



A Gastronomer's Guide to Istria

Long a fan of the less-travelled corridors of Eastern Europe, **Viia Beaumanis** explores a Croatian gem and discovers an emerging hotspot for globe-trotting epicureans **Photography Yuri Dojc**

hOME TO ONE OF THE **WORLD'S** loveliest coastlines, the Northern Croatian peninsula of Istria (about a three-hour drive from Zagreb) has long drawn travellers

to its seaside resort towns and stunning Adriatic beaches. Now, visitors have begun heading inland, discovering a lush cypress spiked landscape of vineyards and olive groves, green valleys and mountain ridges that rivals Tuscany. Ruled by the Austro-Hungarians and the Italians for centuries, the influence of both cultures lingers across the region's Roman ruins and medieval villages, as well as its locavore cuisine. With fine wine, translucent prosciutto, artisanal olive oil, organic meats and – that seminal gourmet jewel – the truffle,

alongside a growing array of unique places to dine, drink and stay, Istria has emerged as an exceptional destination for gastro-tourists.

dine

THE TRUFFLE With festivals and gastronomic events, locals shower dishes with the fine dining fungi during October's truffle season. One of the few places outside Italy that grows the *Tuber magnatum pico* (the world's costliest at \$4,500 a kilogram), Istrian forests are rich in black and white varieties. The area's leading exporter, Zigante Tartufi, discovered the world's largest truffle here in 1999. At 1.31 kilograms, it made *The Guinness Book of World Records*.

ORGANIC OLIVE OIL In contrast to the smooth Italian oils produced from ripe olives, Istrians press

theirs from young fruit, which lends it a distinctly green aroma and hue. The strongest may strike some as sharp, but they work beautifully against, say, the passive lushness of buffalo mozzarella. With 56 of the top 500 brands collected in the *Flos Olei* (a guide to the globe's finest olive oils) hailing from Istria, epicureans covet myriad varieties, mild to intense. One label to look for is the prize-winning Belci.

FIVE TOP TABLES Perfectly grilled organic meats, handmade pasta, melt-in-your mouth gnocchi, fresh-caught fish, artisanal prosciutto, sheep's milk cheese and – when in season – truffles, truffles, truffles. Istrian menus revolve around Italian-influenced classics with noteworthy dining rooms each offering a particular spin.

■ **Toklarija** Meat, seafood, ►



Roman gates in Pula

garden-fresh vegetables: Nevio Sirotić sources ingredients daily, then prepares and serves his slow-food tasting menus, each course paired to local wine, in an ancient countryside grain mill where he's been cooking for nearly three decades. This is Istrian gastronomy at its elegantly rustic best. *Sovinjsko polje 11; +385 52 663 031*

■ **Batelina** Global foodies from Mario Batali to Anthony Bourdain have made the pilgrimage to this seafood mecca where David Skoko's inventive dishes run from shark liver paté and fish roe pasta to Adriatic classics like grilled scallops, steamed crab and seared tuna. The desserts are also divine. *Čimulje 25, Pula; +385 52 573 767*

■ **Stari Podrum** The cheerful domain of two generations of women who shave heaps of fresh truffles onto homemade pasta while grilling gigantic forest mushrooms and succulent tenderloin in their dining room fireplace-cum-grill. This cozy stone *konoba* is a local favourite for traditional home cooking. *Most 52, Momjan, Buje; +385 52 779152; staripodrum.info*

■ **Damir & Ornella** This *boîte* in a pretty coastal town where fishing boats line the harbour specializes in fresh Adriatic seafood and pioneered "crudo-Istrian" ceviche. Sliced right at the table from live fish and served with an array of del mare pasta, gnocchi and

risotto. *Zidine 5, Novigrad; +385 52 75 81 34; damiornella.com*

■ **Villa Meneghetti** With elegant Mediterranean cuisine complemented by a marvellous cellar, this graceful vineyard-set auberge is one of Istria's loveliest places to dine. No surprise it's the region's Relais & Chateaux address. Book lunch so you can enjoy views over the property's wine and olive groves with your meal. *Stancija Meneghetti 1, Bale; +385 91 243 1600; meneghetti.info*

drink

THREE TOP VINEYARDS Drink in views as sublime as the wine while hopscotching Istria's vineyards – the interior landscape is breathtaking. You'll find a variety of local reds, like Teran, along with Chardonnays, Pinots, even bubbly. Every winery offers tastings, and the signature wine is Malvazija. Akin to a Sauvignon Blanc, Croatia's classic white was introduced to the region by Venetian merchants, who planted vine cuttings from Greece. Here, three not-to-miss wineries.

■ **Clai** Restaurateur-turned-revered winemaker Giorgio Clai of Trieste brought the ancient techniques of north Italy's Collio region to his Istrian vineyard and is considered the area's finest artisanal producer. Try Clai's Sveti Jakov, a Malvazija, and Refoš, a red varietal – as well as his olive oil and grappa. *Brjki 104, Krasica, Buje; +385 52 776 175*

■ **Kozlović** Family-run for four generations, Istria's most renowned winery features the strikingly modern design of Zeljko Buric, one of Croatia's leading architects. Overlooking the vineyard, the terrace of the small, stylish wine bar draws *au fait* oenophiles who rave about the Santa Lucia – a sublime Malvazija. *Vale 78 Momjan, 52460 Buje Istra, Hrvatska +385 52 77 91 77; kozlovic.hr*

■ **Pjenušci Peršurić** Istria's prize-winning purveyor of sparkling wine produces six varietals from local Malvazija, Teran, Chardonnay and Pinot grapes. Processed in small batches using the classic French technique, this Istrian vineyard proves that, with finesse, delicate bubbly can be made from relatively new wine. *Pršurići 5a, Višnjan; +385 52 431 586*

stay

MOST CHARMING OLD

AUBERGE Fans of classic chic should head straight for **Villa Meneghetti**. An old stone manse nestled in an idyllic vineyard with four rooms, gourmet dining, a brilliant wine cellar, a small spa, indoor and outdoor pools, acres of pastoral grounds and bicycles to ride to the beach. Just a 20-minute drive from Rovinj, the coast's loveliest town, this is Istria's most beautiful and romantic place to stay. *meneghetti.info*

BEST NEW DESIGN HOTEL Those with a yen for modernity will find it at Rovinj's **Hotel Lone**. Named for a nearby lake (pronounced *Loan-eh*), this 250-room property launched in 2011, adding a sleek contemporary angle to the historic properties Istria is known for. Architecture through furnishings, it's a showcase of Croatian design and also equipped with the country's most stylish and comprehensive wellness centre. Tip: book Dario for your massage. *lonehotel.com* 



The classic charm of Villa Meneghetti

The hill town of
Motovun, Istria,
with vineyards
in the foreground

