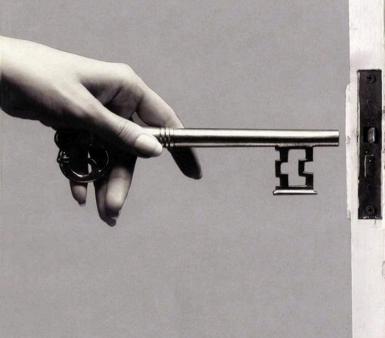
DIRECT PRESS



WIND OF CHANGE

Central European wines and the shadow of the Iron Curtain

Location is

everything, as they say in real estate, and it's just as appropriate when talking about wine. In Central Europe, this can refer to locales that have been known to make excellent wines for over 1000 years. It can also refer to changing borders and disputed territories. Romans, Magyars, Hapsburgs, Ottomans, Nazis, and Communists are just a few of the powers that have controlled Central Europe over the years, all leaving their mark in significant, if not downright traumatic, ways.

This month we're looking at wines from some but not all of the countries that make up Central Europe: Croatia, Serbia, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. This group of countries are united by a history that is distinct from what we call Western Europe or Eastern Europe. It's important to point out that countries like Hungary and Serbia are no more eastern than Sweden, whereas Eastern Europe would include countries bordering Russia: such as Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova. Georgia, often lumped in with this group, is several thousand miles across the Black Sea, far closer to, and at the same longitude, as Iraq.

More than three decades after the Berlin Wall fell, I feel like there is still a psychological and cultural border for wine drinkers. While Austrian Grüner Veltliner is about as exotic

as a Volkswagen Jetta these days, finding Czech or Hungarian wine in a shop is more like seeing a Škoda Octavia parked on your block. This is despite the fact that Central Europe is planted with many varieties found in Austria: not just the Veltiner family, but Welchsriesling (aka Olaszrizling aka Rizling, totally unrelated to Riesling), Blaufränkisch (aka Kékfrankos aka Frankovka) and Rotburger (aka Zweigelt). Though learning some new grape names is not a huge stretch for most wine drinkers, there are myriad linguistic, cultural, and political differences. But for those who surmount these barriers, there are significant vinous rewards to be reaped, as some of Europe's most incredible wine regions are behind the old Iron Curtain.

Central Europe has been dotted with vines dating back to Roman plantings. This month's selections includes two wines from the town of Strekov, on the border of Slovakia and Hungary, where local wines have been praised in writing since 1075. The Hapsburg monarchs, who ruled much of Central Europe from the Middle Ages until World War I, were a wine-loving gang who had their hands in many of the important wine regions of the time. This included Burgundy when Maximilian I married Mary of Burgundy in 1477. Maximilian became not only the Duke of Burgundy but Archduke of Austria and Holy Roman Emperor. But laws and regulations became the real key to improving the wine quality of Central Europe, starting

in 1556, with Ferdinand I creating a code of regulations for trade and agriculture known as 'Landrecht'.

In 1732, Tokaj (pronounced toke-eye) in eastern Hungary became the first legally established wine appellation in Europe, beating Bordeaux by 100 years. The luxurious, prized, sweet, botrytized wines of Sauternes are a copy of Tokaj, not the other way around. Louis XIV of France is said

to have given it the title 'Wine of Kings, King of Wine' in the 1600s. The last Hapsburg ruler, Franz Josef, sent Queen Victoria 12



bottles of Tokaji

Aszú every year on her birthday until
her death in 1901

The middle classes of Central Europe were just as enamored as the royals with the pursuit of drinking good wine, making it a thriving, dynamic place for viticulture. The ruler who did the most to encourage this across the board was Maria Theresa (Holy Roman Empress, Archduchess of Austria, Queen of Bohemia, Hungary, and Croatia) as she introduced wide-reaching wine reforms to promote, safeguard, and raise quality levels starting in 1740. This is mainly why these areas share so many commonly planted grapes today, and why vineyards are planted where they are. Kreso Petrekovic, who makes the Vinas Mora wines in Croatia (Press

4 Red and Press 2), emphasizes that her influence is still felt today, saying "what Maria Theresa did continued through Communism because they did a lot of research and worked on developing agriculture in a very specific way—and in a very successful way."

Communism's influence on wine is more of a mixed bag than you would initially guess. Socialist gov-

ernments took the best plots from landed gentry and focused solely on bulk wine production. Quality was never a consideration, and every vintage was generally the same. Grapes from all over

were thrown together at huge factories, often in vats made of iron—yes, many Iron Curtain era wines actually tasted like iron. It is not a neutral material, like steel. This was only true of wines produced by the state. Crucially, families were allowed to keep small vineyards provided they kept production at a level for personal consumption only.

And many families did this. Kreso says of his parents and grandparents' generation, "if you lived in the country, every family had a vineyard. This was true in our village. It was serious work. A lot of the best vines that are here today were planted during the Communist era, even though it is considered to be an era with periods of no development or no advancement."

These small, family, 'hobby' farms are the reason that much of Hungary's two best regions-Tokaj and Somló (pronounced SHOWM-low) are preserved. Athena Bochanis, who imports Hungarian wines like the one from Jász Laci featured this month, says that "the best parts of Tokaj, Somló, and Eger were left untouched because they were steep and impossible to farm with tractors and machine harvesters. The Communists weren't so efficient that they were able to actually destroy everything. So you still had people making wine by hand at the very top level."

With families only allowed up to three hectares (about 7.5 acres), there were already a lot of people working small plots, but this increased even more after the collapse of Communism. "In the 1990s," Athena explains, "property was really cheap, so a lot of people were able to buy a little bit of land. That's why Somló is Hungary's smallest wine region and the wine region with the most landowners today: over 1000 landowners working a total of 800 hectares."

So while Hungary is full of the small wineries we often value so much, this has its downsides. "One of the reasons Hungary is not very well represented on the international market is because there's no big winery that took over," Athena says. Many post-Communist countries don't have the large, slick wineries that helped other places build familiarity with Americans. Just think where Austria would be without liters of \$15

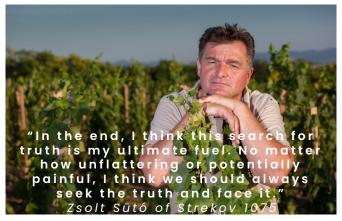
Grüner Veltliner or New Zealand would be without cheap Sauvignon Blanc. Though a decentralized collection of small producers makes for great drinking, it forces consumers to immediately jump into the deep end of the pool, and at prices that reflect labor-intensive, handcrafted wines.

Austria and other wealthy western European countries also have effective government agencies that promote their wines elsewhere. Hungary's current government, which is fraught at almost every level, appears to be nearly incompetent at promoting its wines. This is despite the fact that they receive more EU funding for this purpose than Austria or Greece, given that they have more hectares under vine. Athena tells me that the name of a recent Hungarian marketing campaign was, 'Wines of Hungary: Personally.' In Hungarian it meant something closer to 'Wines of Hungary: It's about the people,' which is not a bad slogan, but they didn't even bother to translate it right."

Hungarian, indeed, is probably the most difficult European language for a native English speaker to learn, up there with Vietnamese and Arabic. "I don't know what it is like to be an importer of another country's wines," says Athena, "but I think that in the EU Hungary has the lowest percentage of people who say they can speak a second language. So it's maybe less than 20% of Hungarians who are comfortable in a second language. And that kind of gives you an idea of the sort of isolation culturally they

have. In some ways, I think it's really cool in this globalized moment when everyone and everything just looks exactly the same. The climate is perfect for wine. They have all these amazing grapes. I think people in Hungary are very interested in native varieties, traditional styles, and natural winemaking. I don't have to convince them." The challenges lie elsewhere. Where Americans are used to using superlatives and in-your-face marketing, Hungarians are averse to such bombast. Instead of 'this wine will change your life,' a phrase easily applied to wines of Jász Laci, he once described his wine as 'nothing special' in promotional material.

Since most wine made in Central Europe is consumed in Central Europe, Catering to the tastes of Americans is not a high priority. Yet the importers and winemakers who are focusing on international consumers have seen the potential to ignite a meaningful cultural exchange through wine as well as an economic one. Right now there is a mix of wines from Central Europe available in New York that can do just this. Kreso Petrekovic is particularly skilled at bridging the



gap between cultural tastes. He spent many years working as a sales rep for Zev Rovine Selections in New York before he decided to revive a local cooperative facility in Primošten, where he was staying during the Pandemic. Vinas Mora is one Croatia's few natural wine projects. "My idea was to make wine that really belongs here, but to be presented in a way where you can understand that. Not to make an egotistical natural wine of philosophy or dogma. I wanted to make something my friends would want to drink." These friends included people like Four Horsemen wine director Justin Chearno, who lovingly told Kreso, "you motherf@&#er, I can't believe you made these wines." I'm also squarely in Kreso's target audience, and I would agree with Justin. They are as pleasurable and exciting as the wines of Eric Pfifferling of l'Anglore while speaking clearly of Croatia's coastal limestone terroir and native varieties like Babic, Debit, Marastina, Plavina, and Lasin. A natural wine scene that exists in cities like Paris or Oslo is not going to spring up overnight, even in a tourist-heavy area like Primošten. But Vinas Mora's wines could easily be the catalyst to make that happen.

Winemakers we're featuring this month, like Milan Nestarec in the Czech Republic or Oszkar Maurer in Serbia, have been found at places like the Ten Bells and Noma for many years now, but they are still very much outliers in Central Europe. That's not to say they are alone; in fact there are more winemakers working this way but most US importers can't take on additional producers, given they already have their work cut out for them with their existing rosters. My guess is that will change in the coming years. Despite the cultural and political challenges to exploring wines from these countries, it is a vast frontier for wine lovers, and climate change may make some of these countries even more lucrative locales.

When I first started in wine, if you were willing to explore places that many people sidelined, like Beaujolais and the Loire, you could drink wines that fulfilled some of the loftiest philosophic and gastronomic promises even with an hourly retail associate's wages. But Lapierre Morgon is no longer \$20–it's \$45. More and more of my peers are seeing Central Europe as the place to find wines that speak of unique terroir and ancient methods. But these countries force you to reckon with more than climate, geology, or the idiosyncratic tastes of obscure grapes. You can't talk about these wines without bringing up economics, politics, and the often violent histories that are intertwined with the vine and the people who tend them. Yet I find hope here. In a region known for borders that have been fought over for thousands of years, the wines have managed to unite people far better than any government.

Cheers, Jonathan

Bormuhely Dry Tokaj

Tokaj • Hungary Press 4 Mix/White

Tokaj, in northeastern Hungary, is the oldest wine appellation in Europe, established in 1732 and pre-dating Bordeaux by 100 years. As such, it is a place of immense pride and unique terroir for making world-class wine. The local passion for excellence in winemaking was interrupted by the Communist era's insistence on bulk production and utility but 30 years later the region is reclaiming its centuries-old reputation. The Communist era did allow for lots of small, family-owned plots in historic areas, however, and that is what János Hajduz and Krisztián Farka are working with for Bodrog Bormuhely, or Bodrog Workshop, named for the Bodrog River that is the lifeblood of Tokaj's vineyards. Though famous for it's sweet, botrytized wines, this is a more rare example of

dry Tokaj that shows off the local volcanic soils. A blend of 70% Furmint and 30% Harslevelu, the main grapes of the region, made all in stainless steel with minimal sulfur. Graham cracker, lemon, and juicy pear, this is a salty, lower acid wine that is nevertheless fresh and easy to love. *Jonathan Kemp*

texture and tannins are so fine-tuned, creating a delicious tension between the earthy, spicy elements and the expressive primary fruit.

The mix of freshness and complexity found here is really on another level, much like Jász himself. *Jonathan Kemp*

Jász Laci Sagi Narancs Somlo • Hungary Press 4 Mix/White

The enigmatic Jász Laci is making some of the most uncompromising wines in Somlo. Despite making some of the most exciting expressions of the region's intense volcanic terroir, his wines never get the Somlo designation. This is because Hungary's wine bureaucracy is even more hardheaded and antagonistic to natural wines than France's. Even though he bottles under the most basic Hungarian wine classification, the government still forces him to add sulfur to the wines, though he does the minimum and there is zero free sulfur in the end.

'Sagi Narancs' is Olaszrizling (aka Welchsriesling—not related to Riesling) that comes from a vineyard known as the 'Valley of the Fairies.' It spends three months on the skins and is a clear nod to the Georgian winemaking methods that Jász looks to for inspiration, though it ages in steel instead of clay amphora. Briny sea spray, orange pekoe tea, apricot and cumin notes all come together in a way that has a beautiful clarity. The



Jasz Láci by Athena Bochanis

Nestarec Youngster Red Moravia • Czech Republic Press 4 Mix/Red

Milan Nestarec may be the name on the wine label but his wines are more than the sum of one person's efforts to make authentic Moravian wine. Milan's winemaking journey began as far back as he can remember. Due to wine's presence in his family's daily lives Milan knew he was destined to be a winemaker. Born in the biggest wine growing village in the Czech Republic where every family made enough wine for their own consumption, his family's foray into professional winemaking came after they were returned a plot of land that was

seized by the the Communist regime during the Velvet Revolution in 1989. This prompted Milan's father, Milan Sr. to pick up seasonal vine-yard work in Germany. Through the connection of the German winery they were able to purchase second hand equipment to ramp up their production and continued buying small plots of land one at a time, despite Milan Jr.'s plea for a computer. These acquisitions and increased

volume of wine production led to Milan's father entrusting him with all winemaking decisions at the age of 16.

This is a youthful fresh drinking wine with just the right amount of structure and zip for a weeknight meal. With notes of beets, blueberry, cola, dark red florals and a dash of earth this is an extraordinarily versatile wine. This would be great with funky cheese and charcuterie, gamier meats, and mushroom dishes exactly the fare these colder months will be calling for. Jeremy Hernandez & Bruno Sant'Anna



Milan Nestarec in his vineyards

If you've had the opportunity to follow Milan's wines over the last few years you'd be hard pressed not to notice a gradual development of precision in his wines, which he attributes to his "essence over style" approach.

His 'Youngster' wines are all blends from organically grown estate fruit. The Youngster Red is a mix of Blaufrankisch, Cabernet Franc, and Dornfelder. The fruit is all hand harvested, pressed, and spontaneously fermented from indigenous yeast in steel tanks. The wine is bottled unfiltered, unfined with no sulfur additions.

Kosovec Zweigelt 2018 Moslavina • Croatia Press 4 Mix/Red

Ivan Kosovec is bringing careful organic farming and no-BS winemaking to Moslavina, Croatia, one of the country's smallest regions. He purchased four hectares of untouched land 50km from Zagreb and cleared it for vineyards that he planted in 2005, working organically from the start. He has made a name for himself in natural wine circles because of his work reviving a very rare local white grape called Škrlet. However, he also works with the more commonly planted Austrian varieties like Frankovka (aka Blaufränkisch) or Zweigelt, as is the case

here. This is such a great expression of Zweigelt, capturing the darker qualities of the grape with red plum and fresh fig notes. Yet where many versions of this grape get overly extracted and are fatiguing, Ivan's version has a remarkable harmony of elements: plump fruit, rustic levity, tannic clarity, and tangy edge. Very crowd-friendly and perfect for sausage, hearty stews, or a roasted Zagorje turkey, a special breed that is found only in central Croatia. *Jonathan Kemp*

Strekov 1075 Fred X Strekov • Slovakia Press 4 Red

Strekov 1075 is the winery of Zsolt Sütó, a former pumpkin farmer turned natural winemaker philosopher. He is located in the town of Strekov, in southwest Slovakia, where 90% of the population is of Hungarian descent, including Zsolt. It's a region that is a crossroads of culture, changing hands politically from the Hungarians, Austrians, Ottomans, Czechoslovakians, Nazis, and Communists until their independence in 1989. In some ways it's not surprising so many have fought over this territory, with it's lush, rolling slopes and vineyards that are tempered by the Danube River and its surrounding marshlands. Zsolt's philosophy is centered around the trust and faith that is needed to make wine without sulfur. "I had a barrel that was borderline flawed, I felt it coming," he says. I also knew that a tiny bit of SO2 would spare me the risk; but if I added it, I'd

never know the eventual outcome — maybe the wine would manage to take care of itself. In the end, I think this search for truth is my ultimate fuel. No matter how unflattering or potentially painful, I think we should always seek the truth and face it."

'Fred' is his basic table red, but it's much more than a basic wine. It's a snapshot of this warmer corner of Pannonia, a wine with soul and zero pretense. A non vintage blend of Alibernet (a cross between Alicante Henri Bouschet and Cabernet Sauvignon), Dunaj (cross of Blauer Potugieser and Sankt Laurent), and Portugieser, from 2021 and 2022. It's a juicy, grippy red with blueberry, violet, and peppercorns. Zsolt says the F in Fred stands for "friendly, fresh, but also f&%#ing good red."

Jonathan Kemp

Vinos Mora Barbba Primošten • Croatia Press 4 Red

Vinas Mora is a project based in Primošten, a stunning part of coastal Croatia protected by UNESCO. Figures like Diocletian used to beat a path to this area to relax, eat, and drink well and escape the 9-5 grind of being a Roman Emperor. The project is run by Kreso Petrekovic, a former NY wine importer and sommelier who comes from a Croatian winemaking family—at least in the sense that the family made wine for their own consumption, like many in this region. Vinas Mora took over the neglected local co-op, giving local farmers a much-needed place to

continue selling their fruit. Now it is one of the few natural wine projects in the country, and focuses on taking advantage of the incredible local vineyards while preserving the local Babić grape as well as other autochthonous varieties.

'Barbba' is their fresh, gulpable red, made from Debit, Marastina, Plavina, and Lasin, planted on limestone and dolomite. Kreso wanted to make a wine his friends would want to drink, and as he has lots of friends in the natural wine world in Brooklyn, I am squarely in his target audience. No shocker here to discover I find this wine to be insanely delicious. Light and great with a chill, it has notes of strawberry fruit leather, violets, steeped orange peel, and iced tea. It's a gateway to discovering the enormous untapped winemaking potential of Croatia. Jonathan Kemp

Oszkar Maurer Fodor Olaszrizling Szabadka • Serbia Press 4 White

Oszkar Maurer's family has been making wine for four generations in what was part of Hungary until 1920. He works organically and has been helping mentor younger winemakers and assisting them with wine and farming equipment so that they can also showcase the special qualities of the region.

The grapes for this 'Fodor' Olaszrizling come from almost 60 year old vines that were part of Oszkar's great-grandmother's dowry. This is an almost wild vineyard with the wild life and cover crops mimicking the forest of the nearby Szelevényi nature reserve. Following his grandfather's advice that the Olaszrizling needs time on the skins in order to survive, this wine sees 6 days of skin contact and 12 months in barrel. The wine is a direct showcasing of traditional farming and winemaking. Keeping with tradition the wine is bottled unfiltered by gravity with no additions.

This wine contains grapes with botrytis, aka noble rot, but is bone dry. The result is a graceful dance between dried and fresh fruit aromas. Smells of honey, raisins, and mandarin oranges. Takes weight on the palate, finishing with notes of apricot tart. Would pair beautifully with butternut squash ravioli, duck in fruit-based sauce, or brie cheese. Demi Elder & Jeremy Hernandez

Fekéte Juhfark 2018 Somló • Hungary Press 4 White

Sometimes we come across wines that seem to good to be true, and this is one of them: one of the final vintages from Bela Fekéte, aka 'the grand old man of Somló.' Bela is a nonagenarian who is respected as one of the finest winemakers in this region of Hungary. Somló is the site of an ancient underwater volcano, vines planted around its dome, rising out of the surrounding plain like some kind of destination for heroes in a Tolkein fantasy. It has been

home to viticulture for 2000 years and it is Hungary's smallest but most serious appellation for dry white wine. The wines from Somló are quite distinctive, due in no small part to the unique volcano they come from. They have been written about since 1093 and loved by generations of European royalty (including Maria Theresa and Queen Victoria) for a reason.

Fekéte's 100% Juhfark—a grape found only in Somló that translates to 'sheep's tail-delivers on all of these regional peculiarities. This is an opulent, savory, volcanic wine to be sure, with luxe texture, waxy breadth, and a delicate hint of honey and white chocolate. Yet somehow it remains lifted and refreshing: that is the secret that makes Fekéte's wines so exceptional. These are reminiscent of Jura whites, every bit as unique and complex; though they are richer and saltier with powerful tension and backbone from Juhfark's naturally high acidity. Fekete's vineyards are said to have a 'secret garden' quality that is a little wild, especially compared to his neighbors, but the results are anything but an accident. Long, slow aging in 1200L Hungarian oak also helps with longevity. These wines need some time, and this is just starting to show us the incredible depth it possesses. Pair it with goat cheese, stuffed cabbage, salmon, pork, or hearty chicken stews. Jonathan Kemp

Kasnyik Orange Rizling Strekov • Slovakia Press 2

Brothers Tamás and Gábor Kasnyik, along with Gabor's wife Virág, are some of the strongest voices in Slovakia's natural wine movement. They are located in southwest Slovakia, near the Hungarian border. They are immensely proud of their home, the historic Strekov region that is sculpted out by the Danube River and was first mentioned in 1075 for it's excellent wines. Along with four other producers (the others are Strekov 1075, Slobodné, Vinárstvo, Magula, and Mátyás) they founded 'Autentista Slovakia' which lays out strict rules for natural farming and winemaking, including a path to undo many of the harmful practices of the communist era.

Part of their charter reads, "We Authentists hereby subscribe to the legacy of our ancestors, who lived on these lands and farmed them for



Gábor & Virág amongst their vines

thousands of years, growing grapes and making wine to delight the spirit and celebrate God's goodness. As their descendants, we want to use our native land to produce wines of consistent quality, so we can preserve this land and pass it on to our children healthy and beautiful."

Thier Orange Rizling is Olaszrizling, aka Welchsriesling, which is confusingly unrelated to Riesling, but is one of the most common grapes in the Pannonian region. It spends two weeks on its skins and a year on the lees in old barrels. Less than 20ppm of sulfur added and they note that the histamine level is 4.40 mg/L as well, which is a stat I've never seen before on a wine bottle. Lemon peel, mandarin orange flesh, fresh cut hay, and a spicy mustard green edge. It's a vivid and invigorating wine that is a testament to the Kasnyik's eye for detail and their stated passion for making wines that can please and unite. Jonathan Kemp

The vines of this Babić are close to the Adriatic Sea in extraordinarily rocky terrain just above sea level. The vines range between 10-110 years old here and have been cared for impeccably with biodynamic practices. The wine is bottled after a year of aging in a mix of fiberglass tank and neutral barrel. It is unfined and unfiltered with the smallest amount of sulfur possible.

Picked at the end of October, this wine enjoys a super long ripening season but still has low alcohol and a crunchy cranberry snap that is far lighter than you would expect for a coastel red. There are some great aromatics here with black pepper, fresh herbs, and a mix of macerated black and purple fruits jumping out at me. On the palate I picked up black cherry, black pepper, and a heap of earthy minerality. I'd say this is reminiscent of some classic Croatian red wines with more nuance, focus, and a healthy dose of energy.

Jeremy Hernandez

Vinos Mora Kaamen I Primošten • Croatia Press 2

For the Kaamen I Kreso Petrekovic teamed up with local couple Josipa and Neno Marinov. Together they jumped on the opportunity to revive the abandoned winemaking facilities of a local co-op.

