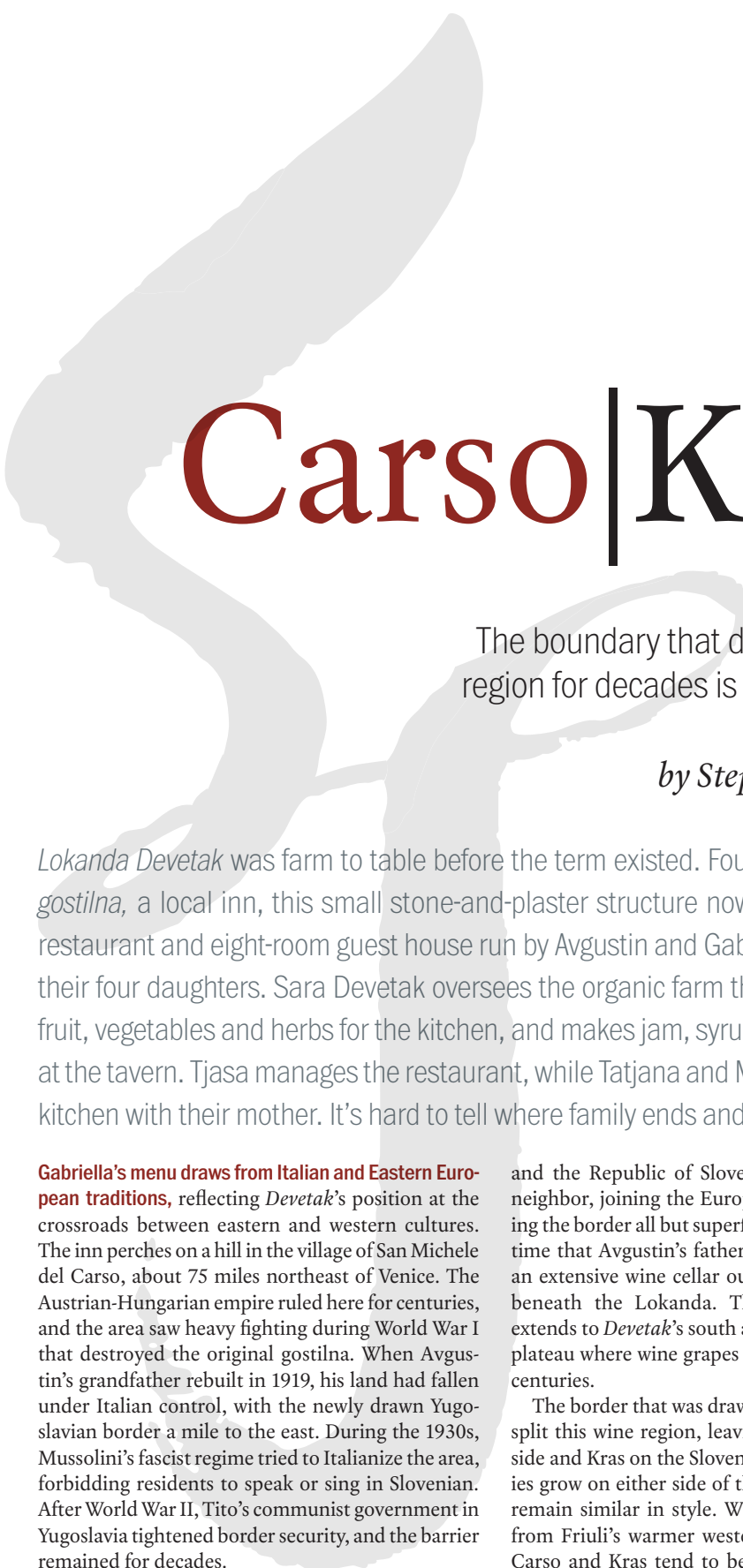




Carso|Kras

The boundary that divided one wine region for decades is now wide open.

by Stephanie Johnson

Lokanda Devetak was farm to table before the term existed. Founded in 1870 as a *gostilna*, a local inn, this small stone-and-plaster structure now houses a tavern, restaurant and eight-room guest house run by Avgustin and Gabriella Devetak and their four daughters. Sara Devetak oversees the organic farm that supplies all the fruit, vegetables and herbs for the kitchen, and makes jam, syrup and honey to sell at the tavern. Tjasa manages the restaurant, while Tatjana and Mihaela work in the kitchen with their mother. It's hard to tell where family ends and business begins.

Gabriella's menu draws from Italian and Eastern European traditions, reflecting *Devetak's* position at the crossroads between eastern and western cultures. The inn perches on a hill in the village of San Michele del Carso, about 75 miles northeast of Venice. The Austrian-Hungarian empire ruled here for centuries, and the area saw heavy fighting during World War I that destroyed the original *gostilna*. When Avgustin's grandfather rebuilt in 1919, his land had fallen under Italian control, with the newly drawn Yugoslavian border a mile to the east. During the 1930s, Mussolini's fascist regime tried to Italianize the area, forbidding residents to speak or sing in Slovenian. After World War II, Tito's communist government in Yugoslavia tightened border security, and the barrier remained for decades.

By the early 1990s, Yugoslavia had broken apart

and the Republic of Slovenia became Italy's new neighbor, joining the European Union and rendering the border all but superfluous. It was around this time that Avgustin's father, Renato, began carving an extensive wine cellar out of the hard limestone beneath the *Lokanda*. That limestone bedrock extends to *Devetak's* south and east, forming a large plateau where wine grapes have been cultivated for centuries.

The border that was drawn after World War I also split this wine region, leaving Carso on the Italian side and Kras on the Slovenian, but the same varieties grow on either side of the border and the wines remain similar in style. When compared to wines from Friuli's warmer western regions, wines from Carso and Kras tend to be lighter in alcohol with higher acidity, a match for delicate fish or cured ham.

Gabriella Devetak



These are the wines that populate Avgustin Devetak's 14,000-bottle cellar, wines produced by his friends and neighbors whose vines are rooted on both sides of a porous border, one that I crossed any number of times during a recent visit.

The Italy-Slovenia border curves south and east from Lokanda Devetak, following a windswept plateau that feels a world away from any other Italian wine region, both in culture and in terrain. On a map of Italy, Carso looks like a slim tassel hanging off the top of the back of the boot. Trieste, a port town at the very end of that tassel, is overshadowed by white cliffs that mark the beginning of the Carso plateau. Carso's largest city, with some 200,000 inhabitants, Trieste has a distinctly Austrian flair in the grand Hapsburg-era palaces that line the Piazza Unità d'Italia, and is well worth a visit for its restaurants focused on fresh seafood, as well as its coffee bars.

The Italian Carso comprises only about one-third of the plateau, the rest extending into Slovenia, where it's known as Kras. Most of the region is rural, dotted with small towns, villages and scattered family farms. If the culture here is rustic, the terrain is downright rugged. During the winter months, the harsh Bora winds can sweep down from the northeast at speeds in excess of 100 miles per hour. E. Alexander Powell, an American correspondent during World War I, described it this way: "Imagine a vast limestone plateau, varying in height from 700 to 2,500 feet, which is as treeless and waterless as the deserts of Chihuahua, as desolate and forbidding as the Dakota Bad Lands, with a surface as torn and twisted and jagged as the lava beds of Utah, and with a summer climate like that of Death Valley in July."

If anyone knows the heroic efforts required to

grow vines on this hard limestone plateau, it's Branko Cotar. Now in his late sixties, Cotar has the wind-scrubbed look of someone who's spent more than 40 years working in the vineyards. He shows me one that he planted about 13 years ago, and says he trucked in more than 400,000 cubic feet of soil to cover the hard limestone beneath; prior to that, he had to break up the limestone with heavy equipment so the roots would have somewhere to go. Now grass covers the rows between the vines to hold the soil in place; there are no vineyards here on steep slopes, because the soil is too precious to risk letting it wash away.

Cotar and his son Vasja began bottling wines in 1990 at their winery, a couple of miles from the border on the Kras, or Slovenian, side. There's no fancy tasting room, just a modest dining room with exposed ceiling beams and lace-curtained windows that look out onto their vineyards. The cellar is rustic, carved out of the hard limestone, and their wines, bottled without fining or filtration, feel a little rustic too. The Cotars work mostly with vitovska and malvasia for their white wines, the two local varieties that seem to best express these soils. The wines ferment spontaneously and rest on the skins for several days, then in barrel about 18 months without added sulfur. According to Branko Cotar, "Every flavor in these wines comes from the vineyard."

The hardscrabble viticulture dictated by this region's harsh conditions has kept yields low and wineries small in scale. Back on the Italian side of the border, less than six miles from Cotar, Matej Skerlj's family subsisted off the land his grandfather bought in the village of Sales after World War II, raising livestock to produce cheeses and cured meats, and growing a few vines to make wine.

Skerlj's father earned some income repairing cars in Trieste, and the family kept an *osmiza*, a local tradition that allowed farms to sell bulk wine and uncooked foods a couple of times each year, but only for eight days at a time (*osem* is Slovenian for eight). Before the internet age, you had to follow hand-painted signs affixed with green branches to find an *osmiza*; now a quick check of osmize.com gives you a list of the opening dates and locations for each one.

Skerlj worked alongside his father in the cellar as a boy and joined the business full time after high school, bottling the family's first wines in 2004. Just shy of age 40, Skerlj represents a new generation of Carso producers. Although his father made white wines in the "fresh" style, Skerlj admired the skin-macerated whites of neighbors like Benjamin Zidarich and Edi Kante. Both of Skerlj's whites, made with vitovska and malvasia, typically spend three weeks on the skins before moving into large neutral oak casks, where they rest for a year without any lees stirring. They combine Carso's mountain and maritime influences in their scents of Alpine herbs and salty sea breezes.

The Skerlj family gave up their *osmiza* around 1990, when regulations loosened and they were able to start an *agriturismo*, but Sandi Skerk's family still runs one. Skerk's cellar is in the village of Prepotto, just a couple of miles from Sales and also home to Zidarich and Kante. The Skerk *osmiza* was in full swing when I arrived, as a steady stream of visitors lined up to buy wine, cheese and cured meats. Skerk's vineyards fan out on the terraced slope just below his cellar. He makes single-variety wines from malvasia

and vitovska, as well as a blend he calls Ograde. He macerates the whites on the skins for about ten days in open-top wood casks (*tini*), with one-third of the cask empty, allowing the fermenting grapes to form a blanket of carbon dioxide that protects them from oxidation; it's his way to minimize the need for added sulfur. After pressing, Skerk moves the wine back into the *tini* where it sits undisturbed for a year. His vitovska has aromas of fresh herbs and white blossoms and crackles with salty minerality. As satisfying as the vitovska can be on a hot summer day, Skerk's 2015 Malvazija is gorgeous. Made from malvasia Istriana, it bursts with peach, apricot and orange-blossom scents, offering an array of fruit flavors while maintaining impeccable balance and clarity.

Skerk's cellar lies below his vineyards, blasted out of the limestone bedrock with dynamite. Stories about cellar construction are a common refrain here—Carso and Kras residents seem almost obsessed with stone, and it's not just the vignerons. Gray stones frame doorways; ochre and rose-hued stones tile walls in restaurants like *Trattoria Valeria 1904* in Opicina; there are stones in wall hangings and carved into sculptures. Pay a visit to Zidarich's cellar, just around the corner from Skerk's, and you'll hear all about stone. He dug through more than 70 feet of it to carve out his cellar, then reassembled the excavated material to construct five levels of arches, pillars and stairways. He also commissioned local artisans to make the stone vat in which he macerates vitovska for Kamen, a wine named with one of this region's seemingly unlimited words for stone. Maybe it's the power of suggestion, but Zidarich's





Edi Kante's cellar



Benjamin Zidarich

Kamen seems to brim with salty minerality and racy, unobscured acidity.

Zidarich's cellar is impressive, but it's hard to beat the three-level, cylindrical cellar built by Edi Kante, the godfather of Carso wines. Kante was born in Prepotto in 1957 on a small farm at the edge of the village. His family raised livestock and grew a few vines, from which his father vinified a red and a white wine in large old barrels.

When Edi came home from his agricultural studies in Trieste, he sawed all of the barrels in half and made them into flower pots, then began fermenting the wines in cement and, eventually, stainless steel. He vinified each variety separately to see how it would develop; it was an unusual strategy at the time, but after 40 years, all of his still wines are single variety. One of those varieties is vitovska, a native grape that had nearly disappeared before Kante began grafting it in his vineyards. Even so, says Kante, "I'm never in love with a variety, only with the possible evolution of the variety."

Kante led the region's return to skin-macerated white wines, or "orange wines," a tradition that his father and others had followed back in the mid-20th century before producers like Schiopetto pushed the

trend toward "fresh" white wines in the 1960s and '70s. Kante made orange wines until 1996, when he had another change of heart. "I wanted to make elegant whites, and elegance is all about setting up the wine to develop in the bottle," he says. That means soft-pressing the grapes immediately after harvest to give the purest juice, then fermenting and aging in neutral wood vats. Once again, Kante is the contrarian, his approach at odds with the producers who followed his lead on orange wines. He seems as comfortable in this role as he is with life on the border, working his vineyards that stretch from Italy into Slovenia. "I've spent my whole life understanding wine, and now I have a 360-degree experience," he says.

It's possible to find wines from Carso and Kras at US retail stores, but quantities are generally limited. I tried to buy some of that compelling Skerk 2015 Malvazija in New York, only to find that it was sold out; Daniel Bjugstad had snapped up the last few bottles for his wine list at *Pasquale Jones*. As more sommeliers try to distinguish their lists with delicious, food-friendly, esoteric wines, look for varieties like vitovska and malvasia to get a taste of this singular region's wines—or better yet, make your own journey along the Italy-Slovenia border. ■

Edi Kante, Benjamin Zidarich and Sandi Skerk all carved their cellars out of the Carso bedrock.



Sandi Skerk

US Importers of Carso/Kras Wines

Cotar – Louis/Dressner, NY

Edi Kante – Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant, Berkeley, CA

Skerk – Oliver McCrum Wines, Berkeley, CA, and T. Edward Wines, NY

Skerlj – North Berkeley Imports, Berkeley, CA, and T. Edward Wines, NY

Zidarich – Rosenthal Wine Merchant, NY

Dining Out in Carso/Kras

Lokanda Devetak (San Michele del Carso)

Alla Dama Bianca (Duino)

Osteria Da Marino (Trieste)

Krizman Restaurant (Repen)

Trattoria Valeria 1904 (Opicina)

Bunker Wine Bar (Aurisina)