**Written by**
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*3 Jan 2018*

# Book reviews 2017 – new Old World


Georgia, Croatia and Hungary have a long history of winemaking. I could have put these books with the Old World reviews, but it many ways it seems that we are rediscovering the wines of these countries, and in some ways they are rediscovering themselves after long periods of war, communism and struggle. Carla Capalbo's book could also just as easily have fitted in with the food-book reviews, so rich was her coverage of Georgian cuisine. But in the end I decided that they really deserved their own space on the bookshelf. For more reviews, see Book reviews 2017 – a guide.

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***Tasting Georgia***
*A food and wine journey in the Caucasus*
Carla Capalbo

Published by Pallas Athene
ISBN 9781843681250
£30, $40


Carla Capalbo visited Georgia for the first time in 2013. By the time she left, she'd already decided to write a book. This is Capalbo's thirteenth book, following on from one on the food and wine of Collio, which won the André Simon Award for Best Wine Book in 2009. She's a photographer; a food, wine and travel writer who studied art; and has lived all over the world, often moving hundreds of kilometres in order to immerse herself in her subject. This book took two years and endless weeks travelling the length and breadth of the country.

The book begins with a short history of Georgia and an introduction to Georgian wine, which focuses solely on qvevri wine made by just over 50 winemakers (and which, as she notes, represents 'only a tiny percentage of Georgia's enormous wine output'). The story of qvevri wine segues into the *tamada*'s tale and from there into an introduction to Georgian food. The *tamada*, in Georgia, is a very important person. He is the toastmaster at the famous Georgian *supra* (feast), and the *tamada* is not unlike a conductor in an orchestra – directing the rhythm, the timing, the intensity and the atmosphere of the whole event. It's highly skilled, and Capalbo has interviewed one of Georgia's acclaimed *tamada* to explain the significance of the role.

Georgian food, unlike almost any other national cuisine, does not stand on its own. It is inextricably entwined with religion, music and dancing, as well as with wine, so the next chapter looks at the relationship between these things. We have come to associate Georgians and their immoderate hospitality with feasts that seem to go on forever and food that just keeps coming, but Capalbo puts this into the important context of their strong Orthodox religion in which fasting plays a very important part throughout the year. Fasting can be strict but on some occasions it might simply mean eating only vegetables, which has given rise to a colourful and delicious array of vegan dishes. Music and dancing don't so much interrupt the feasting as deepen the cultural memory and strengthen the bonds between food, fellowship and survival. (It's almost impossible to understand the Georgian culture of eating and drinking without understanding the impact of the millennia of wars fought over its soil and decades under the shadow of Soviet Russia – see Julia's report on her first visit to Georgia.)

The next chapter, on Georgian ingredients, is fascinating. In alphabetical order, Capalbo puts together a list of the most important foods you'll find in a Georgian kitchen, with a detailed description for each. There are some strange and wonderful-sounding things, such as *ajika*, a fiery capsicum paste, *tenili* cheese, *shindig* (the coffee-bean-like sour Cornelian cherry) and *jonjoli* (fermented buds of the bladdernut tree).

Capalbo is an old hand at writing cookbooks, and the chapter on how to cook Georgian food reflects her experience as well as her eye for detail. Measurements are given in metric, imperial

and US cups (although I was pleased to see that she strongly advocates weighing dry ingredients – recipes that measure butter in cups and spoons drive me mad). She's explained her interpretation of Georgian recipes, an inevitable recourse given that most Georgians cook by instinct and experience, throwing in handfuls and pinches rather than grams and millilitres, and the average western palate may not be acclimatised to the sheer intensity of heat and garlic that Georgians consider normal. She also explains portion sizes, which don't directly translate due to the style of Georgian eating, how a Georgian menu is put together and in what order the food is served. You might think that all sounds a bit like stating the obvious, but Georgia has its own unique way of doing things.

The rest of the book is designed like a journey, starting in Tbilisi and moving roughly clockwise round the country from there. Each chapter focuses on a different region, taking us into towns and villages, and literally tasting our way round Georgia. But before that journey starts, Capalbo makes sure that we don't leave home without the all-important master recipes for *khachapuri*, the iconic Georgian cheese-filled bread, and *khinkali*, Georgia's most popular food in the form of a filled dumpling.

As a travel writer and artist with an obvious eye for beauty and a curiosity for everything, Capalbo has not ignored the sights, sounds and scenery of Georgia in her pursuit of flavour. Each chapter includes vivid descriptions of the landscape, monuments, churches and flora. Each chapter also includes recommendations of where to stay, shop, eat and drink, but what struck me as unusual was that instead of the usual neat, briefly annotated list, comprising overview, wine, places to eat, places to drink, places to shop, places to stay, she's just woven these recommendations into her fluid narrative, and apart from the small red letters at the end of each paragraph giving an address, phone number and/or website, it's just a part of the story. Her favourite Georgian baker is Sasha Jabidze, 'wearing a once-colourful T-shirt and covered in a light dusting of flour' as he tells Capalbo about working in a factory in 'the Black '90s', and about the regional shapes of Georgian bread. Then there is Jean-Jacques Jacob, a gluten-intolerant Frenchman en route to Egypt to grow vegetables in the desert who got side-tracked by Georgian bread (of all things) and now runs a bakery making bread from an almost extinct type of Georgian wheat.

The recipes themselves, a highlight of the book, are knitted into the journey. An afternoon with a winemaker, a meal in a restaurant, a *supra*, a chance to cook with some ordinary housewives in their ordinary kitchens, an interview with a top chef: all these lead to recipes, often passed down from mothers to daughters for generations, made simply without gadgets or Masterchef pretensions, made out of local, seasonal, often foraged ingredients. Each recipe is, in many ways, a capsule of local history, geography, culture; a vignette of Georgian life in a particular place. Accompanied by mouth-watering photographs and charming pictures of homely dining tables laden with fare, grandmothers and mothers mixing, chopping, rolling, the recipes are authentic but come with a sensible introduction suggesting substitutes for ingredients or adaptations to make them suitable for Western kitchens.

While most are traditional family recipes, she's interviewed three Tbilisi female chefs who run their own restaurants, and persuaded them to part with some of their kitchen secrets. These unusual women have the role of Janus, looking forward they are the vanguard of innovative Georgian cuisine, while looking back they are guardians of culinary tradition. From haute cuisine we head off to the most popular eatery in Georgia, in the lay-by of a busy main road specialising in stewed beans and dumplings. I can only imagine the British version of this: Heinz baked beans and suet dumplings on the side of the M1? But the Georgian gift seems to be to make something remarkable out of humble simplicity and to make the best of every situation. The

Phoka convent, built in the 11th century, makes its own cheeses. But as one of its 23 nuns explains, 'we have nowhere nearby to sell them, so we've developed some special cheeses that mature over time'. Their range of 11 Phoka cheeses have, as a result, become sought after throughout Georgia.

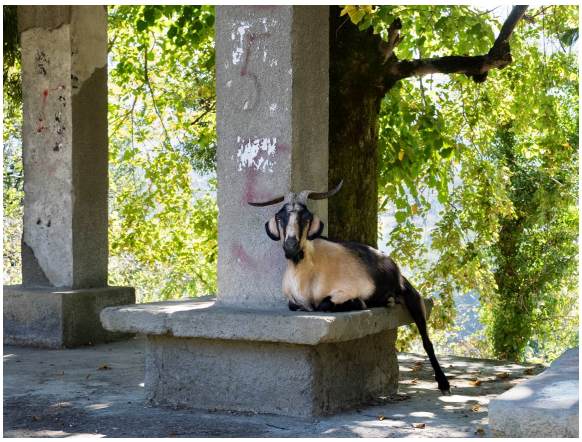
Not everything in Georgia tastes good. Her first encounter with *nazuki* was a raft of women on both sides of a fast, busy road, 'waving what looked like large shoe soles at the oncoming drivers … my guide insisted on crossing to the far side of the road to get to her favourite vendor and we both risked our lives for what turned out to be a very uninspiring flat loaf painted with bland, spiced syrup. You have been warned!'

Capalbo doesn't neglect wine. She visits over 40 wineries, documenting the stories of a great number of the qvevri winemakers. There's the lovely story of Marina Kurtanidze, who complained that, 'when it comes to our wine the whole family pitches in. Yet our wine is called "Iago's wine" [Iago being her husband]. I mentioned that to a woman friend a few years ago who said: "All the winemakers' wives are in the same situation. The men get all the glory. Let's make our own wine!"'. So Marina and Tea Melanashvili became the first women in Georgia to make and bottle their own wine, named ManDili, after the traditional headscarf Georgian women wear. The chapter includes three of Marina's recipes. She writes about Vincent Julian from the Jura, who came to live in Georgia in 2006, is making the first pet-nat in Georgia and who also makes absinthe with wild herbs from the Caucasus. Miriam Iosebidze, behind Georgia's second female-run winery, makes qvevri wine from organic grapes. Her dream is to restore the abandoned 500 square metres that were left when the vineyards were taken illegally from the family in the 1990s. Giorgi Natenadze has a huge dream to restore the once-glorious viticulture of Meskheti, destroyed by the Ottoman Empire. He weeps over the ruthless felling of 300-year-old walnut trees for the furniture industry, looking at the ruins of ancient stone walls crushed in order to get the machinery to them. She spends time with Zaliko Bozhade, the qvevri potter, watching him make the huge clay pots by hand, breathing in honey-scented air as he lines the hot clay with beeswax. Everywhere you see the scars left behind by Soviet rule. In Sighnaghi, Capalbo drives out to visit the Kerovani vineyards and notes how widely spaced the vines are. 'The Soviets used big tractors', the winemaker explains.

At the end of the book is a bibliography, travel information, recipe index and meal planner. I was struck by the generosity with which Capalbo listed other books and websites on Georgia, encouraging the curious to read as widely on the subject as possible. While there are maps in the book (which Capalbo had to create herself because 'nothing existed to show the general placement of things'), she also recommends the maps she found invaluable on her travels. The way she's designed the index has obviously required quite a bit more work on her part, but it makes the book immensely navigable for different purposes: if you're cooking up a Georgian *supra* you can plan the meal by food groups; if you want to work out a tourist route, you can look in the regional index for wineries and restaurants; if you want to find a particular winery, you can look in the winery index. She's also created www.tastinggeorgia.com as an extension of the book with additional information, recipes and a winery directory which explains how to contact the wineries and which services they offer (tastings, meals, beds, languages, etc) because almost none of them have websites.

It's a book for travellers, cooks, wine lovers and for anyone who appreciates glorious photography. It's a book for the greedy – greedy for life and flavour and the richness of tradition and the warmth of breaking bread with strangers and friends. And the book itself is a kind of *supra* – a feast of colour, crafted with patience and persistence, investment, love and skill, bringing people together from all over to celebrate something of great value.

PS I just have to mention my favourite photograph in the book: a very large goat, perched on the concrete seat of a Soviet bus stop, waiting patiently. Carla has very kindly allowed me to reproduce it here, just to give you all a chuckle.



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***Vinologue Georgia***
*A guide to the cradle of wine*
Miquel Hudin and Daria Kholodilina
Published by Vinologue
ISBN 9781941598054
$26, €23


It doesn't seem so long ago that I was reviewing Miquel Hudin's wine travel guide to Priorat, and in the interim, Hudin managed to bag the Geoffrey Roberts Award for 2016, which helped fund his long-held dream to write a travel guide to Georgia.

Helping him in this rather daunting undertaking is Daria Kholodilina. She's a Ukraine-born, Georgia-resident travel blogger who is a chapter leader for Travel Massive and works for the Georgian National Tourism Administration. On her first visit in 2012 she fell in love, moved to Georgia, and adopted it as her new home. If anyone has the inside track on visiting Georgia, it's this red-head with, it seems, enough energy to light up Tbilisi. When I asked Hudin about her, this is what he wrote to me, 'when I made my first casual visit to the country, her blog was the only one that had proper, independent and opinionated information about Tbilisi … while I spent a solid three months traveling the country, there was no way I had that local vantage and so she fleshed out a good wealth of the food and culture parts of the book'.

Unlike previous Vinologue travel guides, this has substantially more meat to it – straying from rucksack-friendly handbook into reference-book territory. This is no bad thing. Georgia as a wine region is still relatively uncharted, and every morsel of information that can be gleaned for curious travellers is a bonus. Having said that, it's not a hefty book, and if I were heading to Georgia I wouldn't hesitate to pack it in my bag.

It's hardback, about 16 x 21cm (6 x 8 in), generously illustrated by Hudin's gorgeous photos, and has been – in true Vinologue style – well thought out with a logical, easy-to-navigate structure. The first half of the book is general information on Georgia – travelling, food and wine. The second half deals with wine regions, wineries, and places to stay, eat and drink.

The first thing that struck me, which I can't say I've ever written about a travel guide, is that it is clear on every page that this book is written with love. Perhaps it's the three months that Miquel spent breathing in Georgian air. Perhaps it's Daria. Perhaps it's the spell that Georgia seems to cast on everyone who visits. But even when describing the driving (to which two pages are dedicated, in an attempt to save your life, dear reader), a dire warning comes across affectionately: 'In Tbilis, it seems that grazing your car is just a city dweller's way of saying, "Hi, and welcome!"' Indeed. (The Georgian Onion, an overtaking manoeuvre, would bring tears to your eyes.)

With the thoughtfulness of detail which makes the Vinologues such a good series, Hudin makes sure that you go armed with practical foreknowledge: the timing of your visit, transport, phone networks, how to get in touch with winemakers (Facebook Messenger, obviously), a Georgian reading list (books and websites), food/wine festivals, a dummies' guide to the Georgian language and the kind of signage you're likely to come across. There is not, I might add, enough information on where to stay and what accommodation is like. I'd like more advice on money – cash, cards, comparative prices. I'm a girl: I'd like to know what the loo situation is. And opening hours: do they do Spanish-style siesta, Norwegian-style supper time, French-style public holidays? Do they go teetotal on Sundays? There are gaps.

The section on Georgian history is a digestible summary of 8,000 years in five pages with all the key touch points covered, including the impact of the country's Soviet past and Russian relations. You realise quite how things were when you read that, 'older people can still remember that treating a guest with a bottle of wine from the shop was simply not polite' because the wines were so horrid. It's not the first time that a bootleg wine industry has saved a country.

Out of the 465+ grape varieties in Georgia, Hudin has focused on the 17 most commonly used for wine with a good photograph of each, useful and meaningful description of the grape and its resulting wine. Despite the chapter on Georgian language, I'd have liked a pronunciation guide for each variety as well. For the digital guide, please?

A couple of pages are devoted to Georgian drinking vessels, and there's more to it than you'd suppose. Much more interesting than a comparison between a coupe and a flute, for instance. But the chapter that was a real highlight for me was the one on kvevri (more usually spelt qvevri). Hudin really takes the time to look at how kvevri are made, used, cleaned, and takes an honest look at the pros and cons of kvevri – good for those of us who get a little misty-eyed at the romance of it all. He also looks at the way kvevri use is changing and adapting for the future – much food for thought (and an MW thesis?).

There are a couple of chapters on natural wine and amber wine. And this is where you see the

author get a little spirited, heated, even. I got a strong feeling that much of this might be directed at certain people in particular, but to give him his due, he's highlighting an issue Julia has also mentioned: that Georgia is being erroneously portrayed as *the* country of natural wine. Hudin tries to get some perspective and set the record straight. Just 1% of Georgian wines are actually 'natural'. He goes to some trouble to discuss what natural wines are and are not, and how that relates to Georgia. He then gets quite pompously pedantic about the use of the term orange wine when the wines are actually amber (consumers may, apparently, get confused and think that the wines comes from oranges) – which makes me happy because I'm a fellow pedant, and I get what he's saying. Whether we're talking, natural, amber, orange or skin-contact, these ancient ways are, ironically, relatively new to wine textbooks, and it's going to be in books such as this one and in other intelligent, informed forums of healthy debate that definitions for the terminology can be established. So rant, Mr Hudin. Lecture us. It's all good.

There are about 15 pages on food – 18, if you count stuff on the *supra* and food-wine matching. I wish there were more. But I had to remind the greedy little sprite on my shoulder that this book was, primarily, about wine. The book gives the reader a round-up of the 'basics' of Georgian cuisine, from spices to sweets. My main complaint in this section is the lack of pictures. There are a couple of full-page shots but with unfamiliar cuisine such as this I'd much prefer a photograph of each dish/ingredient. How else are we to know the difference between *lobiani* and *kubdari*? This section finishes with four speciality shops in Tbilisi selling gourmet, artisan Georgian food, and then (the kind of tip I love when I'm travelling) the name of someone who offers an English-speaking culinary walking tour of Tbilisi. That's why you buy a book like this.

Ending the first part of the book is a chapter on the 18 wine appellations of Georgia, described frankly by Hudin as a 'very, very curious collection'. He's got a local designer to do some very cool maps: ultra-modern, ultra-simple, stylised sketches using circles and lines. I love them. More on that later. Each appellation comes with a map, a summary (history, geography, etc), comments on the quality of the wines, as well as key points on the size of the area, elevation, climate, grape varieties, wine styles, permitted yields and alcohol levels. The digging that Hudin has done to extract and distil this information is worthy of a standing ovation. I know how difficult it can be. For a wine professional, this is gold dust. Thank you.

Part two, Regions, splits Georgia into five broad areas covered in five chapters: Tbilisi, West, Central West, Central East, and East. Although the book doesn't make it abundantly clear, there are 10 wine regions in Georgia and these are covered in more detail within these chapters. Each chapter follows the same format: a map, an overview, orientation, a bit on each of the wine regions within that part of Georgia, and then any wine bars, restaurants/hotels, and places of interest in those regions. It finishes with the wineries – their stories, their vineyards, their wines, peppered with beautiful photographs (check out Keti and Kakha on page 215) that really bring them to life. All of 78 wineries are profiled, although in the winery directory at the back Hudin gives the contact details for 95 of them.

This is the richest part of the book, and is an absolute treasure-trove of information that makes it without question the best guide book for any wine lover travelling to Georgia but, oddly, it is also seems a little unpolished.

If you're unfamiliar with Georgia, particularly names of places, wine regions, cities and appellations, then to even make a start you need to understand how everything fits together. Some kind of 'how to use this book' guide, explaining the geographical divisions Hudin has used to structure the book, the order of things and why would have been extremely useful. A table of regions and their appellations, and a corresponding map (however cluttered), would have eased

the newbie into the maze of Georgia. It would also have been helpful (again) to have phonetic pronunciation guides for all the place names. (I know you told me that *kh* = Spanish *j*, but I'm not sure if Kakha Vakhtangadze is pronounced Kaja Wajtangadze or Kaja Vajtangadze or Kaja Uajtangadze…)

The maps, however good-looking, are not helpful. It is difficult to work out how and where the regions sit within the five geographical divisions into which Hudin has split them. The main map of Georgia gives cities but no regions; another map gives appellations but no cities (or regions); the maps at the start of each geographical division give wineries, restaurants and sites, numbered, but no regions or appellations. They are so stylistic and scaled completely differently from each other that it's difficult to work out how exactly they fit into the big picture of Georgia and connect to each other. Maps are more vital than words when trying to orient a first-time visitor – as many who pick up this book will be to Georgia. Maps need to connect to each other and connect to the text. If you're writing about Imereti in your book, you need to show Imereti on the map right there. I don't want to puzzle over several of the maps and then have to resort to Google to find out where Imereti is and work out where it would sit on the maps in the book. When I read about Lagvinari and the cardiac anaesthesiologist making wine, I want to be able to pinpoint his winery on the map, find the region, and have his contact details right there, but they're all in completely different parts of the book and it becomes a bit of a fiddle. I got frustrated. If I were travelling to Georgia I'd have had to print off Google maps, and I don't want to do that when I have this lovely book in my hands.

There are some odd turns of phrase throughout the book, and I wasn't quite sure whether this was down to a lack of editing, Daria's multi-lingual voice, or, given there were enough of them, a deliberate part of the comfortably informal, chatty style. Sentences such as, 'Winter isn't horribly ideal as is normally the case with winter in most places…' make me blink. There were more than one convoluted sentences, lots of AWOL hyphens and commas that then reappeared in places they weren't meant to be, the obligatory Random Capitalisation (yes, forgive me, I'm making it into a proper noun), plurals when singular should have sufficed, and overall a sense that the copyeditor was in a tremendous hurry or perhaps was distracted by the thought of a *supra*. The best I can say of the editing is that it is tatty.

I love the warmth and humour which threads through the book, the deep respect for the people, the land, the wine. And yet, thankfully, this isn't a starry-eyed Disney version of the vineyards that time forgot; it's pragmatic, honest, even-handed and sometimes quite critical. Miquel Hudin writes with great integrity.

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***Terra Benedicta***
*The land of Hungarian wine*
Gabriella Mészáros, András Nagymarosy, Gábor Rohály
Published by AVilla Pasarét Kiadó
ISBN 9789638924353
£35


*Terra Benedicta* was first published in 2003 but in response to 'significant changes' in Hungary over the last decade or so, the authors decided it was time for an update. Gabriella Mészáros is a lawyer who has been a wine educator, writer and editor for the last 25 years [and contributor to the *Oxford Companion to Wine* – JR]. András Nagymarosy, who tragically died last year, was a professor at Eotvos Lorand University in Budapest, a scientist, geologist, musician, historian and a great lover of wine. Gábor Rohály, a retired physician, runs wine courses with partner Gabriella Mészáros and publishes an annual guide to Hungarian wine in three languages. This new edition, like the first, was translated into English by Péter Balikó Lengyel.

It starts off with 'A concise history of Hungarian wines', which is perhaps not exactly concise. But it's an important story which needs telling. From the early days of the Magyar tribes mixing blood and wine in sacred contracts through to the golden years of a nation which, way back in the seventeenth century, took such pride in the authenticity and quality of their wines that they issued laws to regulate quality and production. Taxes were waived on Aszú berries. Royal articles of 1655 stipulated that 'Those substituting inferior grapes, or grapes harvested from inferior sites, for their wines of excellence and selling them under such excellent name, shall be subject to forfeiting their entire stock of wines immediately'. Not even 150 years under the Islamic law of the Ottoman Empire manage to snuff out the vineyards or the production of high-quality wine. Even phylloxera did not deter the Hungarians for long – within 20 years they'd replanted most of the country's vineyards and the wine industry bounced back stronger than ever. Tragically, however, the upheaval after the First World War and 45 years of communist rule after the Second World War managed to do almost irreparable damage. But 25 years after the fall of communism, the wine industry is finally getting back on its feet, and some of that fierce pride is being restored.

Chapters 2 and 3 cover viticultural traditions, cellar practices and grape varieties. The authors have focused more on the old way of doing things, with interesting photographs and sketches of tools and methods used for hundreds of years in Hungary – some of which are still in use today. There is a section on climate and soils, and a section on the historic wine regions of greater Hungary, quite a few of which now belong to Austria, Slovakia or are no longer wine regions in modern Hungary. The chapter on grape varieties goes into great detail about the 40 or so native and international varieties grown in Hungary today.

In the fourth chapter, on gastronomy, the authors comment that 'In the previous edition of this book, published in 2003, we suggested that the historical developments in Hungary during the second half of the twentieth century were hardly conducive to the emergence or return of authentic regional cuisines, local ingredients, and distinctive dishes. Fortunately, things have changed since then.' That alone is encouraging. The authors then take a look at the regional foods and wines, how they work together (and where they don't), along with 16 recipes. I might add that the stunning photographs accompanying these recipes are just a little intimidating – this is rather more Michelin-star cooking than home cooking.

The main part of the book is chapter 5, divided into six geographical areas of Hungary, with a subsection on each of the 22 wine regions. These are accompanied by excellent maps – detailed and clear – and more vibrant illustrations of this eminently photogenic country. The authors look at each wine region in detail, covering history, rainfall, sunshine hours, soil, temperatures, topography and other factors affecting the styles and quality of wines in that region. They also mention producers whose wines are worth looking out for.

Chapter 6 explains how to taste Hungarian wines – advice which doesn't seem to differ very much from how one would taste any other wines. I wasn't convinced about the value of including this – or perhaps it might have fitted in better as an appendix at the end? This is followed by a chapter on the sparkling wine of Hungary, which begins with a glowing tribute to 'the true king of wines', champagne, and to Dom Pérignon. It is surely a little embarrassing for any wine professional to still believe that Dom Pérignon discovered sparkling wine, and neither champagne nor Dom P have more than the most tenuous link to sparkling wine in Hungary. Although Hungary has a history of making sparkling wine going back to 1825, for the most part it's an unremarkable story and, until very recently, the quality of the wines has not been noteworthy. Instead, the chapter is bulked out with a rambling account of how sparkling wine is made, which includes some slightly odd statements such as, 'there is no such thing as an expensive sweet champagne' (I'm guessing the authors haven't come across Armand de Brignac's demi-sec) and that 'every sparkling wine is at its best at the time it is released by the manufacturer'. Vintage sparkling wines which are cellared 'lose their quality'.

The book concludes with a strange chapter on 'Wine in entertaining and diplomacy'. Again, this is a subject which doesn't seem to quite fit with the rest of the book. It's a laboriously detailed set of instructions on how to serve wines at garden parties, embassy receptions and soirées. Several paragraphs are devoted to the contentious question of whether it is acceptable to pour a different wine into a used glass even if they are both white wines, and whether to serve wine from pre-poured glasses on a tray or to pour at the table. The chapter might be of some use if transposed to a handbook for Hungarian embassy staff but it has no bearing whatsoever on the topic of the book.

This is a big, handsome, glossy book, which has been richly bedecked with fabulous photographs and illustrations, old and new. The layout is clear and easy on the eye. It's well designed. But I have one huge issue with it. It is badly translated, and in desperate need of an editor whose first language is English. Just one example to illustrate what I mean: 'Anyone could rightfully ask what makes Hungarian wines so special as to warrant a separate chapter about food in a book dedicated to the wines of a country whose traditions exerted a decisive culinary influence for centuries, but which find its roles in the world's gastronomy thoroughly reshaped by the forces of history today.' I struggled to make sense of large sections of the book. While there is certainly merit in revising the 2003 edition, and there is some good information about Hungarian wine and wine regions, the English version, I'm afraid, needs to be completely rewritten.

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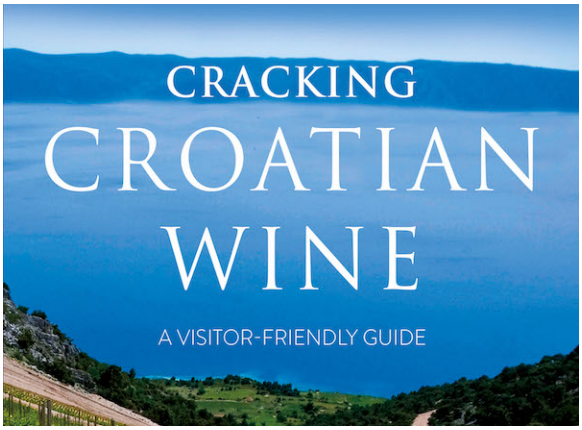
***Cracking Croatian Wine***
*A visitor-friendly guide*
Dr Matthew Horkey, Charine Tan
Published by Exotic Wine Travel
ISBN 9789811139734

£14, US$18 (also available in digital format)




Matthew Horkey and Charine Tan have featured on Purple Pages before; Matthew with his entries for our wine-writing competition, and both of them in this review of their travel guide *Uncorking the Caucasus* and in my more recent one of their guide to Santa Barbara. This is the fourth book they've written as a part of their Exotic Wine Travel business.

It's a 205-page paperback, although 26 pages are taken up with a 'Hello' page, contents, two forewords, a preface, an 'About this book' (contents page rehashed), profiles of the authors and Exotic Wine Travel, advertisements for their other books, acknowledgements, thanks and references. Make that a 179-page book.

Horkey and Tan spent close on eight months between 2016 and 2017 in Croatia, tasting nearly 2,000 wines. Their interest in Croatia was inspired by a love of geography, Mother Theresa, Anthony Bourdain and Gary Vaynerchuk. And their mission for the book is 'to allay the fears of wine lovers' but they have been a little more specific on their website, explaining that 'This book is meant to be a practical guide for people who enjoy wine either casually or with great curiosity and vigor. The most common problem encountered by wine lovers when visiting a wine country is how to spend their limited amount of time in the area sifting through the many wines and producers. Add that to the challenges of figuring out where to buy wines, what (sic) varieties are grown, and what the bottle labels in a foreign language mean, and the adventure of discovering a new wine country may appear rather daunting.' So, in the words of Cliff Rames, author of Foreword #1, 'Everyone needs a hero. This is especially true when it comes to underdog wine regions, unknown winemakers, and quirky wine grape varieties. And that is where Dr Matthew Horkey and Charine Tan step in.'

I think I am correct in surmising that this is not meant to be a travel guide. Too many essential elements are missing for that genre. But it's also a little 'lite' to be a reference book. So it occupies interesting ground between the two – the kind of book that would make a useful supplement to the Croatia volumes of DK Eyewitness, Lonely Planet or Rough Guide, where wine might get a passing mention.

The first three chapters are a very high level whizz through an introduction to Croatian wine (diversity, uniqueness, lots of autochthonous grape varieties, high cost, etc), history and cuisine. Then there is a chapter on 'Where to buy' which, disappointingly, begins by recommending the Konzum supermarket chain, owned by Agrokor, 'the company responsible for a quarter of Croatia's wine production' – presumably, in that case, you can only buy Agrokor-produced wine there?

This is followed, thankfully, by a list of wine bars and shops, but only in Zagreb. And from that list it's not immediately obvious whether each place is a wine bar or shop or both. There's no way of knowing whether Horkey and Tan visited any of them, bought from any of them, drank at any of them; whether they have a wide range of wines from all over Croatia or specialise; whether they speak English, are helpful, offer tastings, offer food and when they're open. Pot luck. You do get a phone number and an address. There is a paragraph or two encouraging the reader to do tastings at wineries ('visiting and tasting at a winery is an enriching experience') with a warning that tastings can turn into 'a hedonistic afternoon of copious food and wine', but apart from listing some names of wineries that also offer accommodation, they don't give much guidance on whether you should make appointments, whether you pay for the tastings, what sort of prices to expect, whether it's expected that you should buy wine (or whether you can buy wine), whether the wineries accept cash or cards, and when wineries are usually open for visits.

At the end of the 'Where to buy' chapter is a pronunciation guide for the Croatian language. It seemed a funny place to squeeze this in, but the guide itself is very good. Just one page, simply laid out, clear, easy to follow, succinct. Well done.

The next chapter, 'How to decipher Croatian wine labels', starts with a bit of emotional hype, the words 'fear' and 'panic' all over the page. I suspect that anyone curious enough to try a Croatian wine is not going to be thrown into a blind panic because of a few foreign accents and unpronounceable words. Wary, maybe. Intrigued, probably. Shaking with fear…? The hyperbole aside, this was another useful chapter. Terms most commonly seen on Croatian wine labels were translated and explained simply and clearly. I'd have found this very useful on my first visit to Croatia! Where the chapter unravelled a little was in discussing Croatia's appellation system. What are the 16 ZOIs and how will I know one if I see one? How many KPs are there, and what do they look like? And why, then, in the chapter on wine regions, does it say that there are over 66 appellations and 22 subregions, and do these ever appear on the label and where do they come from if, as the authors say, 'Croatia has yet to fully implement an appellation system'. At the very least I would expect a book of this ilk to clarify the matter of origin on a wine label, rather than make it even more confusing. Perhaps this could be straightened up in the e-versions.

The first two sentences in 'Wine grapes in Croatia' are a word-for-word repetition of two sentences in the introduction, which is a slightly distracting way to begin the chapter. But it does get better from there. This is a great introduction to Croatian grapes, white and red, extra marks awarded for giving a phonetic pronunciation guide for every single grape variety, as well as an excellent summary of each one, where it thrives, what it tastes like, what its quirks are, how widely its grown, the foods it goes well with. They cover 20 white wine varieties and 12 red, with a brief mention of other grapes you may come across. These would be well-thumbed pages if I were on a trip to Croatia.

The bulk of the book is then taken up with the four main wine regions, but it's here that I have to voice my first real concern about the printed book. All the photographs and maps are in shades of grey. They are dark, grainy and very very poor quality. It detracts from the book throughout (to the point where I actually think it would be better to leave the photos out of the printed book – it's not only difficult to make them out but they are also ugly). The maps – so, so, so important in any wine book, but especially one with travel at its heart – verge on useless. I had a quick look at a preview of the Kindle book, and from the one photo I could see, the e-versions have colour, and that makes a huge difference. For this reason alone, I'd opt for the Kindle/MOBI version (and it's half the price). But it would be my strong recommendation to consider a black-and-white-friendly version of the map. And remove the photos. Or spend a bit

of extra money and print them in colour.

Apart from two oddly misplaced sentences on irrigation and dry farming, the regional chapters are solid. They kick off with a list of the key varieties, a description of the terroir, a bit of background to the region in general, and a rather lovely insider's perspective from Saša Špiranec, Croatian wine writer. Within each region, the authors take a closer look at the subregions, their climates, soils, influences, styles, areas of strength, weakness and future potential. For some subregions they list a couple of 'notable wine bars', with basic contact details, but no information about the wine bars themselves. Each subregion gets a list of 'notable producers', and then the authors present a list of 'wines to try'. They've stuck to a laudably simple, unpretentious rating scale (I can't reproduce their symbols exactly, but you'll get the drift):

! = for the discerning/connoisseur
Ý = for the adventurous/geek
T = fun/easy to drink

The wines are described without vintages, so the recommendation is for the cuvée itself rather than a specific vintage of that wine. Each cuvée gets a bit of an introduction by way of background on the producer, terroir, winemaking and varieties, and then there is a tasting note. These are well written, interesting, and made me genuinely eager to taste the wines.

There's real value in these chapters, sprinkled with a good balance of both light-hearted and serious information. From the IQ* of Istria to the donkey tunnels of the Pelješac Peninsula; the importance of Postup and Dingač to the one-car-at-a-time Pitve tunnel; the white White House stones of Brač to the battle of Prošek v Prosecco, Horkey and Tan manage to cram quite a lot into a few fast-paced pages.

The final chapter is entitled 'Movers and shakers' and is basically three interviews: first with New York sommelier Cliff Rames, the author of Wines of Croatia's blog Uncorking Croatia; then with English Master of Wine Jo Ahearne, who is making her own wine on Hvar; and finally with Croatian Nenad Trifunović, who started a wine blog which has become far more influential than he anticipated. This last is probably the most insightful, but the Croatian government should take note of Jo's comments on the lack of a Croatian wine body to support and fly the flag for the producers.

There are some things that could do with a bit of work, such as the repetition of grape varieties in both the introduction and the 'key varieties' list; adding the iconic Frano Milos to their list of notable producers on the peninsula, and probably adding his rosé to their list of recommended wines; using fewer clichés; italicising Croatian words. There are times when sentences seem totally adrift and irrelevant, as if they'd wandered in from the cutting room and quietly snuck onto a finished page when no one was looking. The Cuisine chapter, for example, opens with 'Croatia has a population of over four million people'. A fact which has nothing to do with Croatian cuisine nor with the sentences that follow. Price guides would be very helpful. There are a couple of vague references to the huge mark-ups in restaurants and the high cost of Croatian wine, but high compared with what? Some tips on transport and accommodation, wine-friendly restaurants and visitor-welcoming wineries would have been good. And little things such as, 'the surrounding wine areas around Zagreb may not have the gloriest reputation' and 'Austrian Rivera' could, one hopes, be corrected in the e-versions without too much trouble.

The chapter on cuisine was dull, to say the very least – especially coming from two self-

professed foodies, and especially because Croatia has a rich food heritage. But because this is about Croatian wine, I'll overlook that.

But having said that, there's no doubting the enthusiasm of Matthew Horkey and Charine Tan. They really throw themselves into their travel projects and whip up their guides with the minimum of fuss.

*IQ stands for Istrian Quality. It's a qualification developed by the Istrian Development Agency to denote products of exceptional quality produced in Istria.