

Vino

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30

Gravner

20

Bakalar

38

Cviček

8

Mladci

3, 16, 28, 42

Elevated: Gravner

"Purist with a cause"*

Some wines win international competitions. Some, equally exquisite, aren't even part of the contest – they simply don't need medals to be winners. Those are the wines that put fidelity to their terroir above all else, embodying the winemakers' commitment to refuse compromise in the pursuit of pristine excellence. Such wines, and the people who fashion them, will be the focus of our story. • How to recognize the apex of what the vineyard, the vintage and the master winemaker can create? Does the price even matter? It does, let's put that to rest. But wine, absolutely, also has value that cannot be expressed in numbers. • *It's not a matter of more or less. It's a matter of being complete.* • What are the shared traits of wine works of art? Colour gradient: if the grapes are mature and the wine has aged for a number of years, the colour is never watery. Its depth and intensity convey a feeling of saturation and crystalline translucence. It's not necessarily golden-yellow or near black, but it must be captivating and full. On the nose: the variety is not always at the forefront, it simply can't be since over-ripeness and years of ageing have transformed the primary aromas. Strikingly serious wines are usually blends, where each variety contributes its most assertive characteristics. At any rate, the predominant sensations will be those of extravagance and opulence. Persistence of aromas is key, with the lingering scents often appearing exotic, intertwined and structured. The notion of complex layers is often pronounced. On the palate: warmth and softness should express themselves clearly. If there is a hint of hardness (astringency) or acidity, this indicates potential for longevity. When maturity is optimal, neither sensation will be disagreeable. Overall, impressions shouldn't appear one-dimensional but rather elaborately layered and balanced, elegant, arousing a duly hoped-for effect of perfect harmony.

* Purists: a circa 1928 group of Styrian winemakers who rejected the use of any oenological agents or any other additives (even sugar), embracing strictly dry wines.

The "tasting living room" features no prestige, no designer furniture encountered so frequently with winemakers of exalted stature. Wine Spectator in 2017 ranked his among the 100 most important cellars in Italy. I remember someone quipping, ages ago: "Joško Gravner would sooner buy himself new cellar equipment than a bed to lie in". Simple words revealing volumes on the man and his mission. On his wall, a great eclectic triptych by David Benati, the *Doppio oppio* on rice paper, attracts the gaze and compels the mind towards nature, overburdened and shackled by our machinations. Another bold piece is the splendid stone fireplace, the source of welcoming warmth.

The wines are already waiting. A temperature of 14°C suits them best. They've spent one year in the kvevri (large earthenware vessels originating from Georgia), six in large wooden barrels, a total of seven years of ageing. A fairy-tale number? Also, but not just. "You have to choose a single road," he speaks with matter-of-fact clarity. His replies are sweeping and thorough, yet without aim to force his convictions on anyone. I remember the French Wine Academy teaching that vines are considered juvenile until their seventh year of age, their wines short-lived. Four times seven equals twenty-eight, and so does the sum of numbers between one and seven! A mathematical coincidence? Gravner says such age grants wines – like people – substance and maturity. This year, the period of *seven lean and ugly cows* cost him four fifths of the produce, yet he appears to be stoically accustomed: "What matters is the forest and not just the trees." He normally presses a mere two hundred and fifty hectolitres of wine from his fifteen hectares of land when harvest is plentiful. "Can't you produce any less?" I cheekily tease, provoking indulgent laughter. His respect for the soil and the vine also reflects in the design of his labels. In his mind, certainly, the key to phenomenal wine lies in the vineyard, and that's where he spends most of his time. He will now only plant his own two-year-old grafts, saying the nurseries are too hasty in their grafting practices and methods. The press isn't pneumatic but rather an old-school basket press. No destemming, no cooling machinery either, no stainless steel, no fining agents, no filtration, no yeast selection. Only the kvevri (ever since 1997) and the wooden barrels. • He's so consistent as to refuse installing mandatory electric carbon dioxide sensors in his cellar, snapping: "I'll do my time, if that's what it takes!" Since picking tends to drag out till St. Martin's Day ("no such thing as overripe grapes"), which means the kvevri are never fermenting simultaneously, the danger is in fact minimal. "The bureaucrats will have their fines, caring little about fact," he rants a little. There's been no trace of artificial fertilizer in his vineyards for twenty-five years. When a cooper visited to check on his barrels, he was incredulous to see them absent of cream of tartar. How can this be? Straight from the horse's mouth: zero NPK fertilizers, very ripe grapes and ossified stems, maceration in the kvevri, prolonged aging. Anything else? The course is set for biodynamic grape and wine production. Small yet essential doses of sulphur remain an unwelcome necessity to ensure a flawless outcome. And quality, as his father used to say, is what all else rests upon. Today, he posits it is no longer enough. Marketing and sales are orchestrated by his daughter Mateja, though Joško believes his target market will always be relatively small, an acquired taste. • Joško Gravner was ever a winemaking pioneer, with his steel vats, barriques or the kvevri. Fittingly, he is now engaged in another new concept. In a while his vineyards will be growing exclusively Ribolla Gialla and Pignolo. The first has shown its merits already, while the rare Pignolo ("wicked tannins", he says), barely saved from extinction, shall henceforth be his red protagonist, considered by Joško a fantastically promising though demanding variety for long lived wines. Staying ahead of the pack is not for the squeamish. The man is certainly graced by four manly virtues: courage to stray from the path; endurance in spite of adversity; generosity and forgiveness; loyalty, having given Ribolla his life. He who passionately kisses the vine will not stop!

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STUDIO AJD (wine bottle) • Translation: MARKO IPAVEC



Amber Excellence

Moving on to the wines, their story is equally genuine. What the maker speaks of is proven true: a radical departure from conventional wine production, a wilful choice to go against the grain. Joško believes the wine economy has gone astray. The orange or amber wines he crafts are so different they require a vocabulary all of their own, a specific aesthetic approach: here, characteristics on the palate are more expressed than those on the nose. The wines contradict the prevailing norm building upon primary aromas, harnessing their branding potential. Perhaps this is the reason for the specially designed glass – the Gravner (we'll refer to it as the G), reminiscent of the French *Le taster-impitoyable* (the flawless taster). Unusually wide, it has no stem but instead a pair of depressions accommodating the thumb and middle finger whose motion is used to swirl the wine, airing it and making one feel as if they were "grasping" the liquid itself. My comparative glass was the Rastal Harmony 53 (hereinafter the RH), intended for reds. I would advise such wines be enjoyed from red wine glasses in general.

Ribolla 2007 • Dominant: the unmistakable light amber colour, crystalline translucent, defines the category. No signs of oxidation, and despite the years no "varnish" that likes to manifest with wines of such age. A testament to its longevity. The bouquet is rather singular though wide, spacious and lasting, the aroma ruled by balsamic sensations of cedar, tea, dry fruit, hay, caramel. The wood is nearly imperceptible, ousted by the overripe grapes. Alongside the phenolic accent, the tactile richness and oily texture thoroughly overflow the mouth, exciting a flood of saliva, proof of the sensory originality, demanding nature and marvellous presence and identity of the wine. Acidity is low sooner than moderate. In this context, the concept of "agreeableness" lies moot. One either resonates with wine of such specificity or does not. It's an intuitive point. • G versus RH: G proves itself to be more suitable on the nose and the palate. In the RH, the aroma is slightly more closed yet also more sharply defined.

Bianco Breg 2008 • Dominant: a darker amber colour identifies this category. United: Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Gris, Chardonnay, Welschriesling **. Without signs or scents of oxidation. First impressions bring a barely discernible acetic, ester trace, covered immediately by a readily apparent ripe fruit note. Balsamic. Game meat comes to mind. Here, the oak makes itself felt, just enough to offer prologue followed by an aromatic avalanche: clove, coriander, ginger, figs and raisins, toffee – invoking parallels with top predicate wines from the Štajerska region. Tactile impressions are even richer than with the Ribolla 2007, a great warmth and softness with low acidity, though overall finesse is in the former somewhat more pronounced than in the Breg. Key findings for the future of Ribolla Gialla! • G versus RH: G is likely more suited to the flavour and the bouquet, partly also to the aroma. RH boosts the sensations, providing also a more classic "wine" profile.

Rosso Breg 2005 • One hundred percent Pignolo, infusing the glass with the marvellous scent of plum jam. Twelve years in still a youthful wine, carmine in colour, its current state (2017!) remains yet unfit for the "Elevated" label, if only because it shows such outstanding potential for future elegance and finesse to herald a brand new "heroic flavour" (of steep hills and terraces), if I may says so, for red wine with a distinguished identity affix. I advocate for such wines! Tactile experiences are tremendous, fully pervading the mouth at a single nonchalant gulp. Its firm acidity is sure to keep it going for years. Whosoever pours these three examples blindfolded to conduct an impartial tasting exercise will, I assure you, be surprised: from here on in, any debate on the phenolic ripeness of "those wines" is merely academic! Putting on *Vedrai, vedrai* (Gino Paoli & Danilo Reya, *Due come noi che...* 2012) to accompany the tasting adventure, you'll reach harmony with the presentation at hand...

** Welschriesling: praised by Joško Gravner nearly as much as Ribolla! Chardonnay, he claims, "has the sugar and little else, while the Welschriesling has been a people's favourite for centuries..."