

Wine Genius of Dobrovo

F&W's *Ray Isle* is fascinated by Slovenia's Movia Winery and its visionary owner, Ales Kristancic. The two spend a wild 48 hours exploring Eastern Europe's wine frontier.

photographs by marie hennechart



Ales Kristancic atop the tiled roof of his pink-walled winery, Movia.

YOU KNOW HEMINGWAY," ALES KRISTANCIC says. "He drank a lot of Movia wine."

Kristancic, the current star of the Slovenian wine scene, is a storyteller, and like many good storytellers, he has a breezy approach to facts. Still, this claim seems plausible. Dobrovo, the Slovenian town where Movia, Kristancic's winery, is located, is only about eight

miles from the site of much of the futile combat chronicled in *A Farewell to Arms*. But is an implied endorsement from Ernest Hemingway any real reason to care about Slovenian wine? After all, many of the bottles exported to the United States aren't cheap. They aren't easy to find. They certainly aren't easy to pronounce—try asking for a bottle of Kocijancic Zanut Brjac at the nearest grocery store.



Movia grows famous grapes, like Cabernet Sauvignon, and lesser-known ones, like Ribolla Gialla.

The reason to pay attention is that right now, Slovenia is home to an extraordinarily innovative winemaking community, with dozens of producers making wines that occupy a compelling stylistic border zone between northern Italy and Austria. Plus, several make outstanding wines that are unlike anything else—producers such as Edi Simcic, Marjan Simcic, Cotar, Sutor and, especially, Movia. Because these winemakers are devoted both to organic farming and to creating wines that are deeply expressive of their place of origin, they've become the darlings of any number of top U.S. sommeliers. Movia, in particular, has a following that makes religious fanatics seem easygoing.

Slovenia's vineyards produce an abundance of white wines—from familiar varieties, such as Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Grigio, and from less familiar ones, such as Ribolla Gialla (called Rebula), Vitovska Grganja, Zelen and Pinela. They also produce surprisingly good reds from Pinot Noir, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, along with native varieties such as Teran. And while pretty vineyards



don't necessarily produce good wine, Slovenia's also happen to be gorgeous. In the Brda subregion, which borders on northern Italy's Collio, the landscape of low, rolling hills and stands of oak trees is painted with vine rows, then broken up by small hilltop towns of white buildings with terra-cotta shingles (Movia is located here). Farther south, in Krasi, the terrain grows rougher, here and there a ruined castle looming over the winding roads. Along the Austrian border, in the Podravje region, the Alps rise in the distance.

That Slovenian wines make it to the U.S. at all is a surprising turnaround. The country is one of those *Mitteleuropean* football states, booted from empire to empire over the centuries. When Hemingway was here driving ambulances—on the Italian side of the border, as Kristancic notes—Slovenia was part of Austria-Hungary. During World War II, the Italians, Germans and Hungarians divvied up the place; after World War II, it ended up as part of Yugoslavia. Finally, when Yugoslavia disintegrated, the Slovenians found themselves autonomous once again.

They took a deep breath, then they joined the EU. Not that vines care about politics: They go on producing grapes, no matter who's in power.

Movia has been owned by Kristancic's family since 1820. While its fortunes have risen and fallen with the region's, it is currently the most famous, and arguably the best, producer in the country. That's largely thanks to Ales himself.

In his early forties, Kristancic looks timeless in a wise-man-of-the-hills kind of way. He is thoughtful, extravagant and opinionated; both genuine and a complete showman; intensely focused, passionate and unpredictable at once. All this would make him a pain in the neck to be around if he weren't also oddly lovable. He studied winemaking at the University of Padua's Conegliano campus and did "research apprenticeships" at Bordeaux's Château Pétrus and Burgundy's Domaine de la Romanée-Conti, yet he insists that "the best school was the school of my father." And he's been the force behind his winery's climb to international acclaim, thanks to an unusual combination of winemaking talent, near-monomaniacal drive and, in a time when winemakers enjoy a touch of the cult of celebrity found in the chef world, a truly outsize personality.

His wines aren't short on personality, either. This is true of Movia's reds—particularly Veliko Rosso, an unusual, deep-flavored blend of Merlot, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon—and still more true of Movia's whites, which are made in an unusually oxidative style. For instance, Kristancic subjects Sauvignon Blanc, typically a fresh, young white, to two years of aging in oak casks (an approach characteristic of many of the cutting-edge Slovenian producers). His most idiosyncratic wine may be Puro, a crisp, mineral sparkling wine he makes from Chardonnay, Ribolla Gialla and Pinot Noir and bottles undisgorged—in other words, still full of the dead yeasts that helped produce the wine's bubbles. That wouldn't be a problem, particularly, except that to get rid of all that dead yeast, one must open Puro while holding the bottle upside-down and partly underwater. Other producers might consider this just a bit of a turnoff for potential wine buyers. Kristancic, however, is working on the problem: "Hah! I am making special packaging for Movia Puro," he says, "so that now a monkey, the stupidest monkey in the world, can open it!"

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Kristancic (left, with friends)
ages Lunar in barrels
buried deep underground.





Vinoteka Movia offers top local wines and snacks like prosciutto—“from happy pigs!” Kristancic says.

Spending time with Ales Kristancic requires a healthy love of unpredictability. If you make plans to visit his winery with him, as I did, it's just as likely that he'll decide en route that taking a field trip down to Croatia, to a new wine estate in which he's a partner, is a much, much better idea. Plan to leave Movia with him at 9 a.m. in order to get to Ljubljana, Slovenia's cosmopolitan capital city, to visit the Vinoteka Movia wine bar by lunchtime, and—after he's agreed that this is an exceptional plan—you'll find yourself blending Pinot Noir with him for several hours in the Movia cellars instead.

Conversation is equally disorienting. This isn't so much because Kristancic's native language is Slovenian (he is also fluent in both Italian and English) but because his actual native language is Ales. To wit, cigarette in hand: “I need critics! I don't need this *wow-brow shiki-miki zak-zak!*” Roughly translated, that means, “Hey, I need actual critics, not a bunch of useless hipster yes-men.”

But crazy unpredictability and a language spoken by only one person on earth can make for an entertaining time. When I had dinner at Movia, the attendees were Kristancic; his wife, Vesna (wearing Gucci boots with floor-length tassels); his father-in-law (the author of two books

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Ales Kristancic's wines are available in the U.S., but they may require some hunting. One good resource for finding wines is the website wine-searcher.com.

2007 Quattro Mani Toh-kai (\$11) Kristancic makes this affordable, earthy white at Movia for the well-known Italian wine importer Domaine Select Wine Estates.

2006 Movia Pinot Grigio (\$29) Kristancic's lightly honeyed Pinot Grigio is much more complex and powerful than most.

2006 Movia Sauvignon (\$29) Long-lasting and silky, this Sauvignon—which undergoes extended aging in oak casks—offers lots of grapefruit and citrus peel.

2004 Movia Pinot Nero (\$34) This Pinot Noir's luscious depth is surprising given Brda's cool climate; the flavor suggests black cherries and wild herbs.

2003 Movia Cabernet Sauvignon (\$39) Minty black currant notes are at the core of this aromatic red, which is only released after lengthy barrel aging.

TRAVEL slovenia

about World War I, from the Slovenian point of view); three executives from a local cement company (“Good customers,” Kristancic explained, a bit vaguely); and a very energetic Chinese entrepreneur who had definitely drunk the Movia Kool-Aid, since in the past year or two he’d opened four wine bars, all called Movia Wine Bar, in four different cities in China. As with all Slovenian social events, the room was a violent haze of cigarette smoke, and at some point, several other Slovenian winemakers arrived, their job apparently to add to the smoke.

Throughout the meal, Kristancic held court, saying things like, “You have to walk on the edge. Forty-eight good barrels, two bad barrels, because the good wine is just, *zak*,” indicating with the edge of his hand the knife-edge between brilliant and disastrous. “The ‘flying winemaker,’ Michel Rolland, he does not know this. If he brings this idea to Château Pétrus, they will kill him. *Then* they will fire him.” He laughed.

We arrive in Ljubljana the next day at dusk. The lovely little city feels more Austrian than Italian, its river-bounded old town filled with baroque and Art Nouveau buildings that have somehow survived far too many wars. The old town area is also the center of a thriving



Slovenia's capital, Ljubljana, has a thriving restaurant scene that includes places like Valvas'or, OPPOSITE.

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restaurant and bar scene. Indeed, Ljubljana is becoming quite a nightlife destination, a sort of mini Prague for the Venetians and the Viennese.

In the center of town, in a covered courtyard next to the town hall, is Kristancic's wine bar, Vinoteka Movia. He seems to have opened it as much to have a convenient place to hang out as anything else, but it has proven very popular. Kristancic, Vesna, a couple of their friends and I chat as couples filter in and out, stopping for a glass of local wine before heading off to their dinners.

The bar is tiny—a couple of tables, dark shelves on the walls filled with bottles, flickering candles—but the list has choices from every significant Slovenian winemaker. We start with glasses of 2005 Cotar Vitovska, dark gold in hue, brightly lemony in flavor, and order off the menu of light, wine-friendly snacks. There's prosciutto ("Special prosciutto! From *happy pigs!*" says Kristancic), local cheese, olives, mortadella and snail pâté—"For vegetarians," he explains. It doesn't

exactly make sense, but the pâté is tasty in any case. Kristancic leans close to say things like, "There are millions of things we know, but it is *good* that we do not know everything about wine." Next we order glasses of aromatic, appley 2004 Simcic Ribolla Gialla. "More risk, more passion," Kristancic continues, balancing the two qualities in his palms. "More good, more bad. You play with fire on the hay, *zak zak zak, paf!* But only sometimes!"

He rises to get another bottle, says "Lunar," and winks at

me. Lunar, his most recent creation, is a luminously orange, honey-and-nectarine-scented Ribolla Gialla. Among other distinctions, it's aged for nine months in barrels buried 25 feet underground. And like Puro, it's bottled on its lees and must be decanted to remove the sediment.

Kristancic starts decanting the Lunar in front of a candle about six feet off the floor, disregarding, as usual, a variety of easier ways to get this task done.

"Ales," says Vesna, selecting an olive, "don't make complications."

"I *like* complications," he replies. ●

