

Croatian wines

Discovering an ancient land's modern wines

Few wine-growing regions can boast a vinous history that predates the Romans, but Croatia can. Today, wines from the tiny nation are captivating drinkers around the globe with their combination of distinctive grape varieties and broad range of styles

Words: Laura Burgess

ADRIAN SHERRATT / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO





Understanding the nuances of Croatian wine history and its current renaissance requires a crash course in the politics of the Balkans, but falling in love with the wines themselves only takes a single sip, whether or not they're served with a view of the country's glittering Adriatic coastline.

"People forget that Croatia is a fundamental wine-growing country. It has some of the oldest UNESCO heritage sites in the world for wine, many of which come from the Illyrians, who predate the Romans," explains importer Eric Danch, whose Danch & Granger Selections represents several Croatian estates in the U.S. "It's really taken off in the last couple of years."

The azure waters and islands of Croatia's Dalmatian coast have always drawn tourists, but the rise of Croatian wine is inextricably linked with the country's geopolitical fortunes—fates that have changed dramatically in the 32 years since the country gained its independence from the former Yugoslavia, and in the 10 since Croatia joined the European Union in 2013.

Newly expanded market access offered Croatia's legion of small, predominantly family-owned wineries an opportunity to export their wares to consumers beyond summer tourists craving a nostalgic sip. Now, the wines have found their footing across Europe and the United States among sommeliers, wine critics, and world-renowned winemakers such as Bordeaux's Michel Rolland and Napa Valley's Mike Grgich, both of whom are currently making wine in Croatia at Saints Hills Winery and Grgić Vina, respectively.

"Croatia has always been known for its beautiful and pristine beaches, but what people didn't know when they started traveling to the country is that it is truly a food and wine destination," explains Anna Viducic, a Croatian native and founder of Aroma Wine Co. and National Croatian Wine Day. "The new generation of winemakers in Croatia has really shown an interest in the native terroir, and they studied viticulture and oenology in school, which never really happened before."

Love at first sip

This combination of education, an open market, and Croatia's geography has catapulted the country's wines into the spotlight, specifically bottlings made from indigenous grape varieties such as Plavac Mali, Teran, Pošip, and Malvasia Istriana. Cultivated for centuries, these are ideally suited to the warm, coastal climate and yield prismatic wines that range from powerful, dense reds to mineral-driven and citrusy white wines.

While Croatia has 18 official wine-growing appellations, the coastal zones of Istria and Dalmatia—both located east of Italy along the Adriatic Sea—are the most well-known and exported. Here, limestone soils similar to those found in Burgundy and

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Dalmatian hotspots
The Croatian geography and climate naturally lend themselves to fine wine production.



Champagne combine with warm, dry temperatures and steep hillsides in a trifecta ideal for premium wines.

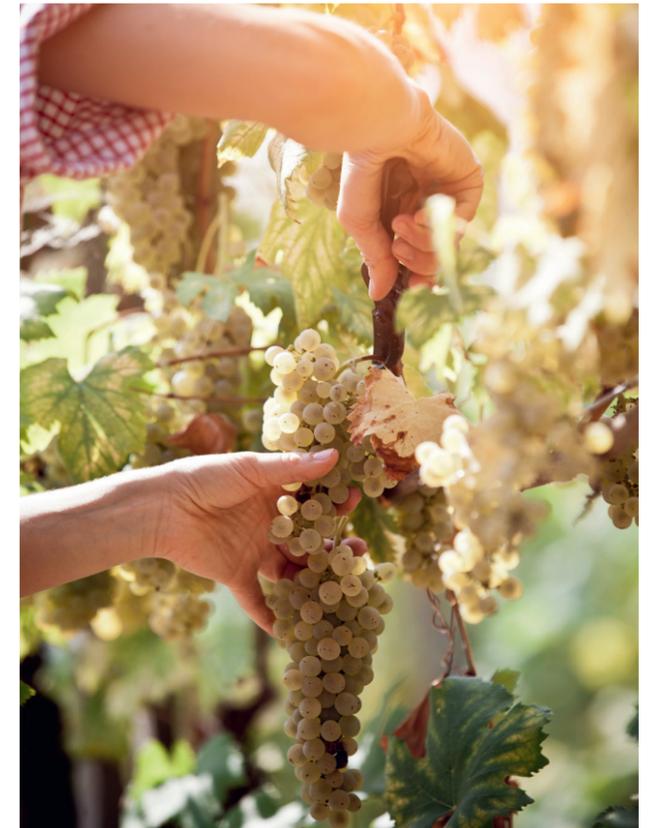
"We have four climate zones for wine growing here, and we can grow almost anything. You can make big wines from Plavac Mali and Zinfandel, Merlot, and Pinot Noir, and Mediterranean-style wines too," says Ivan Miloš of Miloš winery, whose family has been crafting wine on Dalmatia's Pelješac peninsula for 500 years. Miloš brings a reverence for the region's terroir and history to the forefront in its low-intervention wines.

"We grow all of our own grapes and do everything at our estate," he says, adding that the winery focuses exclusively on Plavac Mali, a cousin of Zinfandel. Miloš cultivates its Plavac Mali, known for its dark, full-flavored grapes and long-lived wines with excellent structure, with organic methods and an eye for longevity in the cellar. "The oldest bottles we have in the cellar are from 1942, and still amazing. We age some of our wines up to 10 years at the estate, and they really can last in the cellar."

North of Miloš in the Dalmatian sub-appellation of Komarna, Rizman is in the country's only 100 percent certified organic production area. "The Komarna region is a small, green, hilly jewel whose vineyards descend to the sea while the Neretva river valley guards its back," explains Damir Štimac, Rizman's founder and CEO. "We ensure that Rizman wines show a strong connection to this terroir, as well as the varieties themselves."

Štimac and his family cultivate the indigenous white grape Pošip, known for its tropical and stone fruit flavors and vibrant acidity, as well as reds from Plavac Mali and Syrah.

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Small but perfectly formed

Istria lies at the northern edge of Croatia's coastline. Its wines, based on the red Teran and white grape Malvasia Istriana, often share similarities in profile to Italian and Austrian wines, according to winemaker Marko Fakin of Vina Fakin. "Malvasia is the queen of the region," he says, noting the grape makes wines defined by delicate orchard and stone-fruit flavors.

"If you look at the Croatian winemaking system, there is not a big industry, but you will find a lot of good high-quality wines," Fakin adds, noting the country is roughly one tenth the size of France. As of 2021, the nation had just under 77 square miles (200 sq km) devoted to wine grapes, but what it lacks in size, it makes up for in quality. Vina Fakin wines, for example, are now exported to more than a dozen countries and have received top critic scores and awards at international competitions. "Croatia is a hidden gem, people just don't know about us," Fakin says.

But modern wineries are starting to challenge that status. Capitalizing on Croatia's history as a travel destination, many of its most esteemed wineries offer tastings and food-and-wine experiences with jaw-dropping views of their vineyards.

Only time will reveal where Croatian wines are headed next, but until then Rizman's Štimac has simple advice: "Anyone who loves the world of wine and has not tried Croatian wine simply has to do it as soon as possible." ●

Laura Burgess is a writer and editor and also a certified sommelier with extensive winemaking experience