

With its Tuscan-style landscapes – and a rich array of olive oil, truffles and good wine to match – Croatia’s Istria region is a must-visit for food lovers.

Words and photos by **Kimberley Lovato**

LAND OF PLENTY



“**THAT’S BLUE ISTRIA,**” says the old man sitting next to me at a café on Pula’s seafront, pointing towards the clear, and definitely blue, water stretching out before us.

“So that,” I say, pointing behind me, “must be what they call...”

“Green Istria,” he says, referring to the hills, woods and pastures inland. And when it comes to local winemakers, I soon discover there’s also plenty of Istrian red and white. This heart-shaped peninsula on the Adriatic has a reputation as a foodie’s paradise, and I’m here to take a culinary tour.

Like most of Croatia, Istria has been invaded many times over the centuries, including by the

ancient Romans and, in the 1800s, the Austrians. Today in the local cooking you’ll spot influences from Italy, Hungary, Austria and Spain. It’s all facilitated by the high quality of the local produce, including the olive oil, truffles, and seafood such as oysters.

Getting around is easy enough by car. I follow the smaller roads of the designated wine and olive routes, marked in picturesque fashion by wooden signs nailed to trees, stopping off at *konobe* (family run restaurants) and vineyards along the way.

Taking plenty of detours means my route is a haphazard one, through crumbling villages, over undulating hills and past rust-coloured farmland. I follow the signs to the village of Buzet in search of the winery Piquentum (Cesta Sveti Ivan bb, Buzet, tel. + 385 91 527 5976), home to the celebrated winemaker Dimitri Brečević. But the signs disappear, and when I ask a passerby for directions “Never heard of him” is the response. I persevere and finally locate the elusive winery, or rather a repurposed →

World War II water cistern carved out of the hillside, near the small Istrian town of Tinjan. “You should have asked for the Frenchman,” Brečević smiles. “They all know me as that.”

Born to a Croatian father and a French mother, Brečević is one of the few “natural” winemakers in Istria, using techniques like natural yeast fermentation (meaning there’s no added yeast), and minimal technological intervention during the winemaking process. Despite his French upbringing and a pedigreed education in the best wine-producing regions in the world (Bordeaux, Burgundy, New Zealand), Brečević says he always felt Istria was the right place to be.

“My father was born here and he returned to Istria a few years before me, so I have always felt a



EXPLORING PULA

Before you set off on a Croatian culinary pilgrimage, see the sights in Pula, where your flight arrives

ROMAN REMAINS

Like many Croatian cities, Pula is notable for its wealth of well-preserved Roman architecture, including the vast amphitheatre, which overlooks the harbour. Once used for gladiator spectacles, it’s now host to summer concerts and the Pula Film Festival. You can also still visit Pula’s Roman Forum, where buildings include the Temple of Augustus. The site dates back to the 1st century BC. Unfortunately, the forum was almost destroyed by bombing in the 1940s, but has since been restored.

MARKET FORCES

One of Istria’s largest markets is housed in the impressive, art deco Market Hall, where you’ll find cheese, oysters from Istria’s Lim Fjord and much more. A must-visit.

ISLAND ESCAPE

The 14 Brijuni Islands are a designated Croatian National Park situated just off the coast to the north-west of Pula. The easiest one to visit is the main island, Veli Brijun, which you can reach via ferries that leave daily from Fazana, just eight kilometres from Pula.

“We hope this is a place that expresses the passion we put into our wine, as well as a place where people can simply enjoy”

connection,” he says. “Professionally, I realised that the climate and soils were right for producing quality wine.” Brečević created his first vintage in 2006. He uses only grapes indigenous to the area, meaning Malvasia, Teran, and Refošk. We try a medium-bodied 2008 Malvasia white wine with buoyant character that goes perfectly with spicy dishes and is, unsurprisingly, very good indeed.

When it comes to Istrian wine generally, you can’t throw a cork without hitting a bottle of Malvasia, the often fruity white that accounts for about two thirds of the grape crop here. In the bucolic Momjan Valley, with a dilapidated 1,000-year-old castle looming

above, I’m in good spirits when I arrive at Kozlović Winery (78 Vale Momjan, tel. +382 5277 0188), the region’s largest private producer of Malvasia wine and a frequent award-winner. I’m met by the warm smile of Antonella Kozlović. She’s the wife of Gianfranco, a third-generation winemaker based here (his father and grandfather are depicted on the wine labels).

“We hope this is a place that expresses the passion we put into our wine, as well as a place where people can come to simply enjoy,” says Gianfranco of his new tasting room. After a glass of their golden Akacia Malvasia on the terrace overlooking the vines, Antonella recommends lunch at Konoba Stari-Podrum (52 Most, Momjan, tel. +385 52 779 152, stari-podrum.ch), set in an isolated stone house just down the road. It’s a typical Istrian konoba, where locals catch up and enjoy the fresh, seasonal produce.

I’m greeted by Mira (her last name has too many consonants to write down), the apron-clad →



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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT OUT AND ABOUT IN PULA; ANTONELLA KOZLOVIĆ GIVES US A WINE TASTING

ISTRIA

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT NAVIGATING THE COUNTRYSIDE; MAKING PASTA WITH DADA; ROVINJ; OLIVE OIL TASTING



matriarch of Stari-Podrum. There are no menus and she prepares a four-course meal starting with soup of wild asparagus (an Istrian obsession), followed by polenta and Istrian *špaleta*, a cured meat similar to its more famous cousin Istrian *pršut* (prosciutto) but made from the pig's front legs instead of its hind legs. With a pasta course of local *fuzi*, dessert and wine, the bill for this fantastic meal comes to a staggeringly low 100 Croatian kuna – about €13 per person.

Fuzi is the pasta you'll most often be offered in this region, a quill-shaped variety that's usually homemade using flour, eggs, salt and water. Curious about fuzi, I pay a visit next to Drazenka "Dada" Moll who leads cooking classes in Smoljanci, not far from the pastel-painted seaside village of Rovinj (Smoljanci 2-3, Svetvinčenat, tel. +385 5256 0022, stancija.com).

Dressed in a white chef's coat, Dada is infectiously enthusiastic as she bounces around her homey 100-year-old estate, Stancija 1904, showing me

With music playing and wine flowing, we cut dough into squares, then use our hands to shape them

the rooms and apartments she rents out to travellers, before taking me to the dining room for a demo. "But before we begin cooking, a welcome drink," she says, waving her hand at a table laden with a grappa-esque liquor called *rakija* – in honey (*medica*) and mistletoe (*biska*) flavours. "When you make pasta it's better to invite friends, serve wine, and do it together."

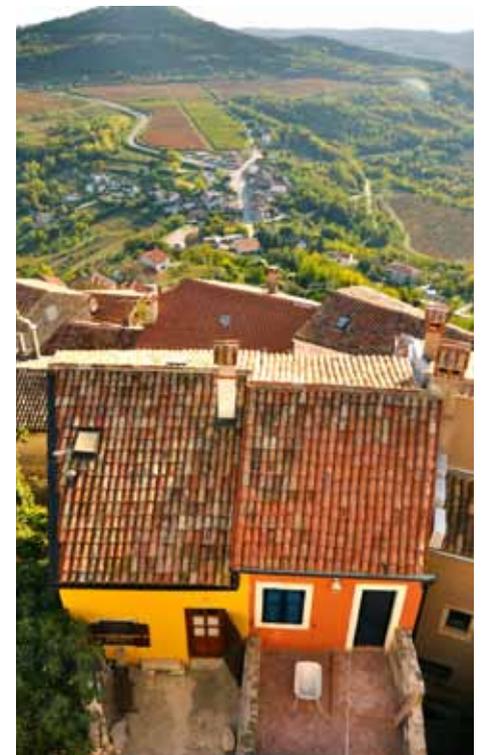
With music playing and wine flowing, we cut dough into squares, then use our hands to shape them around a small wooden dowel, creating tubes similar to penne. Families always make fuzi for special occasions like weddings, baptisms, and birthdays. "Here we say that if there's no fuzi, then there's no party," she says.

Eventually, we sit down to eat our creations, →

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT IVAN KARLIĆ; BUCOLIC SCENES; GET YOUR HANDS ON SOME TASTY TRUFFLES



Truffles can go for up to €3,000 in the autumn market

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along with our handmade *pljukanci*, or “little worms” as Dada calls them, both tossed in a light creamy sauce with fresh herbs. It tastes like a celebration.

I leave Dada and journey on, because there are two more local specialties I’m keen to learn more about. The first is Istria’s celebrated olive oil, the traditional production of which dates back to ancient Rome. Today, Istrian oil is recognised by international authorities like olive oil guide *Flos Olei*. I make quick pitstops at three local producers: Ipša (10 Ipši, Livade, tel. +385 5266 4010, ipsa-maslinovaulja.hr), Chiavalon (16 Vladimira Nazora, Vodnjan, tel. +385 52 511 906, chiavalon.hr) and Meneghetti (Bale, tel. +385 52 528 815, meneghetti.info). Each crank out some of the best green-gold elixir you’ll taste, evoking the scent of cut grass and peppery when it hits the back of your throat.

The final item I came here to try, the gustatory king of Istria, is the mighty truffle. Menus here

brim with truffle-seasoned everything, especially in the area around Motovun, a medieval village perched 277m above the Mirna River Valley.

At truffle sellers Karlič Tartufi (14 Paladini, tel. +385 52 667 304, karlictartufi.hr), in the Lilliputian village of Paladini near Vrh, I meet Ivan Karlič, 19-year-old grandson of the company’s founder. We walk to the Motovun Forest, where he leads truffle hunts. “I’ve been hunting truffles by myself since I was 10,” he says. “I found an apple-sized truffle once but when I told my mother she didn’t believe me at first.” Karlič shows me a photo he had framed of his subterranean treasure to prove it. “I sold it and bought a bike with the proceeds.” And rare white truffles can go for up to €3,000 in the autumn market, Karlič adds.

We sit down in Karlič Tartufi’s tasting room for a meal of truffle salami, truffle cheese and local olive oil, washed down with what else but homemade rakija. Istrian cuisine? I’ll drink to that. ●

PHOTO: V. COUCHMAN/AXIOM