

The medieval village of Motovun in the heart of Istria.



Edible Istria

Truffles, wild asparagus and olive oil are all on the menu during a Croatian culinary adventure.

—BY KIMBERLEY LOVATO—

A DECADE AGO, identifying Istria on a map would have earned me bonus points in a trivia game. But today I'm motoring a five-speed Kia through crumbling villages, over undulating hills and through the rust-colored terrains of Northern Croatia's arrowhead-shaped peninsula. A wooden sign nailed to a tree points left, the official wine and olive oil route signs say right.

While Croatia's sunny Dalmatian coastline and its "pearl" city of Dubrovnik have lured vacationers for years, Istria has remained relatively absent from most tourist itineraries. But for those interested

in 300-plus miles of crystalline shore and a rising culinary scene served with a side of warm hospitality, Istria is the land of plenty, and that's why I'm here.

As a traveler, I find local food is the perfect guide to uncovering the essence of a place, and since Istria is Croatia's culinary gut, I make the easy 2.5-hour drive from the capital, Zagreb, to Motovun, a medieval village perched at the heart of this compact region that overflows with truffles, seafood, wild asparagus and some of the most celebrated olive oil in the world. Mix in a Mediterranean climate, an entrenched winemaking tradition, and a proclivity for

la dolce vita, and Istria quickly transforms from a place on a map into a savory journey.

At the signs, I turn right.

I'm in search of Piquentum, a winery in the village of Buzet, and its winemaker, Dimitri Brečević. I'd met him at a wine festival in Zagreb the week before. When I told him of my plans to eat and drink my way around Istria, he invited me to stop by, which was easier said than done.

Eventually the signs disappear, and I pull over to ask for directions.

"I've never heard of it or him," is the pedestrian's response.

The elusive winery is actually a WWII-era water cistern carved

into the hills below the small Roman village of Buzet, and when I finally arrive and tell him the story, Brečević laughs. "You should have asked for The Frenchman. 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 that insist on minimal intervention during the winemaking process. He uses indigenous Istrian Malvasia grapes, which produce an easy-to-drink white wine, and red Teran and Refošk grapes, which produce ruby reds. I taste each in the musty bunker.

Despite his French upbringing and study in some of the world's top winemaking regions, Brečević says he always felt Istria was the right place for him and moved here permanently in 2005.

"My father is Istrian, and he returned a few years before me so I have always felt a connection," says Brečević. "Professionally, I realized that the climate and soils were right for producing quality wine."

Croatia's wine history resembles that of many former communist

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Clockwise from above left: A cafe in Pula; view from Motovun; bottles of local rakija.

countries, where state-controlled wineries produced low-grade swill. Since Croatia's 1991 independence from former Yugoslavia, quality-focused private wine estates around the country have flourished, and many are being rewarded by wine guides, at competitions and by connoisseurs worldwide.

When it comes to Istrian wine, you can't throw a cork without hitting a bottle of Malvasia, which accounts for about two-thirds of the grape crops on the peninsula.

The largest private producer (and frequent award winner) in Istria is Kozlović Winery, where I arrive in good spirits. Located in a bucolic valley beneath a 1,000-year-old castle in the village in Momjan, the modern building manages to blend in with the ancient surroundings.

I'm welcomed by Antonella Kozlović. She's the wife of Gianfranco, a third generation winemaker and the namesake of the estate. After a quick tour, we settle onto the outdoor terrace where Antonella pours us each a glass

of their golden Akacia Malvasia. Gianfranco joins us for a toast.

"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," he says.

Before I leave, Antonella points me to a nearby *konoba* for lunch.

France has its bistro, Italy its trattoria, and Croatia its *konoba*. These rustic family-owned taverns are ubiquitous and have mastered the irresistible mix of traditional regional cooking and quality gastronomy, with seasonal menus derived from locally produced ingredients.

Mira (her last name has too many consonants to write down) is the apron-clad matriarch of Konoba Stari Podrum, hemmed into a modest stone house, easily overlooked if you drive by too fast. The wood beams and red-and-white checked tablecloths are characteristic of an Istrian *konoba*. I'm escorted to a table next to an open fireplace where steaks sizzle on a grill. There

are no menus.

Mira prepares a four-course meal starting with wild asparagus soup. This needle thin vegetable, similar in look and taste to regular asparagus, is an obsession in Istria each spring; it's common to see people hunched along the roadside, snipping at the weedy plants. From March to late April, restaurants, especially in northwestern Istria, celebrate "Asparagus Days," with frittatas, soups, sauces and pastas bursting with the popular vegetable.

The second course is polenta and Istrian prosciutto, hung to cure for up to eight months in Croatia's *Bura*, a gusty, cold and dry wind that blows from the mainland toward the sea. I'm full but can't resist the next course, which is *fuži*, a tube-shaped pasta with pointy ends like penne, which I'd never seen before. Dessert is tiramisu, followed by a small glass of *rakija*, a local fruit brandy.

Like most of Croatia, Istria has had many occupiers over

the centuries, including Greek, Hungarian, Spanish and Austrian. It belonged to the Venetian Republic for over 500 years beginning in the ninth century and was again annexed by Italy between 1919-1947, which explains the region's definitive Italian bent and bilingual locals. Maybe it's the year-round sunshine and ghosts of welcoming Italians past, but Istrians embody a warmth and *joie de vivre* typical of many Mediterranean outposts.

Even those who don't speak English are willing to welcome me into their homes to 'converse' via charades, smiles and a few shots of *rakija*. Such is the case when I arrive at Stancija 1904, a 100-year-old guesthouse not far from the pastel seaside village of Rovinj and home of Drazenka "Dada" Moll, who leads pasta-making classes and speaks food and drink fluently.

"But before we begin cooking, a welcome drink," she says when I arrive, showing me to a table laden with *rakija* in two flavors typical

TRAVEL



Clockwise: Case of olives; Lovato making fuži with Dada Moll; konoba menu.

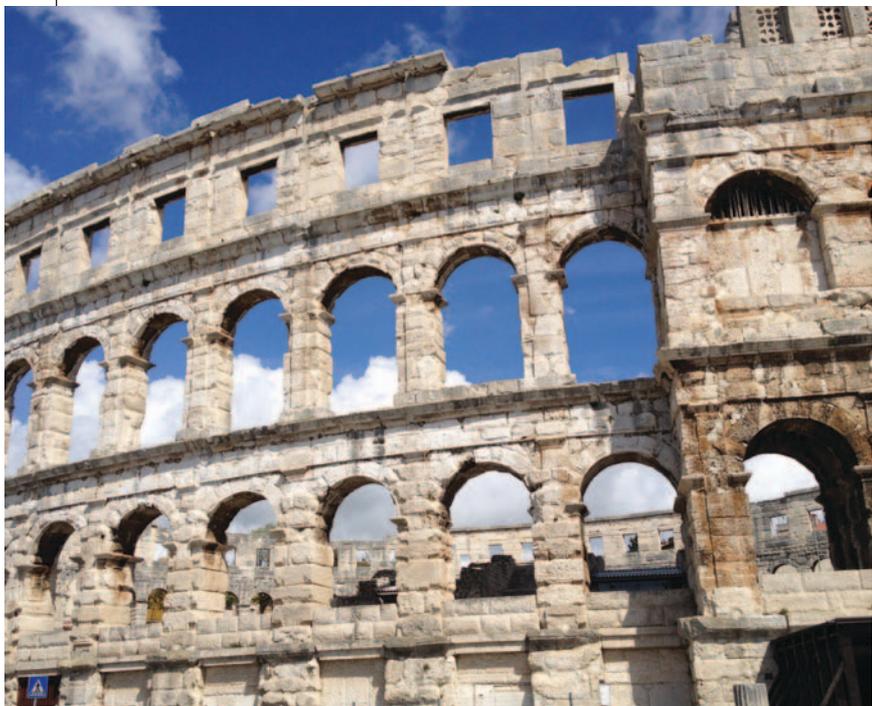


Here: The seaside village of Rovinj.





Here: Restaurant Zigante.
Below: Pula Amphitheater.



Entry to Piquentum Winery in the village of Buzet.

of Istria: *medica* (honey) and *biska* (mistletoe).

On a wooden table in her kitchen, we cut dough into squares, then hand-form them into quills around small wooden dowels. Dada tells me that in Istria, *fuži* is always made for special occasions, like weddings, baptisms and birthdays.

“We say that if there’s no *fuži*, then there’s no party,” she laughs.

On just about every table in Istria, Moll’s included, are bottles of local olive oil—no surprise since regional production dates back to ancient Rome. The bones of old mills and *amphorae*, in areas like the Brujuni Islands and Poreč, are reminders of Istria’s olive oil pedigree and, these days, local oil is ranked among the best in the world by international authorities like the olive oil guide *Flos Olei*. One could spend weeks tasting them all, but I make pit stops at three: Ipša, Meneghetti and Chiavalon, each cranking out some of Istria’s best liquid gold.

In Vodnjan, I sit in a tasting room behind the family house of brothers Teddy and Sandy Chiavalon, who pour oil into glasses and tell me to warm the bottom with my hands. I

take the liquid into my mouth, suck in some air and swallow. It tastes like cut grass and leaves a peppery tinge in my throat—a telltale sign of the antioxidants, says Teddy.

The undisputed king of Istrian cuisine, however, is the truffle—both black and white varieties. Truffle season runs from the end of October to early December, and tourism around hunting (and eating) them is a growing business, with curious culinary travelers like me arranging experiential meet-ups with local business owners.

I’m headed to truffle harvesting company Karlič Tartufi in the Lilliputian village of Paladini. The brawny Ivan Karlič is the 19-year-old grandson of the company’s

founder, and we meet at his family home and adjacent tasting room. He tells me he’s been hunting truffles on his own since he was 10.

“I found an apple-sized truffle once and called my mom, but she didn’t believe me,” says Karlič, showing me a picture of his find to quell my own doubt.

Truffles can sell for €1,000 a kilo or higher (roughly \$1,300 per pound) and, Karlič tells me, with the proceeds from his hefty find, he bought a bicycle.

Around Istria, menus brim with truffle-seasoned everything, and a popular festival takes place each fall in the village of Livade, put on the map when local truffle hunter Giancarlo Zigante found one in

1999 weighing over two pounds. A replica of the humongous fungus is displayed at the entrance of his eponymous restaurant. He is the largest exporter of Istrian truffles, shipping over 1,500 pounds annually, mainly to the U.S. and Italy.

On my last morning, I eat a wild asparagus omelet at the Hotel Kastel in Motovun, my home base for the week, before driving down the hill, where another set of signs points in both directions. Before I choose, I hear the peal of bells. A local legend says a giant named Veli Jože used to roam the countryside and ring the town’s belfry with his bare hands. I turn left.

And, like the carillon, Istria plays inside me long after I’ve gone. ❁

DRINK

Piquentum Winery
Buzet
+ 385 91 527 5976

Kozlović Winery
Kozlovic.hr

SLEEP

Vela Vrata Hotel
VelaVrata.net

Hotel Kastel
Hotel-Kastel-Motovun.hr

Stancija 1904
Stancija.com

EAT

Konoba Stari Podrum
Stari-Podrum.ch

Chiavalon Olive Oil
Chiavalon.hr

TOUR

Istra.hr

CULINARY
TOURS
EatIstria.com