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Jancis Robinson

27 Aug 2024

Central and Eastern European wines, part 1 - Mediterranean



With so much to discover, Jancis and Tam both attended the inaugural Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) wine fair in London earlier this year. We begin our three-part coverage with Jancis's 41 tasting notes on wines from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia next door, and Cyprus, the island undergoing perhaps the most dramatic wine revolution of all. Still to come: wines from the Black Sea region, and wines from the landlocked heart of the continent.

This was altogether an eye-opening tasting and I felt very fortunate to have snagged both Croatia and Cyprus as they were the two most exciting selections of wines I tasted, even more so than from the lone exhibitors from Armenia and Ukraine. There were some interesting wines from Romania but the selection was arguably less of a novelty for me as I have already devoted [several articles](#) and [approaching 200 tasting notes](#) to wines from this extremely vine-friendly country.

But first, **Bosnia and Herzegovina**. I had already tasted the odd wine from this vast landmass in the hinterland of Croatia. If I saw them at a wine fair, I would make a beeline for their stand because it's so rare to get an opportunity to taste such exotica, but I see I have not so far been sufficiently impressed to add tasting notes to our database. There were only two exhibitors – both from Herzegovina in the south – at the CEE tasting, and both from round Mostar, a name which may ring bells from the terrible war of the early 1990s. It's famous for its bridge and I remember Mr (always 'Mr') Vitkovich, then importing into the UK the most authentic wines available from what was Yugoslavia, inducting me into the delights, also much in evidence at the CEE tasting, of dry white Žilavka from Mostar in the late 1970s.

This was when I was editing the trade magazine *Wine & Spirit* when I still went on press trips. Arguably the most memorable was a ridiculously ambitious tour of what was then communist Yugoslavia which included being served sheeps' eyeballs and the group's being manoeuvred into enthusiastically waving bright red napkins for the camera.

The **Croatian** wines at the CEE tasting were both numerous and impressive. I was able to continue my love affair with the very local grape Malvazija Istarska, the white speciality of Istria (locally Istra – see [this World Atlas of Wine map](#)), the bit of Croatia that bulges into the Adriatic just south of Trieste, and to see how the tough local red wine grape Teran (a little bit like Tannat) is being tamed.

But the white wine grape Pošip, a speciality of southern Dalmatia and particularly the island of Korčula, is another exciting Croatian gift to the world's wine drinkers, along of course with the close relative of Zinfandel, Plavac Mali. Jako Vino's Stina wines specialise in indigenous Croatian varieties but, like the vast majority of exhibitors at the tasting, are not (yet?) represented in the UK.

There were separate tables for those UK importers who already sell wines from the countries in question and Croatia was the country best represented on those tables – by Howard Ripley, Liberty Wines, Novel Wines and an outfit that used to be called The Old

Cellar and is rebranding itself as The Jolly Merchants. But we need more! Thanks partly to tourists who understandably flock to the azure waters of the Adriatic and all the islands in them, Croatian wines are not cheap. But they can be very good indeed.

And there was much promise in evidence at the **Cypriot** table, on which was a collection of seven producers – Fikardos, Vasilikon, Kyperounda (producer of a 2013 wine of the week), Mallia (the remnants of the old giant KEO), Tsiakkas, Vlassides and Zambartas – all selling under the auspices of WineCore, the Cyprus wine consortium. There was a time when a handful of seaside companies dealt in vast quantities of cheap copies of sherry and nondescript bulk wine for the Soviet Union but the Cypriot wine scene today is dominated by an array of independent, ambitious wine estates in the hilly interior and is unrecognisable from that grim era, as detailed in this article, Return of the native grape varieties, by Caroline Gilby MW, one of the major forces behind what was a truly seminal tasting.

The 41 tasting notes below are grouped by country as follows:

- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Croatia
- Cyprus

Within those groups the wines appear alphabetically by producer (sur)name with each producer's wines in the order they were tasted.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Carska Vina

A family winery with 180 years of tradition, guided by father and son Grgo and Andrija Vasilj. Today, the winery has 22 hectares (54 acres) of vines in the Mostar wine region, producing around 80,000 litres of wine each year. The winery name, Carska Vina (which means Imperial Wine), was inspired by the region's historical connections to the Austro-Hungarian era when wines from Herzegovina were served at the emperor's table in Vienna. The indigenous varieties Blatina (red) and Žilavka (white) are the main focus of the winery, alone and in blends with international grapes.

Carska Žilavka 2023 Middle Neretva

Deep, greenish straw. Chock-full of fruit. Really emphatic, with great extract. Such character!

12.5%

Drink

2024

-

2026

17

Carska Blatina 2021 Middle Neretva

Bright crimson. Quite high volatile acidity. Velvety texture but on the edge in terms of volatility.

13.5%

Drink

2023

-

2025

14.5

Škegro Family

A family winery in Ljubuški not far from Mostar, cultivating old terraces planted on clay and limestone, where vineyards are up to 100 years old. They have seven labels, using only indigenous grape varieties: Žilavka, Blatina and Trnjak. Total production is 40,000 bottles per year, and exports account for 97% of production. The main export markets are USA, UK, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, Slovenia and Croatia.

Škegro, Krš Bijeli Žilavka 2023 Middle Neretva

Unoaked and grown on clay.

Neat and fresh but not as dramatic as the Žilavka from Carska. A little astringent on the end. Low key.

13.5%

Drink

2024

-

2026

16

Škegro, Carsus Trnjak 2022 Middle Neretva

A unique Herzegovina grape thought to have been brought from France by Napoleon.

Deep, healthy crimson. Like the Blatina from Carska, this seems quite high in volatile acidity. Then very sweet before the really hefty tannins kick in. Not really well balanced.

14.5%

Drink

2025

-

2029

15.5

Croatia

Fakin Wines

The Fakin winery is a young estate owned by second-generation winemaker Marko Fakin who took over from his father Elio in 2010. They own 40 hectares (99 acres) of vineyards close to the medieval hilltop town of Motovun, Istria. The focus is on local grape varieties (Malvazija Istarska, Teran and Muscat). The vineyards in the Motovun Hills are located above the Mirna River valley with a Mediterranean climate, cooled by constant breezes. The white, stony soils are based on limestone and schist.

Fakin Malvazija Istarska 2023 Istria

This wine accounts for 60% of their production.

Lovely, welcoming honey-and-apple nose. Very pretty indeed and rather elegant. Great texture and fruit/acid balance. Charming, with a light note of bitterness on the end.

13%

Drink

2024

-

2027

17

Fakin, Il Primo Teran 2020 Istria

Very bright crimson. Pure, aromatic fruit expression. Really varietal and bittersweet, with excellent persistence. Bittersweet but not painful. Still lots of tannin but there's also lots of fruit.

14.5%

Drink

2023

-

2030

17

Kabola Winery

Kabola is a family-owned winery based in Istria, close to Buje. The estate owns 20 hectares (49 acres). The story of winegrowing in the Markežić family dates back to 1891, when the family first planted Momjanski Muskat. Today the main grapes grown are indigenous: Malvazija Istarska, Teran and Momjanski Muskat. Kabola has been certified organic since 2009. Marino Markežić believes that use of clay amphorae in the winemaking process has made it possible to raise the quality of the maceration.

Kabola Malvazija Istarska 2023 Istria

Certified organic.

A little neutral on the nose then perhaps some cultured-yeast influence?

13%

Drink

2024

-

2026

15.5

Kabola, Amfora Teran 2020 Istria

Certified organic.

Bright crimson. A little sweaty on the nose. Then damson fruit. Correct but not thrilling.

13.5%

Drink

2024

-

2027

16

Kozlović Winery

Valle, a valley in the north-western part of the Istrian peninsula, bordering with Italy and Slovenia, has been the home of Kozlović family since 1904. The estate's 25 ha (62 acres) of vineyards are located on hillside sites in western Istria, facing south and south-west, most notably the Santa Lucia vineyard with the oldest plots dating back to the 1960s. The winery works only with indigenous varieties: Malvazija Istarska, Teran and Muscat Momiano.

Kozlović, Selekcija Malvazija Istarska 2021 Istria

Unoaked selection of riper grapes from three vineyards. Grown on flysch 15 km from the sea but influenced by it.

Tangy and quite rich. Really satisfying balance of fruit and acidity, with a hint of baked apples. Lightly smoky. Long.

13%

Drink

2023

-

2028

17

Kozlović Teran 2022 Istria

Very difficult to grow but rewarding, and they are now picking it riper.

Peppery nose and then sweet red-fruit flavours with medium tannin, though it dries out the mouth on the finish - like Refosco! Juicy start and very firm on the end.

13.5%

Drink

2024

-

2029

16.5

Stina (Jako Vino)

The winery is located in the historic building of the Bol co-operative, Dalmatia, dating back to 1903. The founder, Jako Andabak, makes wines from two vineyards - Stipančić, a 5-ha (12-acre) plot for reds, and Grabice, a 55-ha (136-acre) plot predominantly planted to white varieties - as well as working works in co-operation with a further 30 ha (74 acres). Indigenous Croatian (Dalmatian) varieties account for 11 of the winery's 14 labels.

Jako Vino, Stina Pošip 2023 Srednja i Južna Dalmacija

Light nose reminiscent of Albariño (similar marine influence?). Then masses of clean, well-defined fruit, with a little but not-unpleasant citrus-peel astringency. Maybe doesn't quite follow through perfectly but it's certainly very respectable and full of character.

13.5%

Drink

2024

-

2028

Imported into the UK by Hallgarten & Novum Wines

16.5

Jako Vino, Stina Majstor Plavac Mali 2019 Srednja i Južna Dalmacija

Complex, mature nose. A panoply of rich fruit ushers in graininess. The alcohol is a little obvious and there is no shortage of tannin(!) but this is proper handmade wine. Perhaps the tannin will outlast the fruit though?

14%

Drink

2023

-

2029

16.5

Vislander

The family began cultivating vines in the 17th century on the Croatian island of Vis in Dalmatia. Today, Vislander is the largest family winery on Vis. The estate is the only producer on the island of single-vineyard Plavac Mali (25 ha/62 acres) and offers various styles of Vugava (12 ha/30 acres).

Vislander, Premier Dračevo Polje Bugava 2022 **Srednja i Južna Dalmacija**

Bugava is a local spelling of Vugava.

Not much nose. Then broad and lightly smoky on the palate, with real grip and substance. Grapefruit sensation but there is quite enough fruit and character to compensate for a little astringency. Really interesting!

13.5%

Drink

2024

-

2028

16.5

Vislander, Tihobraće Polje Plavac Mali 2017 Srednja i **Južna Dalmacija**

Single-vineyard wine.

Intense nose, with complexity from a parent of Zinfandel. Quite a bit of tannin, still. I suspect this needs even more time! But it's noble and expressive.

14.5%

Drink

2026

-

2032

16.5 +

Others

Benvenuti Malvazija 2022 Istria

Lots of full-bodied fruit. Slightly bitter finish but masses of character. Baked apples and lots of fun, but I tasted (even) better on the other tables.

13%

Drink

2023

-

2026

Imported into the UK by Howard Ripley

16.5

Benvenuti, Anno Domini Teran 2018 Istria

Pretty high volatile acidity and then lots of tannin. Not really beautifully balanced. Falls off the perch a bit at the end.

14%

Drink

2022

-

2025

Imported into the UK by Howard Ripley

15.5

Clai, Sveti Jakov Malvazija Istarska 2019 Istria

Orange wine - deep orange! - from one of the area's pioneers of low-intervention wines. Rich start with some dusty aromas and really intense flavours. Very rich indeed. And look at that alcohol!

15%

Drink

2022

-

2025

Imported into the UK by Howard Ripley

16.5

Clai, Baracija Refosk 2020 Istria

Meant to be a summer fruity wine but it's pretty tough on the end! I'm not sure I'd want to chill this, even though that is recommended by the importer.

13%

Drink

2023

-

2025

Imported into the UK by Howard Ripley

16

Feravino, Dika Graševina 2022 Slavonia

Rather neutral nose. Then amazing grip! It could be sensational with the right food but I don't know what that is! Calling Tam ...

12.5%

Drink

2024

-

2028

Imported into the UK by Liberty Wines

16.5

Feravino, Dika Frankovka 2021 Slavonia

Traditional Slavonian variety.

Lots of acidity and then a slight lack of volume on the mid palate. Adequate. And, actually, quite long. Damson purée.

13.5%

Drink

2023

-

2026

Imported into the UK by Liberty Wines

16

Iločki Podrumi, Selected Graševina 2021 Hrvatsko Podunavlje

Easy, gentle and a little astringent, without quite enough engaging fruit to compensate. A bit of obvious sweetness on the end.

13%

Drink

2025

-

2027

Imported into the UK by Novel Wines

16

Iločki Podrumi, Kapistran Crni 2017 Hrvatsko Podunavlje

Frankovka, Cabernet Sauvignon.

Not sure about the oak quality here. A bit weedy overlay on too-sweet fruit.

13.5%

Drink

2020

-

2024

Imported into the UK by Novel Wines

14.5

Ivica Matošević, Alba Malvazija Istarska 2023 Istria

A blend of different locations.

Nose is a tad commercial. Correct but a bit bland.

13%

Drink

2024

-

2026

Imported into the UK by Liberty Wines

15.5

Ivica Matošević, Grimalda 2020 Istria

Merlot, Teran, Cabernet Sauvignon. Grimalda is the location.

Mid garnet. Sweet start. Good charge of acidity. Well-melded blend.

13%

Drink

2023

-

2026

Imported into the UK by Liberty Wines

16

Testament Pošip 2018 Sjeverna Dalmacija

Nutty nose and real grip on the palate. Very characterful. Hint of varnish adds something, too!

12.5%

Drink

2022

-

2026

Imported into the UK by Novel Wines

16.5

Testament, Dalmatian Dog Babić 2018 Sjeverna Dalmacija

Winning drawing of a hound on the label.

Full of bittersweet fruit. Lots of fun. Dry finish. But dog lovers will flock to this wine.

13%

Drink

2022

-

2026

Imported into the UK by Novel Wines

16.5

Zlatan Otok, Novus Pošip 2019 Srednja i Južna Dalmacija

Pale gold. Bitter finish but plenty of the varietal character! A little sourness but that's the character. Great, long-lived stuff.

13.5%

Drink

2022

-

2027

Imported into the UK by Novel Wines

16.5

Zlatan Otok, Barrigue Plavac Mali 2013 Srednja i Južna Dalmacija

Transparent crimson. Juicy fruit that has a strong meaty element to it. Very mature! But still the drying tannins on the end. A bit goat's-cheesy, too. Arguably too strong a character to find favour.

14%

Drink

2020

-

2024

Imported into the UK by Novel Wines

15

Cyprus

Fikardos, Single Vineyard Xynisteri 2023 PGI Pafos

Firm, lightly metallic nose. Full-bodied and white-currant flavours with a bit of oak, I think. Maybe a bit too much.

12%

Drink

2024

-

2028

16

KEO Xynisteri 2023 Cyprus

The winery name (Mallia) only in small font on the back label.

A little bitter on the sudden end, but serviceable.

12%

Drink

2024

-

2025

15.5

KEO, St John 2017 Commandaria

Very cheesy nose in that funny, squat flask. Raisiny. Just a bit too sweet. Then a bit tart.

15%

Drink

2020

-

2025

16

Kyperounda, Alma Maratheftiko 2022 PGI Lemesos

A hint of 'natural' hamster cages on the nose. Smooth and light, with bittersweet fruit. Very juicy and characterful.

13%

Drink

2024

-

2026

16

Kyperounda 2016 Commandaria

Xynisteri. Mid orange. Lightly cheesy/rancio nose. Lots of oak-ageing and then dried peel and a certain nuttiness. I must recommend this at Christmas! Very long. Sweet but not too sweet. Great balance!

13%

Drink

2023

-

2030

17.5

Tsiakkas Xynisteri 2023 PGI Lemesos

All-Greek label.

Light nose. Very fruity start and lightly astringent.

13%

Drink

2024

-

2025

16

Tsiakkas 2020 Commandaria

Xynisteri. Peachy nose without quite the refreshment of the Kyperounda. Sweeter and a tad less subtle.

14%

Drink

2024

-

2027

16.5

Vasilikon Xynisteri 2023 Laona Akama

Lively, leafy, fresh and soaraway. Really successful and refreshing, while having lots of personality. Bravo!

12.5%

Drink

2024

-

2028

16.5

Vlassides, Alátes 2021 Krasochoria Lemesou

Oaked Xynisteri.

Light nose and rather leafy on the palate. Refreshing and with good enough structure to be worth keeping.

13.5%

Drink

2024

-

2027

16

Zambartas Promara 2023 PGI Pafos

Fresh, fruity – indeed, very fruity – palate with real impact. Great balance. Very satisfactory with quite enough well-integrated acidity.

13%

Drink

2024

-

2027

16.5

Zambartas Xynisteri 2023 PGI Lemesos

Full bottle 1,263 g. From low-yielding old Xynisteri vines grown at 850 m in the Krasochoria region. Unoaked.

Chalky, citrus nose with real grip on the palate. Extract without heft. Bone-dry Mediterranean refreshment. Admirably long.

13%

Drink

2024

-

2027

16.5

Zambartas, Single Vineyard Xynisteri 2023 PGI Lemesos

Full screwcapped bottle 1,305 g. Designed specifically to express the terroir of the Krasochoria region. Pied de cuve, 100% barrel-fermented in 225-, 300- and 400-litre barrels with acacia heads and oak body (namely Seguin Moreau Fraicheur barrel) for 6-7 months without racking. Certified organic.

Much tighter and more ambitious than the regular bottling. High-toned with a strong streak of lime and something blossomy, too. No aggressive oak but real structure. Serious stuff! You could certainly enjoy it this year but to taste it at its best, my suggested drinking window may be preferable. Like the regular version, this is *extremely* persistent. I dread to think how I dismissed Xynisteri in the old days ...

13.5%

Drink

2025

-
2030
17.5

Zambartas Maratheftiko 2022 PGI Lemesos

Attractive, bittersweet aroma of elderberries. Big, fruity start and then a refreshing, grainy finish with quite enough acidity and a twinge of bitterness on the end. Really nice wine that should take well to chilling.

15.5%

Drink

2024

-

2028

17

The image of a coastal vineyard on the Dalmatian coast of Croatia is by Goran Stimac via Getty Images.