

SLOVAKIA'S QUALITY PROMISE

Bold winemaking, unusual varietals and a flair for natural wines are putting Slovakia on the winemaking map. Darren Smith reports.



PHOTO: VALDEMAR ŠIBENSKÝ

Slovakia is a small wine nation, but one rich in viticultural history. The Celts are thought to have brought viticulture here in about 600BCE. Then came the Romans. In the second half of the 16th century production was at about 700,000hl per year, centred on the capital Bratislava. Mass production during the Communist era saw the winegrowing area rise to 32,140ha in 1985. Since then it's fallen to about 16,610ha today.

Winegrowing is concentrated in the country's south, mainly on the slopes of the Carpathian mountains. The latitude here is the same as in Burgundy, and the continental climate is most suited to white wines, crisp rosés and one or two cool-climate reds with a winning combination of fresh acidity and fruit.

There are six umbrella regions across Slovakia: Tokaj, Eastern Slovakia, Central Slovakia, South Slovakia, Nitra and Malé Karpaty, or the Little Carpathians. Of these regions, none symbolises the transition from tradition to modernity more than Slovak Tokaj.

Innovative approach

It may surprise some to discover that 10% of the Tokaj wine region lies within Slovakia.

This is the country's smallest wine region - officially 900ha, though speaking to winemakers suggests it's closer to 500ha - whose miles of damp, furry mould-coated

cellars harbour some of the most highly prized noble sweet wines in the world.

In contrast with Hungary's Tokaj, where large-scale investment and a more international focus has led to an evolution in style in puttonyo wines - technological, fruited, shorter-aged - Slovakian wines exist in more of a time capsule, where low-tech, long-aged oxidative noble sweet wines are still produced. Typifying this style is Tokaj & Co in Malá Trňa, a winery that emerged after the collapse of the Tokaj state monopoly.

A more progressive attitude has been struck by the likes of Tokaj Macik, also in Malá Trňa, which makes both traditional Tokaj wines and a broad suite of creatively branded modern wines, from a carbonated fizz range right through to single-vineyard Furmint and Lipovina. It's indicative of Slovakia's relative isolation that for several years, Tokaj Macik was the only Slovak winery to attend ProWein.

Head of sales and marketing at Tokaj Macik, Jaro Macik, believes that if Slovakia is to succeed internationally, it's important for people to understand that these are premium wines, not eastern bloc plonk. "The quality is increasing at rocket speed," he says. "Today if demand increases, I think Slovakian wineries are ready. But consumers have to think that Slovakian wines are not entry-level wines. Maybe 20 years back, yes. Today it's more about smaller wineries and premium quality wines."

Export success will come from having a clear regional, and sub-regional, identity. Some of the most significant of the 40 or so sub-regions are Svätý Jur and Modra in Malé Karpaty; Tekov in Nitra; Veľký Krtíš in Central Slovakia; and Strekov and Mužla in South Slovakia.

One winemaker doing more than most to assert sub-regional identity is Bott Frigyes in Mužla, just 3km from the Danube, which marks the border with Hungary. Frigyes's vineyards are between the Danube and its tributary, the Hron, an area known as Garam Mente Pohronie - 'the place around the river Hron'. Frigyes explains that the Hron side is very homogeneous, high-quality terroir based on volcanic andesite, loess and limestone soils, and the cooling influence of the river, which translate to a delicacy, minerality and freshness in the wines.

His affinity with Austro-Hungarian heritage led him to focus on traditional regional varieties: Lipovina, Furmint, Juhfark and Kadarka. Indeed, he was first to plant Kadarka, a red wine, in Slovakia and it is his best-selling bottling. "My prediction is that in the Mužla region in the next 20 to 30 years, many more people will be cultivating Kadarka," he says. "Here we have the best conditions for cultivating. We just need time to find the right varieties." He adds that: "The vines need 10 to 12 years to become fully mature. It's a question

of seeing what works in which micro-terroir.”

For many producers, the work of defining regional identity is just beginning. Probably the most internationally recognised winery in Slovakia, Château Belá, for example, has only existed since 2000. Part owned by Mosel legend Egon Müller, the Mužla-based winery is showing great potential for Riesling; that 50% of production is sold through Egon Müller's distribution surely helps.

Gone natural

Beyond asserting regional identity, a small winemaking country needs big personalities to get noticed. In Zsolt Sütő, Slovakia has just that. Since 2013, his Strekov 1075 has become one of the most in-demand natural wine brands in the world, and 80% of his wine has been exported. His wines are served in eight Michelin-star restaurants in Spain alone. For Sütő, Slovakia's prospects depend on having self-confidence and an awareness of its strengths. “We are very small,” he says. “We cannot compete with the big wine-producing countries, so we have to show our originality, and our originality comes from the land and the communities, how they are thinking. We have to communicate this.”

A handful of export-ready medium-sized conventional wineries have excelled post-communism – Tokaj Macik and Ostrožovič in Slovak Tokaj and Karpatská Perla in Malé Karpaty among them. But, perhaps because it is such a young country, unfettered by winemaking conventions, Slovakia has become a hotbed of natural winemaking talent.

Last year in Slovak Tokaj, Matus Vdovjak, previously assistant winemaker for Ostrožovič, launched Tokaj UnderGround. Vdovjak, along with Marian Takaj, Stefan Hornik and Martin Dankov, all based around Veľká Tŕňa and Cherhov, focus on natural wine aged in clay, with Georgian qvevri winemaking a source of inspiration.

Zsolt Sütő, meanwhile, believes the natural approach could be a Slovakian signature, which is why he set up the winemakers' group Autentistas Slovakia, currently comprised of Strekov 1075, Kasnyik Családi Pincészet and Mátyás Pince, with two other outstanding natural wineries, VINO Magula and Slobodné Vinárstvo, about to join.

Set on a sprawling 350ha farm located above the Váh river near Hlohovec, Slobodné

Vinárstvo – the Free Winery – is one of the more idiosyncratic wine producers in Slovakia and, like Strekov, is doing an admirable PR job for the country. Inclinations towards skin ferment wines, local varieties like the aromatic Devin and Frankovka Modrá, and ageing in clay vessels have made it the darling of wine hipsters the world over.

VINO Magula in Suchá nad Parnou, in the Trnava region, is also worthy of note. In addition to some excellent orange wine and an exciting new investment in Pinot Noir – last year the winery planted 450 massal selection Burgundy pinot vines in its Wolf's Valley vineyard – a highlight here is a range of strikingly elegant, floral, red-fruited Frankovka Modrás.

Mátyás, based among Hobbit-y ancestral cellars in Nova Vieska, also produces charming Frankovka Modrá, along with a Pinot Noir (Rulandské Modrá). Its main variety, oddly, is Pinot Blanc (Rulandské Biele), including one or two excellent cuvées involving skin maceration. Ján 'Jonny' Svetík in Levice also produces some fine, ageworthy examples.

“People have started to realise that this is really the Central European red,” notes Vlad Magula. “From here, there's Frankovka Modrá on alluvial soils, with nice acidity and not so high in alcohol, then there's Svätý Jur on granitic soil. Then you have the south which is completely different again, with more alcohol and a more jammy style. Then you have the volcanic style with a cool, salty, mineral twist. This grape belongs to all of them.”

Work still to do

Another emerging natural wine producer is Živé Víno in the Malé Karpaty village of Svätý Jur. In this historic wine village, just 10km or so from Bratislava, it's easy to get a sense of the negative heritage of the Communist era.

The post-revolution process of redistributing vineyards led to a major separation of growing and making wine. Consequently there are many wineries without any vineyards, and conversely many growers who are simply selling grapes. Well-appointed old vineyards also lie abandoned, with convoluted inheritance

laws creating fragmentation of ownership and thus stagnation for the wine industry.

“We lost a lot,” admits Živé Víno's winemaker Dušan Škubák. “We lost time, we lost experience, we lost a lot of vineyards and we have to learn it again. It's not so easy to get back because there are still many things in historical memory... It will take more than one generation for us to recover from this.”

Undoubtedly, however, there are many green shoots emerging in Slovakia, and the future looks bright thanks to enterprising young guns like Vinárstvo Berta in Strekov, Velkeer in Nitra, VINO Rariga in Malé Karpaty and VINO Šmelko, also in Malé Karpaty.

Vinárstvo Berta, run by brothers Lukáš and Matúš Berta, represents one of the best examples of Slovakia's new generation of winemaking talent. Having launched from their family's ancestral cellar in Strekov in 2007, when

Matúš was just 17 years old (he's now 28, Lukáš is 30), they are building an export-ready brand. The main varieties they focus on are Welschriesling and the red Dunaj, a crossing developed in the 1980s to produce full-bodied reds in the relatively cool Slovakian climate, which enjoys strong popularity within Slovakia. Berta also does well locally with the Moravian Muscat and a Cabernet Sauvignon rosé. “Generally in Slovakia we have perfect conditions to make great rosé wines. Rosés from Slovakia are crunchy, fruity, with good structure,” says Lukáš.

In a country with, as yet, very little by way of state support, these younger Berta producers seem to instinctively understand the importance of collaboration. “We are trying to help each other,” says Lukáš Berta. “That's what I like about the new generation of Slovak winemakers, that they are not like, ‘I have my know-how and I'm not going to tell anybody’. No, we are very open.”

Undoubtedly, the post-Soviet feel to Slovakia is giving way to a more dynamic industry with talent, individuality and a sharpened export focus. Accept certain truths – that this is a small region, and that the new face of Slovakian wine is still evolving – and consumers may find themselves pleasantly surprised. ■



Vlad Magula of VINO Magula