

Croatia's Istrian peninsula is rich with the bounties of earth and sea—and with remnants of the many cultures that have claimed it through the ages.

ADAM ERACE savors this melting pot on the Adriatic.

Photographs by JAKA BULO

Rovinj, a city on the western coast of Croatia's Istrian peninsula.

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BEFORE WE GO FURTHER, you should know there are no yachts in this Croatia story. No below-deck rabble-rousing or port-side parties of the kind you'll find in Dubrovnik or Hvar, where the rich and fabulous descend each summer. This story is about Istria, located at the opposite end of the country, where the "champagne" most commonly popped is sparkling Malvazija Istarska, the versatile native white, and the seaworthy ride is a bivalve harvester roped to the dock of Tony's Oyster Shack at the beachhead of Limski Fjord.

The cruise director of this no-frills vessel and owner of the oyster shack is Emil Sošić, a blue-eyed, buzz-cut connoisseur of Malvazija, massages, and Tina Turner. Emil spends most days on this fjord, and his boat may be a harder invitation to come by than any yacht in the Dubrovnik marina: Emil must judge you to be an Oyster Person, or a Wine Person, ideally both. "Because I offer only oysters, wine," he says. On the rare occasions he indulges a non-Oyster/Wine Person, he faces off-brand demands: "Why is there no water? Why is there no Coca-Cola?" He sighs. "An Oyster Person does not ask for this."

Emil's family has lived on a hill overlooking the fjord for seven generations, and he's been farming flat European oysters for 16 years. They are among the many gastronomic specialties of Istria, an under-the-(American-)radar culinary capital home to hundreds of olive-oil estates and wineries, a coastline brimming with immaculate seafood, and ancient



▲ Pizzeria Rumore, in the mountaintop village of Labin.

► A plaza in Rovinj's old town.



foodways that are nurturing a new generation of makers raised amid the turmoil of the Yugoslav Wars. When something is excellent, Croatians say, "Top!" For those who travel to eat, *Istria* is top.

Our boat glides down the six-mile fjord. The angle of the sunlight, the nearness to the sea, the mineral runoff from the forested hills that rise up on either side like furry green wings—they all cause the color of the water to shift, from cloudy jade to aquamarine to deepest denim. It's like sailing across the surface of a mood ring. Halfway between the beach and the Adriatic, the farm materializes: more than a thousand oval buoys lined up like the lanes in a lap pool, each tethered to an oyster cage below the surface. Emil's captain flings the anchor overboard, engages the winch to raise the cages, then heads aft for a cigarette.



▲ A plate of bivalves, fresh from Limski Fjord.



▲ Tony's Oyster Shack, on the bank of Limski Fjord.

"Ask anyone here, where are the oysters in Istria?" Emil says. "Limski Bay. And ask, who has the oysters in Limski Bay?" He points to himself with a neatly manicured finger. A few years ago, there were other farmers raising oysters and mussels, but, according to Emil, they all gave up. Bivalves take their sweet time in these legally protected waters. "Other farms mature oysters in two years. Ours take three and a half," he says. "Nice and easy." As if on cue, Tina Turner's raspy intro to "Proud Mary" blares over the boat's speakers. "You see we never ever do nothing / Nice, easy," she growls. "We always do it nice and rough."

Over the course of a week in Istria, this is what constitutes rough: the calf-searing ascent to dinner at the Michelin-starred Monte, in the shadow of Rovinj's hilltop St. Euphemia church; finding a roadside strawberry stand closed; truffle hunter Nicola Tarandek's dog biting a precious fungus in half during a hunt in the Motovun woods. Which is to say, not very rough at all. The people are openhearted, the infrastructure impeccable, the lifestyle salubrious. Some destinations conceal their treasures, make you work for them. Istria puts them all out on a picnic table underneath a vine-laced arbor, then covers them in world-class olive oil. After more than a year away from Europe, it's about as low-stress a reacquaintance as an American can get.

And we're rollin'. "Rollin' on the river!" Emil sings as we slide up to the dock. While the captain pours himself Malvazija from a plastic water bottle, Emil shucks oysters and wild "sea truffles" (cockles—salty and preternaturally sweet) and arranges them on a tin platter. I slurp an oyster down. Its brininess shocks my face like a cold wave, then retreats to reveal rich creaminess—*panna cotta del mare*. I toss back a few more and wash them down with the Malvazija, young and jicama-crisp. I could stay here all day, eating oysters and



The Pula Arena is one of the largest surviving Roman amphitheaters.



Luciano Bar at San Canzian Village & Hotel, near Buje in northwestern Istria.



Music on the garden terrace at San Canzian, which sits about 15 minutes from the Slovenian border.



drinking white wine on a ramshackle dock, overlooking a glittering body of water, but Istria has more to show me, so I jump back in the car, and we’re rollin’.

ISTRIA IS SHAPED LIKE a slice of pizza, and Pula, the peninsula’s largest city, is just northwest of the point. It’s an octopus of pedestrian alleys and leafy boulevards climbing out from the seaport. Wandering the city, I encounter Roman ruins, in various stages of preservation and decay, as common as ATMs. The most impressive, the Pula Arena, watches the waterfront from a hill. Nearby, the market heaves with strawberries and wild asparagus in the spring, stone fruit and melons in the summer, and Stancija Kumparička dairy’s fantastic goat-milk cheeses—vacuum-sealed for travelers—all year long.

Pula makes a convenient base for exploring the region, and its Pješčana Uvala neighborhood is the kind of quiet, residential seaside cloister you’d see on *House Hunters*



International. Tykes tearing across the beachfront playground, teens playing pickup basketball, friends unfurled on sofas on café patios. There are plenty of well-kept boats in the marina, none of them yachts, and plenty of attractive homes, only a few of them Modernist villas overlooking the sea. Hotel Valsabbion is one such: four bleached-white stories with a shimmering lap pool and 11 spacious rooms that balance thoughtful details (Frette bedding, essential-oil diffusers) with bohemian spirit.

Premantura, with a population of less than a thousand, sits between Pula and Istria’s actual southernmost point, the wildflower-carpeted cliffs of Cape Kamenjak. Luka Žuljević and his wife and business partner, Anja Bendeković Žuljević, moved to the village two years ago, when their distilling hobby—the start of what would eventually become micro-distillery Monachus Gin—began outgrowing their Zagreb apartment just as they were outgrowing their city-based full-time jobs. The proximity to the sea, and to the botanicals that now give Monachus its Istrian terroir, became irresistible.

I follow Luka and Anja’s dusty ’89 Suzuki Samurai to Cape Kamenjak’s upper trailhead. Anja leads me up the stony path, pointing out unruly wild figs and pungent immortelle, its silvery leaves bowing under mops of yellow blossoms. “On hot days, the smell of the plants is more intense. It’s incredible,” she says. The cloudy weather has the flora feeling stingy, so the dominant smell is salt air, borne on the Adriatic bora wind.

Back at the Žuljevićs’ home in Premantura, the botanical aromas reveal themselves when the gin starts flowing on the garden patio. They float up one by one—lemony coriander, bright mandarin, piney blue juniper, zesty immortelle, smoky vanilla from the fig leaves—then harmonize into a subtle,

elegant bouquet. “Our still is small for the industry, perfect for us,” Luka says. “The flavor is always best in small batches.”

This is a time of many firsts in the peninsula’s food-and-drink realm, and they’re happening in garages, home kitchens, barns, and spare bedrooms. After visiting Anja and Luka, I drive to the interior town of Svetvinčenat, where a chalkboard sign outside the two-year-old brewery Kampanjola Eko Bira reads, in Croatian, IF NO ONE IS HERE, CALL THIS NUMBER. I call, and owner Darko Pekica ambles over from his house. For a place that doesn’t even keep regular hours, the hospitality is over-the-top generous. Darko sets out a tasting of Kampanjola’s malty porter and easygoing blonde and brown ales, the first to be certified organic in Croatia; a bottle of oil from the olives he grows; and a board decked with his sharp, nutty aged cheeses. (The secret: he reads Walt Whitman to the cows.)

Bora Nera, Istria’s first specialty coffee roaster, also appears to be closed when I pull up to the address—not the café I expected, but owners Matteo Cardin and Erika Forlani Cardin’s terra-cotta-colored home in Vodnjan. “Oh, yes, we’re open. Just ring the doorbell; my husband will let you in,” Erika answers when I call. Which is how I wind up sipping funky Sumatran espresso on yet another scenic patio, at yet another villa, with a view of yet another envy-inducing garden—this one full of Whoville cacti, hardy kiwis, scarlet poppies, and a pawpaw tree smuggled from the hinterlands of New Jersey.

Matteo sells me a bag of his Rwandan Gakenke beans that smell like chocolate-covered raspberries, but he won’t let me pay for the espresso. As far as he knows, I’m not a writer, just a guy who showed up on his doorstep interested in coffee.

A WHO’S WHO of problematic empires ruled Istria until Croatia’s declaration of independence in 1991: Roman, Venetian, Napoleonic, Austro-Hungarian. After World War I, Italy and its Fascist regime forcibly Italianized the region, subjugating (and murdering) Croats and Slovenes, who fled to Yugoslavia. After World War II, Yugoslavia and its Communist regime forcibly de-Italianized the region, subjugating (and murdering) ethnic Italians, who fled to Italy, North America, and beyond.

Still, Italy’s influence is as culturally and culinarily embedded as the olive trees that



▲ The entrance to Konoba Kotlić, a bastion of hearty Istrian classics.

► The Monachus Gin team prepares waterfront cocktails at Cape Kamenjak.

have been grown here since the first century. Prosciutto is as revered as it is in Parma, but here it’s gamier, muskier, deeper in color, and cut in chips thick and sturdy enough to build a house of cards.

It’s the same with the region’s pristine seafood. Everything from mackerel to langoustines is accorded intense respect, and nowhere more than at Marina, in Novigrad. Chef Marina Gaši enchants me with her poetic crudos: scallops with roe aioli, elderflower-freckled amberjack with coffee and kumquat. And don’t tell my Italian friends, but the crazy-popular Pizzeria Rumore, purveyor of pistachio-and-mortadella pies and out-of-body experiences in the medieval aerie of Labin, beats all the pizza I’ve eaten on the other side of the Adriatic.

Farther inland along the hilly switchbacks, the menus at the homey family-run restaurants known as *konobe* (the Istrian version of Italian trattorias) reveal watermarks of the region’s Austro-Hungarian past. At Konoba Malo Selo, a cozy tavern that specializes in dishes featuring meat from indigenous, long-horned Boskarin cattle, hearty fare offsets the evening chill in the carport turned courtyard. They’re sold out of steaks, so my server suggests braised Boskarin “goulash” with gnocchi. For dessert, it’s *gibanica*, an apple-and-poppy-seed strudel popular across the Balkans, and synthy Whitney Houston covers set against the rustling of an ancient mulberry tree.

Deeper into the woods, at Konoba Kotlić, ravenous hikers and mountain bikers swallow the “Istrian plate” of crackling



pork sausage, tenderloin, and sharp sauerkraut, while the forest swallows this fairy-tale stone cottage, like a Croatian Angkor Wat. Mojmir Ibrahimović, Kotlić’s longtime supplier of foraged mushrooms and homemade cheese, rescued the restaurant in 2017 when the previous owner wanted to close. “What do you think?” he asks, leaning in. His brows are so bushy they meet his lashes, forming a trellis over eyes as ice-blue as the Mirna River below. I think the Istrian plate—along with the featherweight gnocchi and

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► Beet risotto with buffalo-milk blue cheese and white asparagus with trout roe and at Meneghetti Wine Hotel.



Eat Your Way Through Istria

Where to Stay
Hotel Valsabbion
The modern design of this Pula property doesn’t sacrifice comfort. valsabbion.hr; doubles from \$117.

Meneghetti Wine Hotel
Stay in a dreamy villa amid olive groves and vineyards. meneghetti.hr; doubles from \$415.

San Canzian Village & Hotel
A laid-back-luxe retreat with a pool and a culinary focus. san-canzian.hr; doubles from \$291.

Villa La Vita Bella
This spot near Poreč is built for languid terrace meals. oliveandspicecroatia.com; villa from \$415.

Where to Eat & Drink
Ipša
This family-owned operation makes stellar Malvazija. ipsa-maslinovaulja.com.

Kabola Winery
An organic winery producing some of

Croatia’s best bottles. kabola.hr.

Konoba Kotlić
Comfort food so good you’ll weep. fb.com/konoba.kotlic; entrées \$11–\$35.

Konoba Malo Selo
The place to go for Boskarin beef and cozy vibes. konobamaloselo.hr; entrées \$8–\$40.

Marina
A celebration of the bounty of the Adriatic. marina-restaurant.eu; tasting menus from \$73.

Pizzeria Rumore
Labin’s premier pie shop rivals any in Naples. fb.com/pizzeriarumore; entrées \$8–\$14.

Tony’s Oyster Shack
Slurp down bivalves straight from Limski Fjord. istrida.com.

Vina Fakin
Motovun’s most lauded winery highlights native grapes. fakinwines.com.



(Istria, continued from page 93)

beef, *fuži* pasta under a canopy of shaved black truffle, and almond-dusted crêpes rolled up around hot fudge and plum preserves—constitutes the best meal I’ve eaten in Istria, and maybe one of the best I’ve eaten, period.

TRAVEL CONCIERGE and Airbnb host Marko Radović was four when things got bad in Slovonski Brod in 1992, a year after Croatia’s secession from Yugoslavia. His parents owned a bar in that deep-inland city, far away from Istria, both physically and culturally.

“I remember hearing the airplanes roaring above. There were days we weren’t allowed to go outside,” he says over lunch at the watermelon-colored Casa Rossa, a *konoba* and inn with an unbeatable view of the hilltop village of Motovun. “My parents did not want to leave Croatia. Istria was farthest away from the conflict, but no one in my family had ever been there, and we spoke a completely different dialect.”

Eventually they saved up enough to open their own place, Bistro Niki’s, in Poreč, a summer town on the Istrian coast between Rovinj and Novigrad. Marko has worked there on and off all his life. It’s where he met his wife, Chelsea, while she was on vacation from Pittsburgh, and with whom he started the travel concierge company Olive & Spice. They have just put the finishing touches on Villa La Vita Bella, a three-bedroom rental near Poreč with a black-and-white Moroccan-tiled pool and central

air—“Croatian contractors think I’m crazy,” Chelsea says. Marko still pitches in at the restaurant, where his sister, Irena, is now the chef. He and Chelsea live upstairs.

I meet Markos all over Istria—literally guys named Marko, but more broadly, millennials born in the limbo between the declaration and realization of independence, now stepping into the family business (or starting their own) instead of bouncing for Zagreb or London or New York. “All my life I have been in the vineyard,” another Marko, Marko Fakin, explains in the cozy tasting room of his winery, Vina Fakin, outside Motovun, where his family has lived off the land since the 17th century. “My family were farmers. My father made wine, but mostly grew grapes for other winemakers.”

Marko wanted to grow grapes for himself. So in 2010, he produced 2,000 bottles from his father’s 10 acres. Today, he farms 91 acres and produces 130,000 bottles of Malvazija and Teran, the Istrian red whose feisty tannins and wild acidity require a winemaker with discipline and finesse, along with some Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet, Syrah, and Muscat. Fakin has a great catchphrase: “Fakin good wines.” And they are.

WINE MAKING in Croatia is both ancient and new. The Greeks introduced grapes in the sixth century B.C., and Malvazija thrived in Istria’s white-limestone-rich soil, up in the mountains. Malvazija is the Swiss Army knife of whites. It can sparkle. It can be as zippy as a Sauvignon Blanc or as voluptuous as Viognier. It can age, in oak or acacia barrels or conical clay vessels called amphorae, or go orange, as it does at Ipša, whose 2017 Malvazija is my favorite—an amber daydream of jasmine, apricot, and Honey Nut Cheerios.

Had Yugoslavia not fallen, and with it the state-controlled wine cooperatives, there would be no Ipša (home to another father-son duo, Klaudio and Ivan Ipša) or Vina

Fakin as they exist today. Following independence, winemakers shifted focus from quantity to quality, and Croatia started to gain traction as an internationally significant wine region. Road-tripping through Istria’s lush interior and its grape-pampering microclimates of hot days and sea-breeze-cooled nights, I see that the ingredients for excellence have always been there, just waiting for the right moment.

Every few miles, another winery beckons. Thirty minutes from Fakin and an olive’s toss from the Slovenian border, an unhurried construction project takes me on a detour to Kabola Winery, Croatia’s pioneer of amphora-aged, skin-contact wine in Momjan. After working for a large hotel chain, Ana Markežić moved back to Kabola to help her parents run the place while studying for her Italian sommelier certificate. She fills my glass with lovely iterations of Muškat Momjanski, from screaming-for-oysters-dry to honey-drenched.

By Croatian law, only wineries in Momjan can use the Muškat Momjanski label, and now Ana is part of the effort to land a DOC-type protection from the European Union. Working to safeguard this fickle little grape, and by proxy her hometown and her heritage, was, for Markežić, a foregone conclusion. “I studied in Italy and traveled all over the world, but coming back to work in the family winery has become a natural part of the growing process,” she says.

Marko Radović wasn’t so sure. He and Chelsea started his U.S. green-card process two years ago, imagining they’d eventually relocate. But after spending last winter in the wet gloom of Pittsburgh he had a change of heart. “I miss the sushi and the tacos, but you can’t beat this,” he says, gesturing to the truffles on his plate and the postcard view of Motovun. I think about Emil’s oysters, Luka and Anja’s gin, the dozens of other age-old and modern expressions of Istria I’ve consumed this week. No disrespect to Pittsburgh, but he has a point. ♦