



WORDS ELISABETH KING

CROATIA, THE MED AS IT USED TO BE

IN THIS era of rabid over-promotion, it's refreshing to see a country that's been producing wines since Julius Caesar was alive finally tossing its hat into the global sales ring. This northern hemisphere summer, over 30 Croatian winemakers headed to New York for the first-ever portfolio tasting of their country's wines in the Big Apple. There's a reason, of course. Until recently only five percent of Croatian wine was exported, but as foreign tourists have turned to cheaper bottlings many winemakers were left with expensive wines and new markets had to be found - quickly.

The best place to taste, and more importantly learn how to pronounce the names of Croatia's varietals, is on home turf, of course. "Croatian wines have been produced for over 2000 years," said Zeljko, the waiter in an historic bar close to the main street of Dubrovnik. To be honest,

Croatian seaside resort of Rovinj. And former James Bond, Roger Moore, visits Dubrovnik every year to the delight of passengers from the many cruise ships that pull into the historic World Heritage-listed town.

Like many eastern European towns where the beer is cheap, Dubrovnik went through a baptism of fire as a favoured destination for British stag parties. Thankfully, the moment has passed. The biggest danger now is being pinned against a wall walking along the town's ramparts, as hordes of daytrippers and cruise passengers push forward for a photo-op. At truly busy times, just opt out of the crush by sipping a cool beer. Most barmen in Dubrovnik just plonk down an Ozujsko, the flagship brand of Croatia's largest brewer, Zagrebacka pivovara.

Historians and archaeologists still dispute the origins of Dubrovnik. Some

Stradun, cuts the town neatly in two. At one end the 18th century Church of St Blaise, Sveti Vlaho in Croatian, may be dedicated to Dubrovnik's patron saint, but his bones are ensconced in the baroque cathedral. One of the most endearing things about Dubrovnik is that many of the buskers are elderly men in traditional costume singing klapa, the haunting folk songs of Croatia, not scruffy blow-ins mumbling English pop ballads.

The Hilton Imperial, originally built in 1895, has been restored to its former grandeur as a luxury bolthole, and also offers stunning views of Dubrovnik's Venetian Bay location. And it's just as famous for the cooking of Maltese-born chef, Christopher Gauci, in the hotel's Porat restaurant. He trained with Raymond Blanc at Manoir Aux Quat Saisons in England and brings a deft

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I can't remember how to pronounce the name of the rich, red Svirce Plavac Mali he served, but I do remember it was very good. Later that night, we googled Croatian wine on the hotel computer and discovered that we had a long way to go to taste even a fraction of the 200 wine varietals from the country's 17,000 wine producers. Most are home fermenters, of course, with maybe 2500 winemakers rating the professional tag.

With Greece in a downward spiral, Croatia has become the go-to destination for celebs and regular people who want a stress-free holiday in the Mediterranean. Jay-Z and Beyonce have moored their yacht off the Adriatic coast for the past two years. Russian oligarch, Roman Abramovich, is frequently seen in the

say it was founded in the 7th century by Dalmatian refugees fleeing from Slavic invaders. Others claim that the town has Greek roots, dating back to an 8th century Byzantine basilica. But its glory days as the maritime republic of Ragusa are firmly Italian, when Dubrovnik rivalled Venice as a trading power.

Many of Dubrovnik's finest palaces and merchants houses were built in the 15th and 16th centuries. And the most atmospheric way to feel the full impact of their magnificence is from the town's encircling walls, in some parts over a metre thick. Constructed from limestone form the island of Korcula to the north, there are 14 towers, six bastions and four corner fortresses if you're counting.

Dubrovnik's main thoroughfare,

touch to a Mediterranean modern menu that includes delicacies like fork-tender Pag island lamb. Here we enjoyed one of the most expensive bottlings of Plantaze, the biggest wine company in the country which sold 16.9 million bottles last year.

Lonely Planet calls Istria, a 30 minute drive from the Italian border in the north of Croatia, a "toned down Tuscany". There are lots of narrow roads, lushly green landscapes and mediaeval hill towns like Motovun, overlooking the Mirna River valley, to be sure, but the Slavic names on the road signs leave you in no doubt where you are. Rovinj, too, with its historic alleys and piazzas looks a lot like Venice, which attracts Italian holidaymakers who are looking for a home-away-from-home. English is

widely spoken, though, and our guide in Pula was fluent enough to make pretty good puns as we weaved through the town's Roman ruins, including the Temple of Augustus, the Hercules Gate and a first century amphitheatre. One of the real discoveries of Istria, though, is that truffles are so plentiful that even inexpensive restaurants sprinkle shavings of the expensive fungus over omelettes and game dishes.

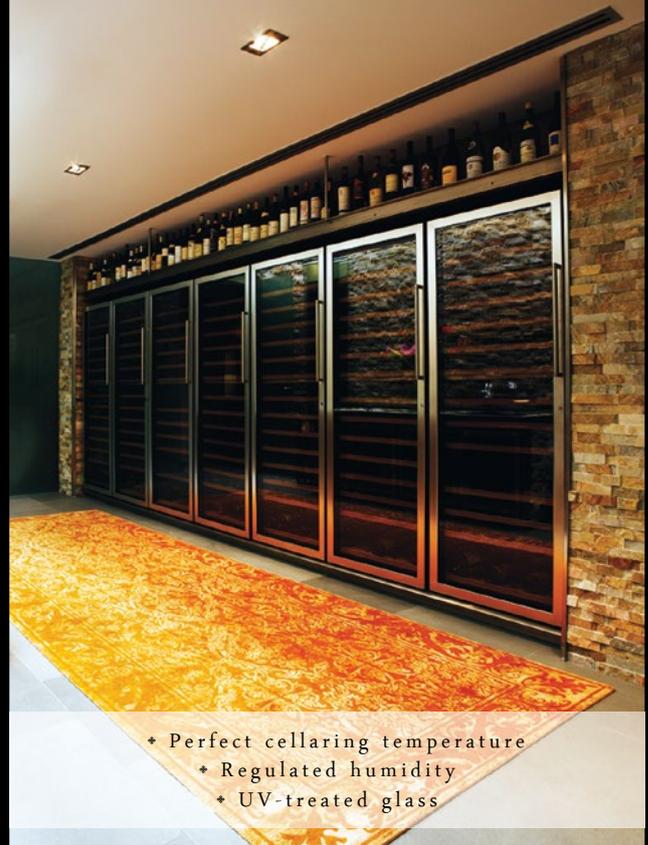
There are over 1000 islands dotting the Croatian coastline, many little more than crags sticking out of the sea. Hvar is the largest and recently gained a World Heritage-listing for its Stari Grad Plain, one of the best preserved ancient Greek landscapes in Europe. Greek pioneers staked out land here 2500 years ago and the same methods of cultivating grapes and olives are still in use. The result? The scene looks much as it did when Socrates was still alive.

Split is every schoolchild and sub-editor's favourite Croatian town for obvious reasons. There's a lot more than cliched word play to be enjoyed, though, if you bed down in a boutique hotel or B&B surrounded by the 1500-year-old walls of the Roman Emperor Diocletian's former summer palace, another of Croatia's World Heritage-listed sites. Split is Croatia's second largest city, so there's plenty to do besides staking out a spot on the beach or visiting one of the finest archaeological museums in Europe. And one of the city's main rituals is to stroll along the town's Riva, where the nightly Italian tradition of passeggiata rules. Holidaymakers and locals gather here on most warm nights to toast one of the most beautiful sunsets in Europe with a glass of two of local wine. As we did with a bottle of Krauthaker Graevina Mitrovac, a peachy white that goes very well with the barbequed meats the Croatians adore.

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