

# Jancis Robinson

- Resize

## Eastern Slovenia, Europe's Middle-earth

### INSIDE INFORMATION SLOVENIA

*It takes an Irishman to persuade a Zimbabwean-Brit to fly to the remotest corner of Slovenia to taste wine on a whim.*

Actually, it took an Irishman two years, six bottles of wine, some breathtaking drone footage and a lot of persistence ...



But I got there.

Wizz Air (I kid you not, that is the name of the airline) flies from the grimly post-industrial Luton to Ljubljana. From there it's a two-and-a-half-hour drive to the north-eastern corner of Slovenia, within spitting distance of the Croatian border, and not that much further from Hungary and Austria.

This is not the orange-wine-sexy side of Slovenia (see [Julia's articles on Brda](#)). There are no Radikons here. But there is something other-worldly, almost Hobbit-like about this bucolic place, fitting Tolkien's description of The Shire as a 'small but beautiful, idyllic and fruitful land'. Fine wine importers in County Mayo with a double life as winemakers in Slovenia, Liam Cabot and his wife Sinead are huge champions of Slovenian wine, especially those that come from the less-known north-east region of Podravje (also known as Podravska).

Back in 2016, he'd sent some samples of their own wines to try and despite knowing next to nothing about Slovenia or its wines, I was blown away. He told me that Slovenia was beautiful, and I should come and see it myself. Everyone says that about their own region, even more so if they've adopted it and invested blood, sweat and wallet into it. And I was busy.

The following year he sent me their 2016s, and once again, they were fabulous. I broke the Wine of the week rule that a wine should be widely available (which I won't do again, Jancis, I promise) and made their Furmint my [wine of the week](#). Please come visit, Liam nagged, promising to show me interesting producers and wines.

In 2017, he sent me this [drone footage of Kog](#) and a [ream of photos](#), telling me that if it was proof that I needed, this might help. A few months later, with bloody-minded determination, he sent me dates, flight times and connections and said he would be waiting at International Arrivals. I know when I'm out-stubborned. Braving the perils of the Wizz Air website, I booked my flight.

In autumn 2018, knowing nothing about where I was going or nothing about this Irish couple other than a few email exchanges about their wine, I found myself standing in Ljubljana airport at midnight, looking for a guy with a beard.



Kog is a tiny string of a village, population 164, deep in Podravje. As the crow flies, it's about one kilometre from Croatia, you can be in Hungary in 20 minutes (less on the train) and Austria in 40. This is alpine country. You can be on the ski slopes near Maribor in under an hour, the vineyards thread up pretty steep slopes, and even on the hottest days, cool breezes fan the vines.





It's also farming country. Every second house, it seems, has a vineyard, and most people seem to have a cow or pigs, hens or bees. Patchworks of vineyards are separated by dark belts of thick beech and pine forest, rich green pastures, fields misty with the white flowers of buckwheat and chamomile or golden with wheat. Trees are laden with fruit, from fuzzy green-yet-sweet vineyard peaches to crisp red apples. I stopped twice on a morning run to pilfer plums hanging over the road, saving them, I reasoned, from the fate of the hundreds squashed all over the tarmac. (Unusual, I might add, for a place so clean and tidy that I wondered if people were popping out every morning to scrub their bit of the road.)



When I sat down for breakfast at Hlebec, my entire meal (above) – of fresh cheese, sliced bell peppers, tomatoes, basil, Kranjska sausage, ham, rye bread, butter, honey and jam – bar the coffee, came straight from the Hlebec farm or from close neighbours. Pumpkin-seed oil, deep blackish green, nutty-sweet and rich, is a speciality of this region and is drizzled over cottage cheese, salads, beans and ice cream. We passed old men sitting on stools, cigarettes hanging out their mouths, piles of orange pumpkins behind them, red plastic buckets in front for the seeds and knives in their hands as the growing pile of seed-shucked pumpkins in front of them became pig food.

The producers I visited are all in Podravje, the largest winegrowing region in the country (6,050 ha/14,950 acres under vine). This hilly, forested region with a continental climate of hot summers and cold winters is made up of two main districts. Štajerska, also known as Styria and once part of Austrian Styria just over the border, has the lion's share of the vineyards. Prekmurje, in the north-eastern-most corner and once part of Hungary, has just 784 ha (1,937 acres) under vine. Maribor, Ormož, Ljutomer, Jeruzalem, Gornja



Radgoner and Ptuj are the important wine towns of Štajerska and you will often see these names on wine labels.



This is white-wine region where Furmint (known locally as Šipon, pictured above), particularly from the Ljutomer-Ormož area, had an international reputation for producing fine wines as far back as the early 1800s. From 1810 to 1813, Napoléon briefly annexed Slovenia into his Illyrian Provinces. The story goes that French soldiers, sampling local wines, preferred the Furmint, commenting, 'C'est si bon! C'est si bon!'. And so, as legend would have it, the name Šipon (pronounced shee-pon) came about. Ljutomer-Ormož is still where the most exciting Furmint is to be found.

Renski Rizling (Riesling), Sauvignon Blanc, Laški (Welschriesling) and Traminec (Traminer) are the other high-quality whites of the region today along with an emerging red-wine production of Blaufränkisch (Modra Frankinja, pictured below being raked off the skins) and Pinot Noir. Red wine makes up just 7% of production, although more than one winemaker

told me that before phylloxera and the communist era there were a lot more red varieties planted than today.



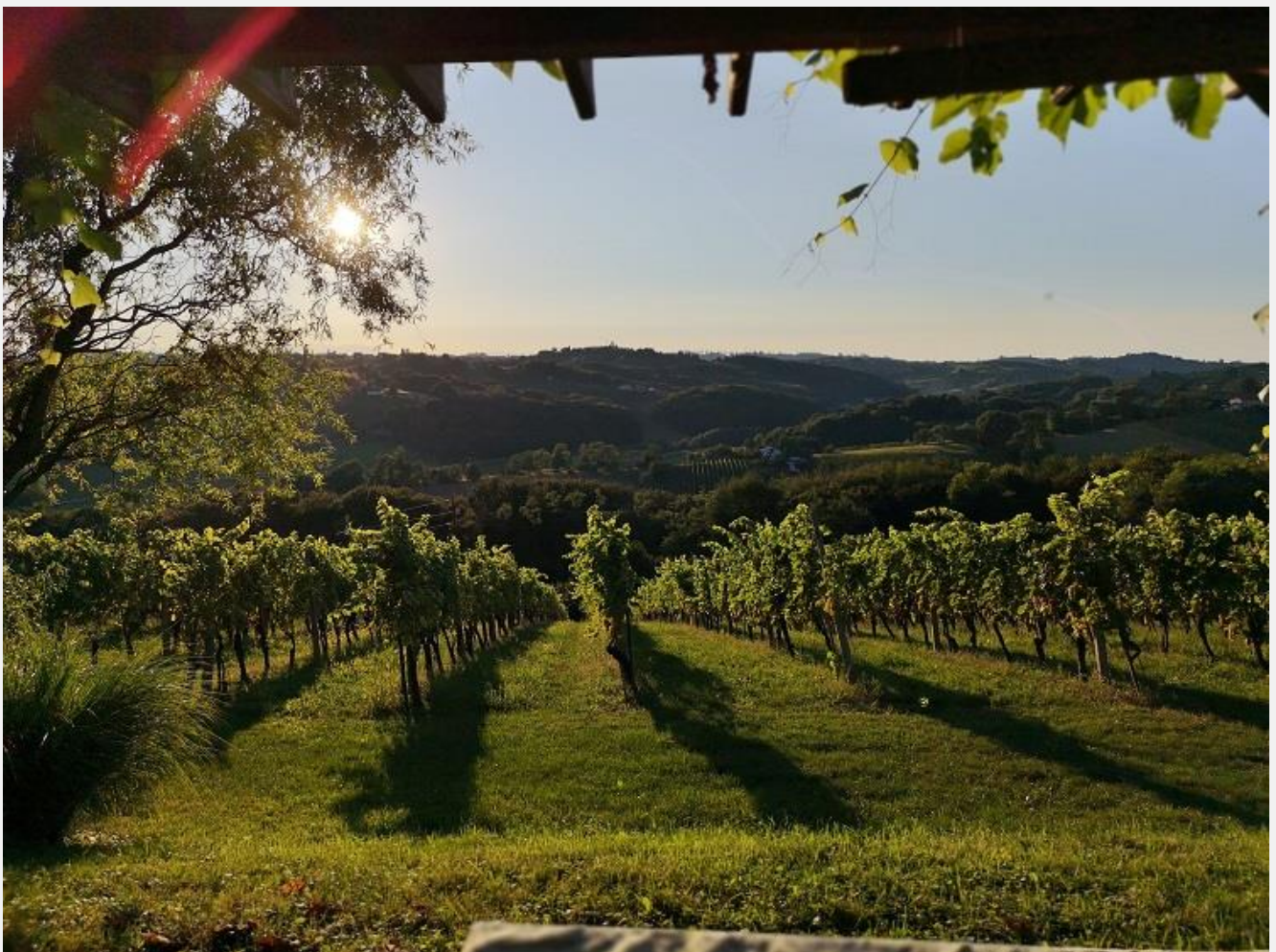
Thanks to the communist era, much of the production during the twentieth century was bulk, cooperative-made sweet wine, but even so, Slovenia, unlike many other countries under communist rule, managed to keep the quality of their cooperative wine relatively high. Wine-district boundaries were drawn up in 1935 (along with recommended varieties for each), quality-standard seals were established in 1969 and new wine laws were implemented in 1974, formalising regions and districts and regulating production, yields, quality standards and permitted grape varieties. Today, most quality wine is dry, although Podravje still makes stunning sweet wines under a strict German-style Prädikat classification.

When Slovenia broke free from Yugoslavia in 1991, small private producers began to proliferate. Many registered to claim their family vineyards back from the state – a complex, fraught process – and many sought to buy



vineyards that hadn't been claimed. A new generation went to college and university to study viticulture and oenology and began to travel to other countries to gain experience.

Confidence is growing, styles are maturing and the export market is growing. Wine, as with so many countries in Europe, is part of life here. You make your own or you buy from your neighbour, as you do with honey or cheese or ham. But just as Brda, on the opposite side of the country, has carved its own distinctive niche into the wine world with quite remarkable wines, so has this to-date-overlooked, humble, spotlessly neat and heartbreakingly beautiful little corner of Europe.



All the beautiful photos in this article are by Liam Cabot, with the exception of my Hlebec breakfast!



