

STORY MELINDA JOE

SAVOUR SLOVENIA

Chefs are reinterpreting traditional cuisine and coming up with bold and innovative dishes

A few years ago, many people would have had trouble identifying Slovenia on a map. Recently, however, this tiny corner of former Yugoslavia has captured the attention of the world. Most of the world will have started paying more attention to this country courtesy of Melania Trump, but foodies have been keeping an eye on it for a while.

In January, chef Ana Roš, of the restaurant Hiša Franko, in the rural town of Kobarid, was named The World's Best Female Chef, shining the spotlight on the region's highly original cuisine. Since then, the republic has become one of Europe's most exciting food destinations.

Nestled between Italy, Austria, Hungary and Croatia, and bordered by the Adriatic Sea to the southwest, Slovenia has always been at the crossroads of Central European cultures, and its bounty of unspoiled nature has endowed the nation with amazing biodiversity.

The densely forested landscape is lush and variegated, rippled with mist-capped mountain ranges, and filigreed with networks of sparkling turquoise rivers that snake through the rocky valleys. Driving along the narrow mountain roads feels like flipping through the pages of a fairy tale: you pass fluffy white cows grazing in green pastures, quaint cottages perched on Alpine peaks, and stripe-muzzled badgers that dart out from the woods.

Historically, Slovenian cuisine was based on hearty staples such as game meat, fermented cabbage and polenta. Standards include bean soup flavoured with sauerkraut, and dumplings stuffed with raisins and walnuts, liberally sprinkled with pork cracklings. These days, chefs in the countryside are using traditional themes as the foundation for a style of modern cooking that is bold, experimental, and refreshingly down-to-earth at the same time.

"If a nation needs its own language and culture, it for sure needs its own cuisine, one that expresses its character and way of living," says chef Matej Tomažič, whose inn, Majerija, houses one of Slovenia's most famous restaurants.

Surrounded by vineyards in the Vipava Valley – part of the Littoral wine-producing region near Slovenia's southern border with Croatia – the dining room at Majerija offers classic dishes with contemporary touches. Tomažič sources ingredients from organic farms in nearby villages and creates food to pair with local wines from the restaurant's formidable cellar. His speciality, mlinci, is a silky pile of "pasta" made from flatbreads grilled on a cast-iron stove and then simmered in a sauce with rooster and fresh herbs from the garden.

"I'm trying to keep local specialities alive, but I'm adjusting the plates with time," Tomažič says, before explaining that mlinci was originally a "rustic peasant dish" that made use of leftover bread. His interpretation represents a natural evolution of Slovenian cuisine.

An elegant dish of crispy suckling pig and duck blood by Luka Košir at Brunarica Gric



PHOTO: PETER IRMAN



ABOVE
A colourful summer dish by Bine Volcic at Monstera in Ljubljana features local produce and freshly foraged herbs.

RIGHT
Dishes like cold-smoked trout atop a bed of barley and dried pear enriched with mushroom broth, references ricet, a stew of barley porridge and cured meat, while Štefelin's version of Slovenian breakfast is a hollowed-out eggshell filled with creamy polenta, poached egg, and crispy crumbled bacon.

At Hiša Franko, Ana Roš focuses on local, seasonal products, combined in surprising and delicious ways. In autumn, there are plump ravioli filled with vibrant lovage and served with wild mushrooms, and in summer, squid and lamb sweetbreads with black garlic. Her inventive and elegant cooking has inspired other chefs to take a closer look at the ingredients on their doorstep.

On the outskirts of Lake Bled, chef Uroš Štefelin is working to recover heirloom species like the tepka pear, an aromatic fruit with concentrated sweetness. At his restaurant, Vila

Podvin, refined riffs on classic dishes embody the spirit of New Slovenian cuisine. The cold-smoked trout, atop a bed of barley and dried pear enriched with mushroom broth, references ricet, a stew of barley porridge and cured meat, while Štefelin's version of Slovenian breakfast is a hollowed-out eggshell filled with creamy polenta, poached egg, and crispy crumbled bacon.

"Growing up in a time where locals still grew their own vegetables and prepared home-made sausages has left me eager to preserve these memories and introduce them to the current generation in my own way," he says.

Rising-star chef Luka Košir has undertaken an ambitious project at Brunarica Gric, located 20 kilometres outside of the nation's capital, Ljubljana. Košir started a farm on the restaurant's extensive grounds to supplement the wild ingredients he forages in the nearby forest. The Košir family brews its own beer, distils schnapps, and began raising seven species of ducks last year. Once a rustic tavern serving comfort food, Brunarica Gric now turns out some of the country's most daring haute cuisine: a disk of trout roe set in a jade pool of sauce made from a local herb that tastes of artichoke, adorned with a fermented sunflower; cured duck



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PHOTOS: TOMO JESENICNIK, BENJAMIN SCHMUCK



Creativity is on the plate at JB, Ljubljana's top fine-dining establishment. Chef Janez Bratovž combines Mediterranean, French and Slovenian influences in his high-impact dishes.

breast coated in birch sap and butter with nasturtium. "We want to make our guests think and expand their horizons," Košir explains.

The picture-perfect city of Ljublanja is also teeming with culinary creativity. At the restaurant JB, chef Janez Bratovž – considered one of the fathers of modern Slovenian fine dining – uses French techniques to prepare lively, contemporary dishes that belie the dining room's formal interior. Fresh Adriatic prawn comes with hazelnut praline and lemongrass foam; ravioli filled with pistachio is paired with foie gras and licorice. Younger chefs such as Bine Volcic are pushing boundaries even further, incorporating more international influences in his fusion cuisine at Monstera, a neobistro in the city centre.

Slovenia's status as the new darling of the food world may help spark interest in the cuisines of

neighbouring countries such as Austria, Hungary, Croatia and Serbia. Could this be the beginning of a food revolution?

"It's difficult to understand your own roots and identity and then communicate those ideas to people abroad, but Slovenia is starting to do that," says Enrico Vignoli, founder of Postrivoro, an event that showcases up-and-coming talent in the hospitality industry. He fell in love with the food and wine culture of Slovenia in 2008 and featured Valter Kramer, Hiša Franko's sommelier and general manager, in the first edition of Postrivoro five years ago. Whether New Slovenian cuisine will have the same impact that the New Nordic movement has had on dining is unclear, but Vignoli says he's keeping his eye on the region: "Central Europe has a lot of potential, and there is still much more to discover." [T](#)



Wine master Primoz Lavrencic at work at the Burja Estate winery. Slovenia produces some outstanding red and white wines.

WINES WITH AN IDENTITY

In addition to its stellar cuisine, Slovenia is home to an astonishing range of natural wines – including rare age-worthy whites beloved by connoisseurs.

"The terroir, landscape and people are so unique," says Postrivoro's Enrico Vignoli. "The wines express an identity strongly influenced by the area's complex history."

Winemaking in Slovenia predates Roman times and can be traced back to Celtic and Illyrian tribes, who began cultivating grapes in the fourth and fifth centuries BC.

Of the country's three main wine-producing regions – the Drava (Podravje), Lower Sava (Posavje), and Littoral (Primorska) districts – the Littoral has gained the most renown.

In the prominent Goriska Brda sub-region, which borders Friuli-Venezia Giulia in Italy, Ales Kristancic, the winemaker behind biodynamic pioneer Movia, has been crafting seductive reds from international varieties such as cabernet sauvignon, merlot and pinot noir for more than 20 years. Kristancic's beguiling Rebula has a savoury character and amber hue that comes from extended contact with the grape skins.

The intersection of warm Mediterranean and cool Alpine climates in nearby Vipava Valley gives rise to growing conditions that result in crisp, aromatic whites. Top organic producers Batic and Burja employ extreme winemaking techniques to create some of the Littoral's most stunning whites based on indigenous grapes such as pinela and zelen.

For an in-depth introduction to the wines of Slovenia, head to Hiša Franko in Kobarid or Majerija in Vipava.