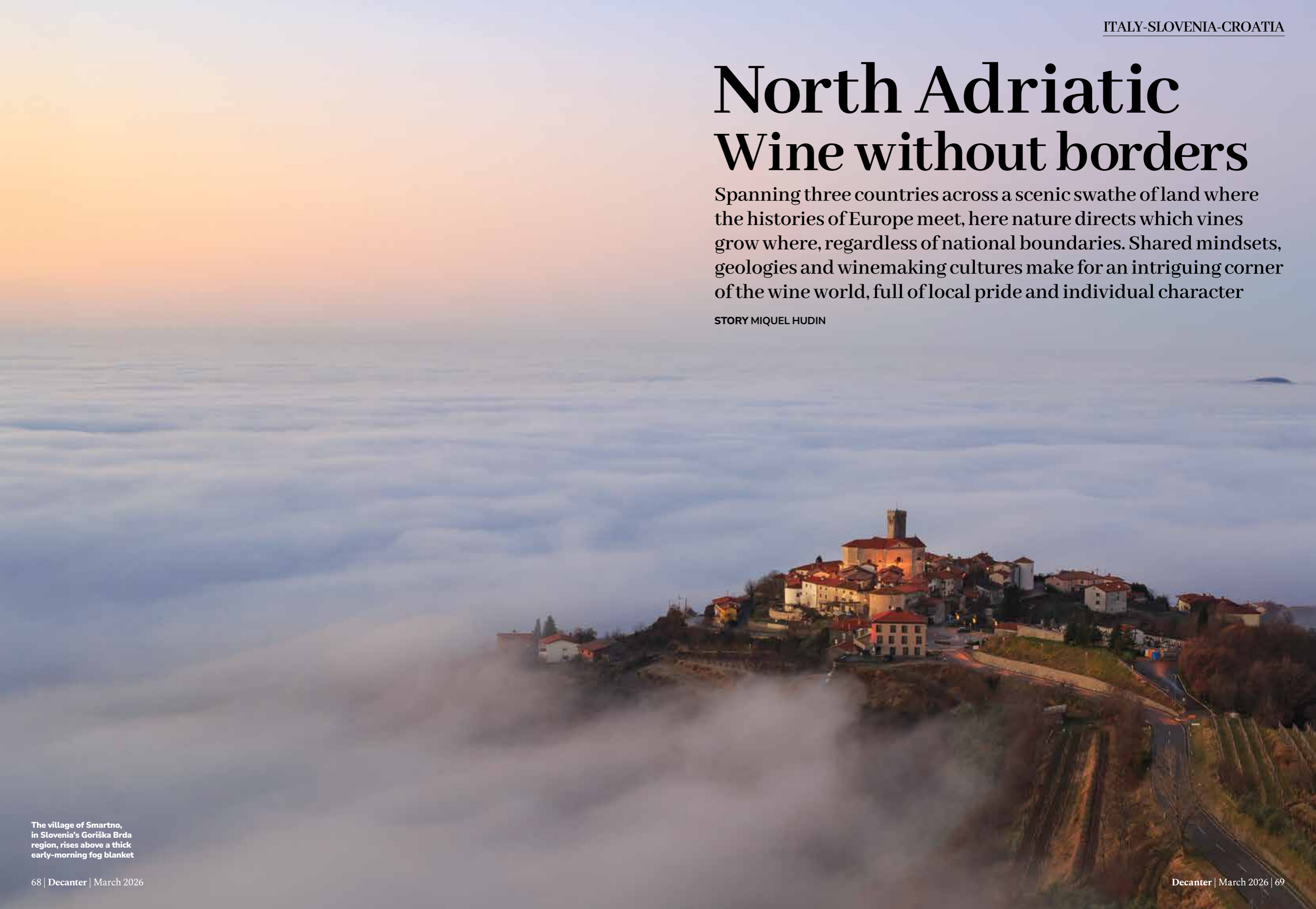


North Adriatic Wine without borders

Spanning three countries across a scenic swathe of land where the histories of Europe meet, here nature directs which vines grow where, regardless of national boundaries. Shared mindsets, geologies and winemaking cultures make for an intriguing corner of the wine world, full of local pride and individual character

STORY MIQUEL HUDIN



The village of Smartno, in Slovenia's Goriška Brda region, rises above a thick early-morning fog blanket



Aleš Kristančič of Movia Wines, in the Slovenian village of Ceglo, about 250m from the border with Italy, pours his Lunar Ribolla into a decanter

For any wine region to be great, it needs a simple name. Just look at Bordeaux. Given its 65 appellations, having this one name is quite convenient as trying to remember all of them, save for a few of the most famous, is a tedious proposition. The same can be said for Burgundy, the Rhône, Napa or a multitude of famous regions the world over.

This is what makes the proposition of the 'North Adriatic' so appealing. It's a convenient shorthand for not just a very wide group of appellations, but also parts of three different countries, including northeast Italy and the western parts of Slovenia and Croatia.

When Paul Balke, author of the book *North Adriatic* (£40 Académie du Vin Library, 2020), contacted me about a trip he was planning that grouped all of these regions into one much more digestible whole, I thought it a splendid idea. I've been tasting them individually for nearly two decades and hadn't really considered the fact that they are, to any wine drinker, far more comprehensible via this collective nomenclature.

While at first glance it may appear that this spaghetti of borders, rivers and small mountains has no cohesion, there are several aspects that bind it all together. And, given that Croatia entered into the Schengen and Eurozone at the start of 2023, imagining that there is any kind of separation at all seems more artificial than the separation that was.

First and most important is the Italianate nature to everything. In ancient history this was all Roman, and in later history it was all Venetian. It's only during the last century that things have become a great deal more complicated, especially after World War II. Despite this, almost everyone who isn't Italian (namely Slovenes and Croats) does also speak Italian.

While this shared language and history is what we see on the surface, below there's a vast stretch of flysch (charmingly known locally as ponca/opoka in Italian/Slovenian), a sedimentary mix of sandstone and marl that links the geology of the region.

Linked by separation

This novel new way to look at the region essentially has Trieste in Italy's far northeast as its focus point and city, with Venice serving as the western flank and Rijeka, Croatia, as the eastern (see map, p74).

It would be easy to get bogged down in finite details across these various lands, of which there are 15 zones. However, there are two core regions to the north and south that are the most important, as they both produce some of the most exciting wines: Colli Orientali/Collio/Goriška Brda straddling Italy and Slovenia; and Istria, which is mostly in Croatia, with a smaller northern segment in Slovenia and the smallest scrap just to the south of Trieste.

These two North Adriatic sub-regions perfectly embody a spirit of being 'apart yet together'. ►



Miquel Hudin is a widely published and awarded wine writer and judge.

Originally from California, he is now based in Catalonia and writes exclusively about the wines of southern Europe. He is founder of the *Vinologue* series of wine books and the wine portal hudin.com



The Devil's Bridge in Cividale del Friuli (see p72), in northeastern Italy, with the Natisone river below

'In ancient history this was all Roman, and in later history it was all Venetian'



‘Along these hills, one will find undulating waves of vines’

Prior to the imposition of the new border in 1947, Collio and Brda formed a single, coherent wine region, with the same flysch soils extending west into Colli Orientali. Anyone wandering through these hills today could potentially cross the remnants of old, now-obsolete borders several times in a single day without noticing any real difference – aside from the reversed order of the bilingual village signs and the shared tourism branding of Collio Brda, marked by small shelters dotted across the region, ready for a selfie (pictured, top – and see colliobrdawelcome.com, brdawines.com).

Along these hills, one will find undulating waves of vines and, while both red and white varieties are planted, what’s most notable are the vines of Ribolla Gialla/Rebula. While not planted as much as in the past, there has been a renewal in the last 20 years, with the wines ranging from a fresher style to full-on skin-contact orange, to sparkling wines that are really pleasing these days, such as the **Kristalvin, Rebula Extra Brut**.

The still wine producers – such as **Movia** or newcomers such as **Ferdinand**, both in Brda – are also excellent locales to visit. Movia especially seems to have a steady stream of visitors, which should come as no surprise given the view from the terrace of the cellar.

While there is plenty of Ribolla Gialla in Collio, the Italian part of this common area, it’s with Friulano where producers seem to be excelling, especially from the likes of **Renato Keber** or **Castello di Spessa** (pictured, top right). There’s something of a branding issue with this white grape, however, given

Quirky designed yellow seat-shelters are dotted throughout the Collio Brda region, often framing views over the vineyards

that it can be found labelled as Tocai (a name that had to be changed under EU regulations, due to its confusion with Hungary’s Tokaji – the luxurious sweet wine made mostly from the Furmint grape), as well as Friulano, Sauvignonasse and the particularly confusing Zeleni Sauvignon.

To the point of Istria

It’s difficult to leave the hills of Collio/Goriška Brda (a feeling I know well from many trips), but there’s much more to see in the North Adriatic region. One can go west to regions that are much more plain-driven, especially in Friuli – the zones of Grave, Isonzo or Colli Orientali. In Friuli Grave, Udine is a lovely Italian city to visit, too (see map, p74); and, 10km to its east, the very historic town of Cividale del Friuli is a necessary stop.

Or you can head east, deep into Slovenia, winding along the 70km of the Vipava valley, with grapevines on the valley floor, castles high above on the hills and, higher still, the rocky Karst plateau, which is shared by Italy and Slovenia. But once you pass through Vipava and follow the rear side of Trieste – a wooded world away from the busy Italian city and port – you arrive at the Istrian peninsula, which, like Collio and Brda, was a single contiguous region prior to World War II.



The vineyard holdings of the 13-century Castello di Spessa near Capriva del Friuli, Italy, are spread over the Collio and Friuli Isonzo appellations

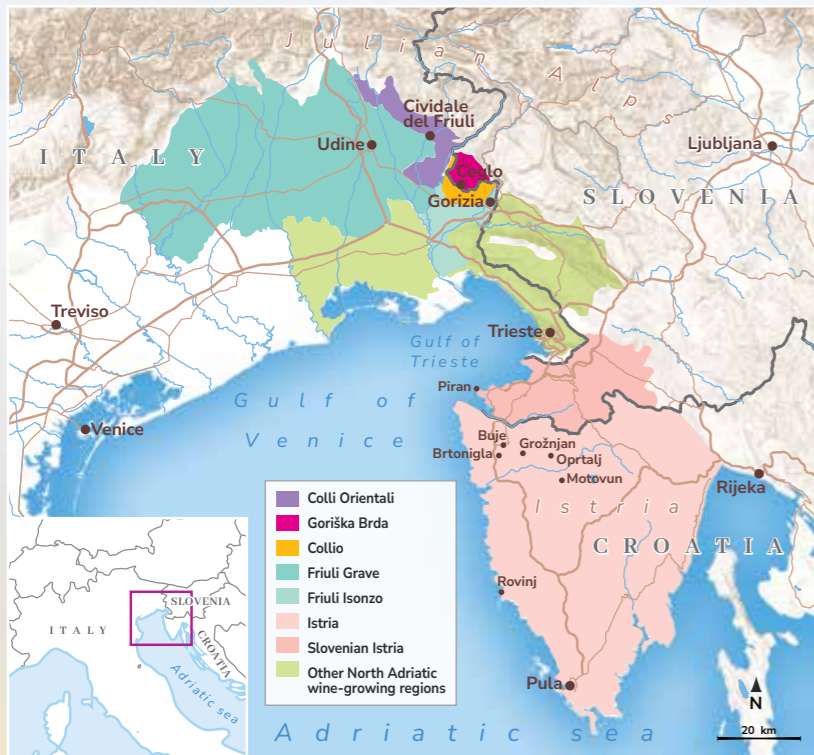
Wherever you are in Istria – from its Italian sliver at the northern end to Slovenia’s 43km of coastline and the vast bulk of land in modern Croatia – you’re far better off pulling back from the coast by some 10km or so. The historic presence of Venice is clear in the lovely towns of Piran in Slovenia and Rovinj in Croatia, while the unmistakable imprint of the Romans is apparent in Pula at the tip of the peninsula.

Large-scale tourism, too, has left its mark along the entire coastline. This, however, is nothing new and, as such, the interior was long developed as a destination for boutique hotels, fine food and, of course, very, very good wines.

Both the flysch soils from the north and the Italian language continue into Istria. In fact, schools in Croatia are bilingual, as are the street signs, and the local Croatian language is markedly different – more sing-song and melodic when compared with that spoken in the country’s capital Zagreb.

Heart of the peninsula

While roughly half of Istria is planted with vines, the most serious production and winery focus lies in the northwestern areas of Croatian Istria and, at slightly lower altitudes, in neighbouring parts of Slovenia. Conveniently, this overlaps perfectly with the most scenic, postcard-ready parts of Istria, including ►



the villages of Brtonigla, Buje, Grožnjan, Oprtalj and, perhaps most famously of all, Motovun. Running around the bases of the hilltops these villages call home is an endless parade of vines.

Istria is also refreshingly easy to understand from a grape variety point of view. There are, broadly speaking, two principal grapes: the white Malvazija Istarska, and the red Teran (Terrano in Italy, Refošk in Slovenia – though the latter may be a close relative, rather than exactly the same variety).

Despite this shared varietal base, the resulting wines can show significant stylistic differences. This is worth noting, as in recent years, producers in Slovenian Istria have leaned more towards natural and low-intervention approaches, as seen at **Korenika & Moškon**. This isn't to say such practices don't exist further south, but Croatian Istria retains a strong, studied Italian core of winemaking that has a tendency to keep things more tightly controlled.

Teran-based wines from producers such as **Coronica** and **Cattunar** rank among the stars of the region's reds. On the white side, Coronica's **Gran Malvazija**, Kozlovič's **Santa Lucia** and Clai's

Baracija Malvazija are all genuinely world class. Of course, it would be remiss to focus solely on the wines. Truffles should also be high on the agenda – ideally grated generously over a steak at a fine *konoba* (a traditional tavern or small restaurant serving regional cuisine) enjoyed with an unparalleled view from the top of Motovun village.

A delicious slice of the Adriatic

Paul Balke proposes that the North Adriatic concept stretches as far as Rijeka and the nearby island of Krk. There is indeed a shared history across these areas, but they lack the rolling, vineyard-covered hills that seem to define much of the rest of the region.

That said, it remains a sound concept. The core elements of wine, history and, for lack of a better word, an 'Italian' style feel broadly contiguous throughout. Given how difficult it can be for neighbouring wine regions – let alone different countries – to work together in pursuit of a common goal, it may be some time before there's greater alignment. Still, for wine lovers who enjoy one part of this region, there is a great deal more to explore and enjoy across the North Adriatic as a whole. **D**

PHOTOGRAPHS: JURKOSGETTY IMAGES; FLAVIO VALLENARI/GETTY IMAGES; ROMAN DZUBALO/SHUTTERSTOCK; MAP: IP MAP GRAPHICS LTD



The ancient hilltop fortress village of Motovun in central north Istria, Croatia