



Dubrovnik from Mount Srd.



Pelješac-Salt pans from Napoleon's road.



Istria-Rovinj.



Istria-Grozňan village.

SNAPSHOTS OF Croatia



Pelješac-Ston oysters on the half-shell.



Konavle Valley, cooking with Stane at Kameni Dvori.



Konavle Valley, charcuterie platter.



Dubrovnik at night.

story and photos by Catherine Van Brunschot

I'm not really sure what brought me here to Croatia. Maybe it was the country's position at the crossroads of a complicated history, from Greek colony through Roman, Venetian, and Habsburg Empires – and, of course, the Yugoslavian experiment.

There were those glossy travel photos, too: sparkling harbours, craggy mountains, and romantic walled cities, scarred but enduring beyond the 1990's Balkan Conflict, known in Croatian parlance as "the Homeland War."

But it was Croatia's food culture that definitely sealed the deal, with the promise of uber-fresh seafood, rustic country cuisine, and wine varieties rarely seen or heard-of on our side of the pond.

So here I am, road-tripping with my man up and down the 700 km coastline, collecting snapshots of the tasting terroir, whose details I can't wait to share with the folks back home.

DUBROVNIK

Stunning Dubrovnik, with its old city walls jutting into the Adriatic Sea and its evocative *Game of Thrones* settings, is Croatia's brightest calling card for good reason. Our early morning walk atop its ramparts brings heart-stirring angles across the red-tiled roofs. A gondola ride up Mt. Srd provides even more great photos, plus an opportunity to peruse the passionate exhibition "Dubrovnik During the Homeland War" housed in the Napoleonic fortress.

But it's the evenings, when the cruise ship day-trippers have disappeared and the sinking sun shines rosy on the tiled streets, that the Old Town is most magical, and it's then that we embark on a Dubrovnik food tour. With owner-guide, Hamo Ovcina, we explore the residential backstreets and find the narrow wall breaches that open onto cliffside *buža* (literally, hole in the wall) bars. We sample some of the region's best *pošip* whites and *Dingač* reds at **Razonoda Wine Bar** – and a groaning charcuterie board that includes local *pršut* (air-dried prosciutto) and famous Pag Island sheep's cheese. Winding our way past churches, monasteries, and a former palace, we stop for tuna tartare at **Konoba Veritas**, the bustling sidewalk café of Hamo's neighbour, and for octopus gnocchi and vongole tagliatelle at delightfully artsy **Stara Loza** restaurant, helmed by Chef Damir Šarić, one of Dubrovnik's rising stars.

The tour takes a reflective turn as we wander through the lanes favoured by local shoppers, where Hamo's own personal stories of the 1991 siege of Dubrovnik augment the before and after photos posted on building walls. We close the night at **Patisserie Pupica** with its signature cakes – the chocolatey "Black Queen" and the almond-orange "Southern" – and discover that the three-hour tour has morphed happily into five.

KONAVLE VALLEY

Just outside Dubrovnik, the Konavle Valley stretches beneath a limestone ridge marking the borders of Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina. With its grapevines, fruit and olive trees, and the medieval grist-mills that string along the Ljuta River, the valley's a perfect place for a bucolic cycle, which is what I'm doing today with Epic Croatia's Tomi Čorić and five other travellers.

We see scars of the Homeland War in a bombed-out farmhouse, but a Franciscan monastery that still tends a 15th-century church has been restored since the conflict, and its 250-year-old maple tree grows on. Sunning out front of many farmhouses are jugs of dark liquid, and I wonder what local ritual this might be.

"*Rakija*," says Tomi, explaining that most families make their own version of this powerful brandy by fermenting berries or nuts for a biblical-sounding 40 days. A shot of *rakija* typically welcomes visitors to Croatian homes, a practice I experience first-hand at **Kameni Dvori**, where sisters-in-law Nike and Katarina Mujo have converted the family farm into an *agroturizam*, offering accommodation, a cozy field-to-table *konoba* (tavern), and immersion into local food and culture.

Here, next to the wood-burning cooking hearth, we thread pork onto laurel skewers and make bread and semolina soup dumplings under the guidance of Stane, the family matriarch, whose lack of English proves no hindrance to her cheerful chiding of my husband's chopping efforts. Our work is rewarded by a first course of Konavle charcuterie and cheese, house-made pickles and spreads, including *ajvar*, an astoundingly delicious purée of eggplants and red peppers.

We harvest ingredients from the garden and take another round in the kitchen before tucking into the main feast, where side dishes and wine have materialized next to the fruits of our labour. The conversation turns lively when the sisters and a husband join us for fig cake and Turkish coffee. Sooner than we'd like, our transport driver arrives on the scene, but he simply sits down and joins the party.

PELJEŠAC PENINSULA

High on the dolomite slopes of the Pelješac peninsula, the terrain feels distinctly Mediterranean, with tiny groves of citrus and olives, and drystone walls trailing with poppies. From where we stand, I can see the sea-salt pans and sprawling fortifications of the town of Ston. Both are historically important resources for Dubrovnik, which lies just a 90-minute drive from here.

But we've opted for foot-power today, hiking along this former Napoleonic road down into the vineyards that are part of this region's claim to fame. Here grows the *plavac mali* grape, ancestral cousin to *zinfandel*. Its propensity for producing big, stunning reds brought the return of famous native son, Mike Grgich, the transplanted winemaker who rocked the world in 1973 when his Napa Valley chardonnay beat out all French wines in blind taste tests in Paris.

Grgich's Grgič Vina winery lies too far along the peninsula for our hike, but the highly reputed **Miloš Winery** awaits at the bottom of this trail. Ivan Miloš proves an ever-so-genial host among the grapevines and in the tasting room, and his family's stellar wines steal a big place in my backpack.

Then we're off to the seabeds of Mali Ston, where shellfish have been cultivated since the Roman Empire stalked these straits. Mollusc-farmer **Denis Dražeta** offers shots of his mulberry *rakija* before we chow down on the fresh-plucked oysters that are the Pelješac's other claim to fame. Mussel stew is next, made according to a Dražeta family recipe, served with rustic bread with which we mop the kettle clean. We deem our host's homemade wine a commendable libation, and a perfect instrument of procrastination for any plans to scale Ston's five-kilometre great wall.

ISTRIA

Two days of driving have brought us to the Istrian peninsula on Croatia's northwestern tip, a region whose mercurial borders have left a unique cultural legacy and a deep gastronomic tradition. The green hills of the interior produce olive oil, truffles, indigenous *malvazija* white wines and robust red *teran* wines, and proliferate with sleepy hilltop villages. At a tiny farmers' market in Grozňan, we nibble *fritules* (sugar-powdered doughnut spheres). At steep Motovun, it's handrolled *fuži* pasta with black truffles that perfumes the air and sates our stomachs.

Back along the coast, a well-preserved Roman amphitheatre is to be discovered in the city of Pula; Byzantine mosaics are the star at the Euphrasian Basilica in Poreč.

But, in the end, it's seaside Rovinj that captures my heart. Crumbling Venetian houses run chock-a-block in the old town, where residents switch mid-sentence between Italian and Croat, and children play soccer in the cobblestone streets. Here, fishing boats bob in the harbour; figs, cherries, and walnuts are piled high in the market; the aroma of warm *burek* (meat, cheese, or spinach-stuffed phyllo) wafts from the *pekaras* (bakeries).

On a winding descent from Rovinj's church campanile, we stumble across **Tipica Konoba**, a tavern with a decidedly plain interior but a promising menu. The utilitarian surroundings warm with the first bites of truffle-flecked cheese drizzled with acacia honey and olive oil, and glow bright with the arrival of sea bass *en papillote* and tuna medallions with peppercorn cream on polenta. By the time we fall into the night streets after polishing off deconstructed apple pie and cheesecake with honey and walnuts, I am positively rapturous.

Harbourside in Tito Square, a troupe of breakdancers has joined forces with a ballad-loving guitarist. Their unorthodox but sweet collaboration draws a small crowd under the moonlit sky, and we join their ranks with murmurs of appreciation and soft applause, grateful for this night, this food, this place. ♣

Croatian Culinary Connections

IN CALGARY

DINING:

Find hot spirals of *burek* (stuffed with cheese, spinach, or ground meat), semolina soup-dumplings, or a side of delectable *ajvar* at **Cozy Kitchen** in the light-industrial district east of Chinook Mall. Since 2016, Emina Dedić Halilović and her Croatian-Serbian team (she herself is Bosnian-born) have been serving up the dishes common to all three countries to an appreciative crowd of nearby workers as well as expats from across Calgary. You'll find Emina herself chatting with every guest, proffering samples from a menu that includes *sarma* (cabbage rolls), *čevapi* u lepinji (beef and veal sausage with flatbread), goulash, sandwiches, and spaghetti bolognese. You'll want to take something home from the pastry case stocked with housemade *čupavci* (coconut-and-chocolate-dipped cake), *baklava*, *cannoli*, and other treats.

5708 - 1 St. SE, Calgary. Open Mon-Thurs, 7am-8pm; Fri & Sat, 7am-9pm; Sun, 10am-8pm. Catering available.

At **Niko's Bistro**, former Dubrovnikite, Niko Miletić, has focused on the Italian food of his Croatian childhood, with the likes of Calamari All'Inferno (a crowd-favourite), pasta, and plenty of seafood and olive oil. But the kitchen of this Kensington mainstay prepares its crème caramel Dubrovnik-style and will make *palaciinke* (Croatian crepes) to order. Customers in the know can get *buzara* (shrimp or mussel stew), *crni rižot* (black risotto), or *paštica* (sweet and sour beef) by request. Great Croatian wines are difficult to source in Alberta, but Croatian beer is available from the bar – and you're apt to find Niko sharing a *šljivovica* (plum brandy) or *pelinkovac* (wormwood liqueur) with guests as he makes his way among the tables.

1241 Kensington Rd. NW, Calgary. Open for lunch and dinner, Mon-Fri; Dinner only Sat & Sun.

LIBATIONS:

- **Metro Liquor** store (Skyview Ranch Rd. NE) offers a wide selection of Croatian liqueurs, beer, and some wines.
- **Sobey's Liquor (Cranston)** carries a bevy of Croatian liqueurs.
- **Olympia Liquor** stores (especially the Evergreen and Westgate locations) sell several Croatian wines and beer.
- Look for other retailers of Croatian tipples at liquorconnect.com.

Calgary-based food and travel writer, Catherine Van Brunschot, explored the Konavle Valley and the Pelješac peninsula with Epic Croatia (epiccroatia.com) as part of a week-long tour booked with BikeHike Adventures Canada (bikehike.com). She DID, eventually, tackle that five kilometre wall in Ston and has the photos to prove it. Read more of her work at catherinevanbrunschot.com.