

Croatia, Georgia and Hungary – The Haven of Production

The typical American consumer would probably fail to point out Eastern European countries like Georgia, Hungary, Croatia, or Slovenia if they were given a map of Europe. However, in terms of wine production, this region is actually a major player in the world market. Once the heart of the Eastern Bloc, these countries create some of the most treasured wines, using ancient wine making methods supported by land and history.



Croatia

Croatia is a completely unique dividing line, where Western and Central Europe meet from the Adriatic Sea to Albania. The coastal regions of Croatia have given birth to the nation's best wines. Istria, near Slovenia, is the home to a large variety of red wines made from Merlot, Carbenet Sauvignon, and Teran grapes. They have also given unique white wines, like Iстриana, a very rich version of Malvasia.

The Pelješac peninsula vineyards have yielded dense, fragrant Plavac Mali wines with a variety of scents that range from dense, meaty, and earthy to light, floral, and herbaceous. The nearby islands of Hvar and Korcula have given us crisp, fragrant white wines from the local Pošip grape.

Winemaking is a cultural mainstay of Croatia, to the point where many of expatriates have found amazing success in other countries. Miljenko Grgich, also called Mike, is famous in Napa Valley. He moved back to Croatia in 1996 to focus on wines. New Zealand's famous Kumeau wine region was formed by Croatian families in the 1930s, who created wineries like Kumeu River, Matua Valley, or Nobilo.



Croatian winemakers, businessmen, returned natives, and foreign investors have created many of Croatia's best known and most successful wineries. Lee and Penny Anderson of the USA formed Korta Katerina after traveling to Croatia. Ernest Tolj, a businessman, created Saints Hills and hired Michael Rolland of Bordeaux as a consultant. Alen Bibic¹ is a native Croatian that reformed his family's traditional winery after clearing land mines from the ancestral land.

Georgia

Georgia is the dividing line between Eastern Europe and Asia. Evidence of winemaking date back 6,000 years, including grape presses and qvevri, or clay fermentation vats. 90 percent of Georgia's wine production went to Russia until 2006, when Russia levied a trade embargo on Georgian wines. Since that year, Georgia has focused on establishing its fine wines and offerings in a global market. With a variety of lovely grapes, the country's wineries focus largely on quality.

Saperavi, Georgia's red wine grape has lent bold, rich color and deep flavor to wines meant for aging. Rkatsiteli, the dominant white wine grape, was once the most popular grape of the Soviet Union due to its adaptable nature to many winemaking styles. Georgia has produced Champenoise style sparkling wines since the 1800s, with some of the best in Eastern Europe being born of Georgian grape blends from 1882.

The most popular Georgian wines are made using the most ancient styles; these wines were natural and organic far earlier than these ideas mattered to farmers and winemakers. Josko Gravner makes a popular 'orange' wine using ancient Georgian techniques, macerating white grapes in qvevri, coating them with beeswax and burying them in the earth. These low, regulated temperatures offer a slow oxygenation for these wines, giving them rich red and orange hues with powerful tannins.



Some of the best qvevri wines are created in ancient places, like Alaverdi Monastery. Though these are limited and uncommon, the Alvederi wines and others like them through Telavi and Pheasant's Tears, are becoming more available in the market abroad. They are recently available in the United States as well.

Hungary

Tokaji Aszu, the rich honey wine from botrytized grapes, has been the archetypal Hungarian wine. It was a favorite of well-known persons like Thomas Jefferson and Russian czars. These floral, fruity wines are typically made of Tokaji grapes like Furmint, Harslevlu, and Muscat, creating brands like Royal Tokaji which is readily available in the United States.

Hungarian winemakers have begun to move toward dry wine production. The best dry wines are created from Furmint or Tokaji grape blends. These all have touches of the same honeyed, floral richness and waxy mouth-feel of the sweeter Hungarian counterparts. Pinot Grigio and Gruner Veltliner, as well as other local grape varieties, have made it into the United States market. Though famous for white wines, Hungary produces rich red wines as well. Egri Bikaver is a rich, ruby red mix of traditional and new grapes. Though over-produced, it is Hungary's most famous red wine.

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