

Slovenia's most famous vintner acts eccentric, but his wines merit serious attention

THE MAGICIAN OF MOVIA



Ales Kristančič has raised the winemaking bar in the hilly terrain of western Slovenia.

By Sam Gugino
Photographs by Marijan Močivnik

Ales Kristančič sports an impish smile as he stands on the terrace of his pink stucco palace overlooking his vineyards in the town of Ceglo, Slovenia, just across the border from Italy's Friuli-Venezia Giulia region. Kristančič, owner and winemaker of Movia winery, is positioned behind a table, on top of which is a bottle of his Puro sparkling rosé and a large, clear bowl of water.

"Puro is the way sparkling wine was made 400 years ago," Kristančič says. "We call it Puro, which means pure, because it doesn't have any added sugar or yeast, especially the genetically created industrial yeast that is so commonly used today." Instead, he triggers secondary fermentation in the bottle by adding more grape must and the naturally occurring yeast found in the must. Moreover, there is no disgorgement, the process by which the plug of spent yeast cells is expelled after the secondary fermentation.

How is the consumer to get rid of the plug? Before you can say "remuage," Kristančič removes the foil-and-wire cage from the bottle of Puro. Then he turns the bottle upside down in the bowl of water and removes the cork. There is a whoosh of pink bubbles in the water, along with the dark plug of spent yeast. Kristančič immediately removes the bottle from the bowl and turns it upright, holding it aloft as if he's displaying Slovenia's first World Cup in soccer.

When asked how sommeliers are going to



Slovenia's Brda region has minerally soils and a cool Alpine climate conducive to growing white grapes. Across the border in Italy, the extension of the hilly terrain is known as Collio.

replicate this feat in restaurants, he replies, "Are you kidding? They love it." (Puro comes with cardboard cylinders to store the bottles upside down, allowing the yeast cells to settle in the neck.)

This is, you'll pardon the expression, vintage Aleš Kristančič, the wild and crazy guy of Slovenian wine. But despite his theatrics, Kristančič is a serious winemaker; more than half of his recent releases scored an outstanding 90 points or higher. Top dry wines include the white blend Brda Veliko Bianco 2004 (93, \$49) and the Ribolla Gialla Brda 2006 (92, \$29).

Slovenia is probably not a country Americans associate with wine. If anything, most Americans are familiar only with its recent political history, Slovenia having been part of Yugoslavia until declaring its independence in 1991 as that amalgam of Slavic states began to dissolve. But this small country (comprising fewer square miles than New Jersey and fewer people than Houston) has a wine history that goes back more than two millennia.

In the mid-19th century, pre-phylloxera Slovenia had some 126,000 acres of vineyards under cultivation. Today, more than 50,000 acres produce almost 100 million cases of wine annually across three winegrowing regions: Podravje, Posavje and Primorje. Movia is located in Primorje (also known as Primorska), on a strip of land that adjoins Italy's Friuli region. In fact, 30 of Movia's 70 acres of vines lie in Italy, just on the other side of the road from Kristančič's house. Many of the signs in the area are written in

both Slovenian and Italian, and many Slovenians (including Kristančič) are fluent in both languages. Still, Kristančič says, "I never promote Movia as Italian."

Known as Collio on the Italian side and Brda in Slovenia, this hilly part of Primorje is noted for its complex, minerally soils. Its proximity to the Alps provides a cool climate. Though smaller than the country's other two wine regions, Primorje produces most of Slovenia's best wines. While there are native grapes such as Pinela and Malocrn under cultivation, international varieties such as Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay (the country's most popular wine) dominate. About three-fourths of Slovenia's wines are whites.

The Kristančič wine tradition dates from the 17th century. In 1820, the Movia estate was purchased by the family when Slovenia was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. By the time that empire collapsed following World War I, Movia had become a well-known brand.

When Communists led by Josip Broz Tito took power in Yugoslavia after World War II, Movia was the only winery in Slovenia that remained privately owned, thanks to Kristančič's grandfather Anton, a commandant in Tito's partisan resistance against the Fascists during the war. But Tito required that Movia be the official winery of the state, meaning that it could only sell to the government, and not under the Movia label but as Kristančič wine. (The government sold some of the wine but kept most of it. According to Kristančič, Tito, a notorious hedonist, kept some

40,000 bottles for himself.) "My grandfather said that the most important thing was to carry on the tradition," Kristančić says. It wasn't until 1988, as the Yugoslav government became more open prior to its dissolution, that the Movia brand returned.

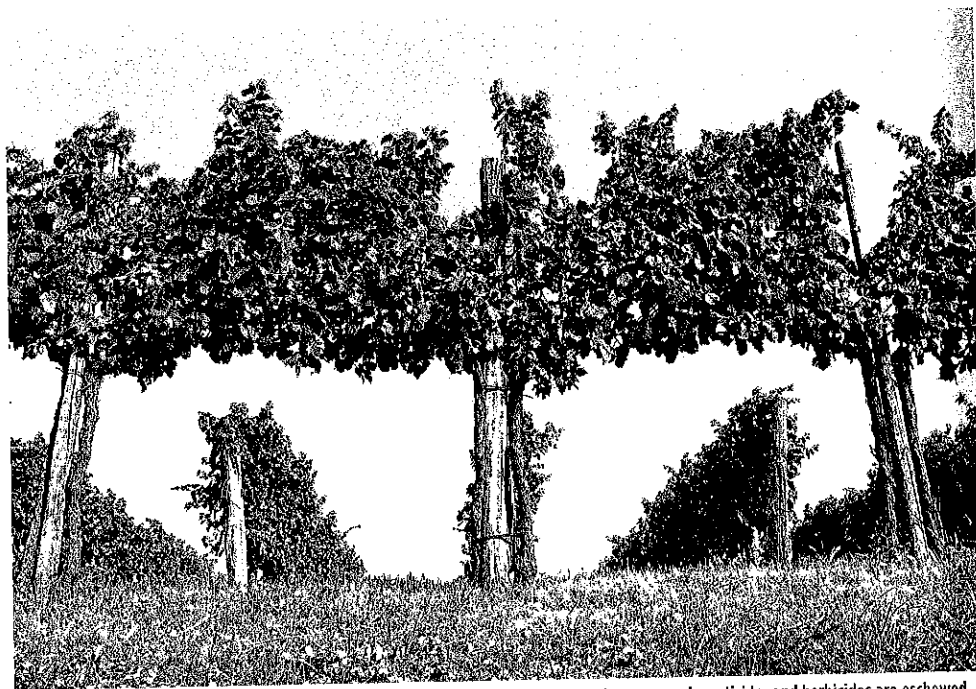
Though Kristančić has two older sisters, his father, Mirko, passed the torch to him in 1986. "It's a family tradition that only one child carries on," he says. "Otherwise, the winery would be split up." So Kristančić occupies the big house with his wife, Vesna, daughter Ela and son Lan. His father and mother, Marija, live next door.

Kristančić farms his land the way his ancestors did: no chemical fertilizers, no irrigation, no pesticides or herbicides. He talks about his vines as if they were his children, in need of nurturing to become strong enough to stand on their own. "It takes 20 to 25 years before the vines understand what you want," he says. Some of the vines for Kristančić's intense Pinot Grigio are 38 years old. "After 38 years, they have self-regulated," he says. "They know how to make 1 kilo of wine per plant." (Grapes from "younger" vines, usually less than 20 to 25 years old, go into Kristančić's second label, Vila Marija.)

For his exotic Veliko Bianco (Big White), Kristančić planted Ribolla, Pinot Grigio and Sauvignon Blanc together—literally. Instead of planting a block of one variety here and another there, he interspersed the vines for a field blend so that "they pollinate and make love with each other," he says. "More love means better wine." Kristančić is a member of Return to Terroir (*Renaissance des Appellations*), an organization of biodynamic winemakers founded in 2001 by Nicolas Joly, who owns Coulée de la Serrant in the Savennières region of France's Loire Valley. Kristančić takes the philosophy quite seriously; he plants a cow horn filled with manure in the vineyard on the first full moon after harvest.



Movia has been a family-run operation since 1820 and survived under Communist rule because Kristančić's grandfather fought with Tito's partisans. The family today includes (from left) daughter Ela, wife Vesna, Kristančić and son Lan.



Movia vineyards are cultivated along biodynamic principles. Natural fertilizer preparations are used; pesticides and herbicides are eschewed.

"The horn is like the oldest antenna. It can accept the energy of the universe," he says. "The manure is a perfect medium to get energy, like a battery." However, some of what Kristančić does might strain the credulity of even biodynamic winemakers. After six months, he says, the manure "smells so nice, you could eat it." And, in fact, he has. "It tastes like potatoes with a little bit of truffles and sweetness at the end."

For Kristančić's Lunar wine, the moon is not only important, it is, according to Kristančić, the winemaker. Hand-harvested and

destemmed Ribolla grapes—and only the yeast contained on the grape skins—are put into French *barriques* and left until the wine is ready to be bottled. The *battonage*—normally the stirring of dead yeast cells and grape particles, but in this case the skins as well—is done by the moon. “When the moon is on the rise, the skins are on top,” he says. “At the full moon there are no skins on top. Just clean wine.” According to Kristančič, the movement of skins in concert with the moon’s phases brings up tannins that help preserve and clean the wine.

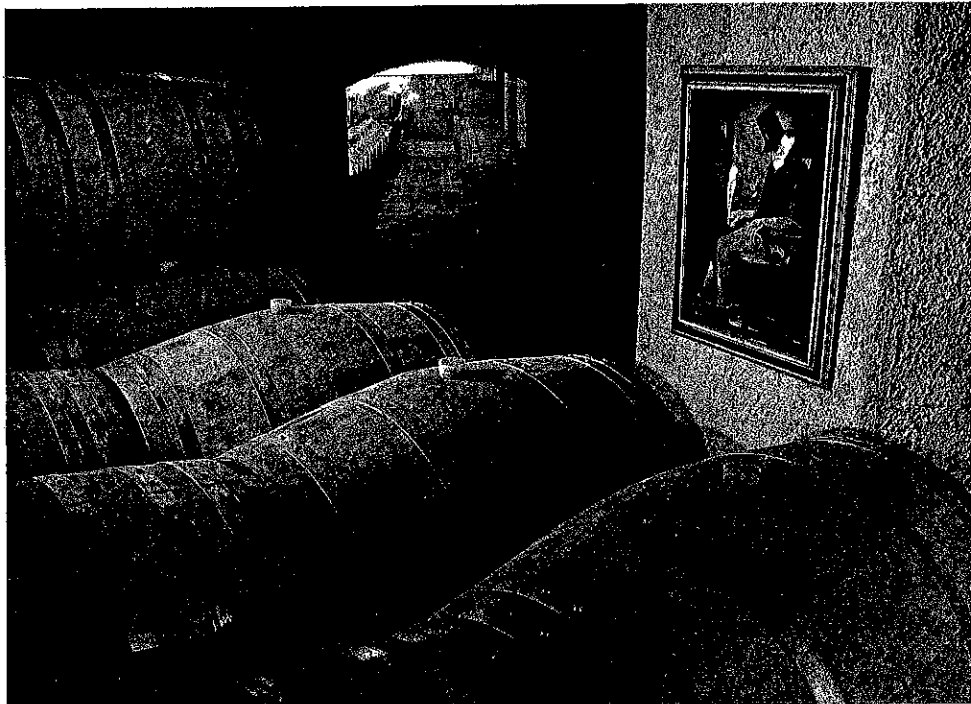
Moon phases and cow horns aside, Kristančič is most fanatical about details that don’t necessarily have anything to do with biodynamics. For example, he is positively obsessive about harvesting grapes at the optimum time. So he pays his pickers well, even when they aren’t picking. “Maturation is very important. The second before rotting is when you pick,” he says.

Kristančič is equally zealous about keeping his wines fresh and alive, something that may seem odd for a winemaker who ages his

scope,” he says. “If you filter, what you see under the microscope is about what you see with water.”

No filtration often means sediment in the bottle, which Kristančič views as an advantage rather than a problem. “You have to learn to accept more sediment in the bottle so you can use less sulfur,” he says. “People think sulfites preserve wine. They kill wine. We have the lowest sulfites but the freshest wines.” Extended lees contact, which contributes mightily to that sediment, also gives the wines a creamy mouthfeel. “Sediment is only a negative for the eyes,” Kristančič says. “If I gave my customers a choice [of wines with and without sediment], they would probably say, ‘Give me the one with the sediment.’”

As they say in Texas, “It ain’t braggin’ if you can do it.” And Kristančič creates an amazing freshness in his white wines. At dinner that night, he pulls out a dozen or so bottles. With homemade prosciutto, he pours a



Kristančič ages his Pinot Grigio for 18 months in new French oak barrels and believes that a steady flow of fresh air is key to quality.

white wines longer than most, and in new oak at that; the Pinot Grigio gets 18 months in new French *barriques*. But contrary to the conventional wisdom that new oak mutes freshness, Kristančič believes it preserves it. “The tannin in new barrels is a natural antioxidant,” he says.

And while you may not think that fresh air is a factor in fresh wines, Kristančič begs to differ. He built a circular staircase rather than a more conventional one to get from his residence to the cellar. “It keeps the air fresh, but the humidity stays the same,” he says. “Freshness is what you need for life.”

Ever the showman, Kristančič stands in his cellar and pulls the bung from a barrel, which elicits a noticeable *ppfft*. “See, life!” he exclaims. Filtering takes some of the life out of wine, so Kristančič doesn’t do it.

“If the wine is not filtered you have a jungle under the micro-

scope,” he says. “Clonal selection makes all the wines taste the same—boring,” Kristančič asserts.

Say what you will about Kristančič’s techniques, his wines are never boring. You may not like them all—Lunar, for example, is definitely an acquired taste—but there is no denying that all of them are suffused with the winemaker’s boundless enthusiasm and joy for life.

That vivacity shows up in one bottle after another during dinner. Even the velvety and buttery 1996 Veliko Bianco, which has elements of an older white Burgundy, and the 1966 Ribolla with its wonderful spice and earth notes, shows remarkable liveliness and freshness in the mouth.

Movie: Slovenian for freshness and life. *Czak, czak*.

Contributing editor Sam Gugino has been writing for *Wine Spectator* since 1994.

2006 Gredic Tokaj, the Slovenian name for Tocai Friulano. The delightfully off-dry wine, made from 57-year-old vines, plays beautifully off the salt and fat in the prosciutto. “Tocai and prosciutto—*czak, czak*,” says Kristančič. *Czak, czak* is his favorite way of describing something that is perfect.

A 2005 Sauvignon Blanc is fresh and bright, but with surprising richness. “Sauvignon Blanc didn’t just get made here yesterday,” he says. “It was made here 200 years ago.”

Kristančič goes on to say that his Sauvignon Blanc vines were from massal, rather than clonal, selection. Massal selection involves propagating cuttings from the best vines in the vineyards because, the theory goes, vines lose their identity when outside clones