

Get to know Croatia's grapes

With more than 140 indigenous grape varieties and a wide range of climatic conditions, Croatia offers a diverse palette of flavours for wine lovers to explore. Amanda Barnes outlines the key grapes and wine styles in each of Croatia's wine regions



Riesling vines in the Tomac vineyard, in Plešivica, Croatian Uplands

The Croatian Uplands: cool-climate white varieties

The limestone hillsides and cool, continental climate make the Uplands ideal for white wines and early ripening reds. Riesling is the queen of the Uplands in terms of quantity and quality. You can expect lean, aromatic styles of dry Riesling in general, but you'll also find sparkling, orange and even dessert wines. Plešivica is considered a top terroir for Uplands Riesling.

There's a growing interest in Sauvignon Blanc from the Uplands (and Croatia in general), especially from the region of Međimurje. Stylistically, Croatian Sauvignon Blancs tend to be well balanced rather than overtly aromatic.

As a renowned territory for traditional-method sparkling wine, the Uplands is also home to Chardonnay and Pinot Noir. Sparkling wines are typically complex, with more than two years on the lees – Croatia's answer to Champagne.

Interesting native varieties in the Uplands include Škrlet, Portugizac, Moslavac (Furmint) and Kraljevina.

Slavonia & Danube: Graševina and continental reds

While the Uplands are cool continental, Slavonia and the Croatian Danube have a moderate continental climate. Extremely cold in the winter and sweltering in the summer, you can ripen reds such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and



Plavac Mali



Graševina



Malvazija Istarska

Croatia: the facts

Vineyard area: 21,184ha
Producers: 1,620
Production: 843,000hl annually
Most-planted varieties: Graševina, Plavac Mali, Malvazija Istarska

Merlot. Frankovka (Blaufränkisch) is, in fact, the most-planted red in the region, but winemakers are freely experimenting with other varieties and blends.

Southern-facing slopes are dedicated to red wine production, but the rest of the vineyards are usually white wine territory and, more specifically, Graševina territory. Croatia's most-planted variety, Graševina (Welschriesling) accounts for one fifth of Croatia's wines and is the darling of continental Croatia.

Top sub-regions include Kutjevo (a cooler climate, producing fresher wines with green apple and citrus notes) as well as Ilok and Baranja (milder regions giving wines of a riper style with a fuller body).

The majority of Graševina wines are made in stainless steel tanks and consumed young. However, Graševina's naturally high acidity allows for long ageing too. Late-harvest wines are also common, and ice wine is made occasionally.

Another popular variety for sweet wines is the peachy, floral Traminac (Gewürztraminer). The sub-region of Ilok has a windy climate and loess soils ideal for late-harvest, sweet Traminac.

Istria & Kvarner: Malvazija and more

More than half the wine produced in Istria is Malvazija. Although similar in name to Malvasia, Malvazija Istarska is a unique white variety found only in Istria. Malvazija is usually made in a fresher style (vinified in stainless steel tanks, which conserves fruit aromas) or a full-bodied style (aged on the lees in acacia or oak barrels, concrete eggs or increasingly with skin contact in amphorae). Peach, apricot and citrus aromas are common, often with a savoury note, and the favourite local pairing is with Istrian white truffle.

Another local white you might come across is Žlahtina, especially on the island of Krk. Lighter in colour and body, these wines have moderate to low acidity and floral, citrus aromas.

While the white wines of Istria tend to be fuller bodied with low acidity, the red wines are known for their notable acidity – even Istrian Merlot. The native variety Teran is marked by wild cherry aromas and feisty tannins.

Photograph: Ivan Dimijaković

'Dalmatia is the heartland of native Croatian varieties and previously unknown indigenous varieties are still being discovered among old vineyards'

Dalmatia: Plavac Mali

The third most-planted variety in Croatia, Plavac Mali, is an ancestor of Zinfandel and native to the coast of Dalmatia and its many islands. On the warmer flats, Plavac makes everyday hearty reds, while the most coveted vineyards on steep, south-facing slopes offer more opulent styles. Vineyards in Dingač and Ivan

Dolac are particularly sought after and give full-bodied Plavac Mali, resplendent with ripe notes of fig, plum and spice.

These might feel like rather hearty wines for a beach holiday, but they are ideal in the evenings with local game. Paštica, a local beef dish with plums, is another ideal match.

While Plavac is the main ticket in Dalmatia, this is the heartland of native Croatian grapes, and previously unknown indigenous varieties are still being discovered among old vineyards. Another local red variety worth looking for is Babić, a full-bodied red with great ageing potential, especially those wines made from the remarkable stone-walled vineyard of Bucavac.

Native white varieties also abound and there's a lot of buzz about Pošip. Native to the beautiful island of Korčula, the variety has boomed in the past two decades and is now spread throughout Dalmatia. While traditionalists stick to ripe and voluminous styles, the trend is to harvest Pošip earlier to make zippy whites which have become coastal Croatia's equivalent of Sauvignon Blanc.