec's Bermet and Red Cuvée to my top Croatian wines list.

Filipec's heritage pales compared to Kutjevo Winery, with its original cellar dating from 1232. Located three hours southeast of Zagreb, the winery revealed the historical roots of wine. After hearing a zillion times that the Church kept winemaking alive during the Middle Ages, I saw the physical evidence – a door in the Kutjevo cellar leads to an underground tunnel to the village church.

Situated on a hilltop above Kutjevo, Krauthaker Winery maintains Croatian old ways on twenty-seven acres where horses plow the steepest and narrowest rows. In the cellar, enologist and daughter of the owner Martina Krauthaker-Grgič (age thirty-two, no relation to Mike Grgich) applies the latest lab techniques to craft well-balanced Graševina (Gra-she-vi-na), the signature white wine of Continental Croatia. I was attracted to the varietal which melded the freshness of Riesling and the complexity of Chardonnay.

Heading an hour south to Stanišlav Brod, an historic town across the Sava River from Bosnia, I'm surprised by the urban-chic Đikulin Winery tasting room and its energetic, knowledgeable manager, Dalobar Pejčić. Further northeast in Slavonia province near Osijek is the Baranja Wine Road, one of seven EU-designated "Vintour" wine routes.

Along the five-mile Baranja Wine Road are several wineries owned by Croatia's largest agricultural firm. Committed to reviving the wine industry in Slavonia, the company has replanted vineyards and opened hotels and a new seven-acre hospitality and production facility at Belje Winery. I sense that premium Belje Goldberg Vineyard Chardonnay and Pinot Crni (Noir) spell a strong future for Croatian wines.

Reconnecting with Croatian wine is not easy. Most Croatian wineries are too small to export; major companies target cities with large Croatian populations. The Blue Danube Wine Co. will soon add Krauthaker to their online selections. Grgič Vina wines will be available at Grgich Hills in June. To taste Graševina and Frankovka in their unspoiled home, you'll just have to take the less traveled Croatian inland route.

