

THROUGH THE GRAPEVINE

Who knew Serbia produces some of Europe's best bottles? **SARAH SOULI** explores a rich wine culture that, as the Balkan nation continues to recover from the conflicts of the 1990s, is beginning to thrive once more.

NIKOLA TESLA, prolific inventor and perhaps one of history's most famous Serbs, predicted in 1935 that "within a century, coffee, tea, and tobacco will be no longer in vogue. Alcohol, however, will still be used. It is not a stimulant but a veritable elixir of life."

In Serbia, at least, history has proven him wrong about the former—Serbs are still enthusiastic smokers and coffee drinkers—but decidedly right about alcohol. The country has a long legacy of wine making: The Romans introduced viticulture, digging canals and planting vines during their 500-year occupation. In the 19th century, Serbia was one of the most important wine-making areas of the Austro-Hungarian empire—and when phylloxera ravaged the vineyards of Burgundy and Bordeaux, the French turned to this region to satisfy their thirst. In fact, I got my own Serbian wine education at the elbow of my France-based aunt and uncle, who once gave me a memorably delicious bottle produced in Serbia by French expats.

Today, many of Serbia's wineries are concentrated on the slopes of Fruška Gora, a mountain just northwest of the capital, Belgrade, and in the bucolic eastern region of Negotin. But wine making was decimated in the 20th century. Just 25 years ago, the country was embroiled in the decade-long conflict that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia. The future of viticulture was threatened by aerial bombings and economic sanctions. And so I landed in Belgrade for my Serbian wine tour, asking myself, What happens to wine after war? And

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From top: The Krušedol Monastery, in the Fruška Gora wine region of northern Serbia; Father Platon, a monk at Manastir Bukovo in Negotin, eastern Serbia, with barrels of his wine.





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From top: Kajmak cheese with porcini, roasted cauliflower with pomegranate, and more Balkan small plates at Ambar, in Belgrade; Ambar's modern dining room and wine bar.

how was it that a landlocked corner of the Balkans could produce and export some of Europe's most interesting wines?

As my husband, Nikos, and I drove east into Negotin, away from the industrial sprawl of Belgrade, we passed sleepy villages and gnarled trees growing through the walls of dilapidated stone houses. Increasingly, the only people visible were older women (and the occasional man) keeping vigil on benches and stoops.

"We need more people like us," said Mick O'Connor, an English winemaker who runs Vinarija Raj with his Serbian wife, Beka, in the wine-making village of Rajac. He means enterprising vintners willing to move to the countryside, like he did in 2011—but he also just means people. Most of the town's population has left, pushed out over the years by unemployment. Under Yugoslav leader Marshal Tito, in power from 1944 until his death in 1980, private vineyards became state-owned, and the policy continued into the 1990s under Slobodan Milošević, Serbia's notorious first president. Villagers tore up their vines to replace them with more profitable crops, and hundreds of acres of vineyards were abandoned. Policies of quantity, not quality, were implemented. An old train track, which was used to transport bulk wine during the Yugoslav era, runs past O'Connor's winery—a rattling reminder of the past.

But across the green hills of Negotin, there remain hundreds of *pišnice*, stone houses built exclusively for the storage and enjoyment of wine and rakija, a liquor made from fermented fruit that is popular throughout the Balkans. Serbia has asked UNESCO to consider these structures for World Heritage status—a promising effort to protect Serbia's wine-making future. And a small but growing number of wineries are reemerging in this region, run by both local and foreign winemakers: The weather is good, the land is cheap, and there's a strong enough history to keep people anchored.

After a tasting with the O'Connors at Vinarija Raj, where we sampled Serbian varietals like Crna Tamjanika—a strong, fruity wine made from the eponymous black grape—we drove to Francuska Vinarija in nearby Rogljevo. Here, a French couple named Cyrille and Estelle Bongiraud make French-style natural wines with Serbian flair. The couple moved from Burgundy more than a decade ago, intoxicated by the landscape and the richness of the soil.





Winemaker Cyrille Bongiraud and his vines at Francuska Vinarija, in Negotin.

Their grapes include Gamay, Tamjanika, Graševina, and Riesling; though the manner of production is decidedly French, Francuska wines have an unmistakable, earthy Negotin taste. It was the Bongirauds' wine that I had sampled with my family, all those years ago. It is produced mostly for export, but at Francuska, you can have an informal tasting straight from the barrel.

THE NEXT MORNING, we drove a half-hour to Manastir Bukovo, a complex of 14th-century buildings that includes a working Serbian Orthodox monastery. On a hill overlooking the town of Negotin, the soft-spoken Father Platon works 12 acres of land with a level of spirituality not often found in the alcohol industry. "We've always been connected to wine," Platon said of the ancient order.

He poured us a glass of still-not-quite-ready Chardonnay, an overwhelming banana scent on the bouquet. "Producing it is maybe the best thing we can do." Only a handful of people are allowed to visit the vineyard daily—"We love people, but we must protect our monastic life," he said.

There was much more to see—the hospitable winemakers and natural social lubrication had extended each visit by hours—but we headed back through Belgrade to the Fruška Gora wine region, also in the middle of a comeback. Under Tito, much of Fruška Gora's

forest was preserved as a national park. With winemakers drawn to the fertile mineral soil—10 million years ago, this was an island on the Pannonian Sea—the past few years have seen an explosion of innovation.

"Even a decade ago, this kind of wine culture was unimaginable," explained local oenophile and blogger Dušan Jelić as he joined us on our tour. There are more than 30 wineries in the area, but our first stop was Deurić Vinarija, founded in 2006. We were offered a glass of Probus, a full-bodied blend with notes of blackberry and tobacco named after the

The historic Staro Hopovo monastery in Fruška Gora.



wine-loving Roman emperor who planted the first vines in Fruška Gora. Part Cabernet Sauvignon, part Kadarka, a full pour is the color of a freshly cut beet, but sticks to the glass in long, rust-colored tears. The standout, though, is a 2016 Chardonnay, of which only 80 bottles were left (78, after our visit). Last, we dropped by Vinarija Kovačević, which—despite having been in operation since 1895—put Fruška Gora on the map when it opened its new facilities in 2001.

At the end of the trip, we returned to Belgrade, a city in the midst of radical urban transformation. The government is eagerly investing in infrastructure projects, and new homegrown hotels, restaurants, and shops are rewriting the rules of what it means to be Serbian. Wine culture is flourishing here, too. Chefs, turning their attention to local ingredients, are pairing their dishes with Serbia's acidic, food-friendly wines—unheard-of in the city's best restaurants just a few years ago.

We sat down for dinner at Serbian wine bar Ambar, where we ordered Balkan snacks such as bacon-specked kebab and red peppers stuffed with *kajmak*, a Serbian cream cheese. As I sipped my glass of Žilavka, I was reminded of something said earlier that day by a dapperly dressed winemaker named Miloš Jojić at Mačkov Podrum, a vineyard back in Fruška Gora. "Wine is a reflection of the state of society," he told me. If that's true, then Serbia is worth a visit. 🍷



◀ A park-view guest room at Mama Shelter Belgrade.

Exploring Serbian Wine Country

GETTING THERE AND AROUND

There are nonstop flights on **Air Serbia** (airserbia.com) between New York City's JFK and Nikola Tesla Airport in Belgrade. It's also easy to connect through a hub such as Amsterdam or Istanbul. Belgrade has a good public transit system, but you'll want to rent a car to head out into wine country.

BELGRADE

Base yourself in the capital, known as the White City. French hotel chain **Mama Shelter** (mamashelter.com; doubles from \$99) has opened a location on Knez Mihailova Street that has colorful rooms, Moroccan-inspired textiles, and great views of the Danube. The wine list at the bar is divided into three categories: Serbia, France, and the Rest of the World. **Townhouse 27** (townhouse27.com; doubles from \$125), a 21-room boutique hotel, collaborates with the winery **Atelje Vina Šapat** (sapat.rs) to organize

wine dinners and vineyard tours for guests. At **Homa Fine Dining** (homa.rs; tasting menus from \$66), chef Filip Ćirić marries Serbian home cooking and molecular gastronomy. Italian-trained chef Nikola Narančić whips up pasta inside a sleekly remodeled Socialist-era apartment building at **Salon 5** (salon5.rs; entrées \$9–\$25). Pair tapas-style Serbian food with local wines and rakija at **Ambar** (ambarrestaurant.com; entrées \$5–\$11).

WINE COUNTRY

My favorite wineries in the Negotin region, 3½ hours from Belgrade, are **Vinarija Raj** (vinarija-raj.com), **Francuska Vinarija** (lesbongiraud.com), and **Manastir Bukovo** (manastirbukovo.prodavnica.com), a Serbian Orthodox monastery that has been making wine for seven centuries. Also worth a stop are **Clevora** (vina.negotinskekrainine.com) and **Dajic** (fb.com/podrum.mihajlovac), both in the village of Mihajlovac, or **Matalj** (mataljvinarija.rs), in Bukovo, which produces a fantastic Cabernet Sauvignon. Highlights of the Fruška Gora region, an easy day trip from Belgrade, include **Kovačević** (vinarijakovacevic.com), **Deurić** (vinarijadeuric.com), and **Mačkov Podrum** (mackovpodrum.co.rs). Outside of Negotin and Fruška Gora, wine is also produced in the south of the country. Almost all the wineries you'll pass are open to visitors, but you'll want to call ahead to book tastings.

TRAVEL ADVISOR

Eastern Europe specialist **Gwen Kozlowski** (gwen@exeterinternational.com; 813-251-5355), a member of the T+L A-List, can plan a wine-focused Serbia itinerary with her team at Exeter International. —S.S.