



▲ STANKO CURIN

Slovenia

AND THE NEW JERUSALEM

BY KESTER J. EDDY

THE CLOCK at in the dining room in the Puklavec tourist farm in the hills of north-east Slovenia is stuck at five to 10. Perhaps it is meant to be symbolic. For if, in the early morning, you look out of the window, past the huge traditional oven that dominates the room, it could be in 2007, 1957, or even 1907.

Outside, a pair of falcons glide, seemingly effortlessly, in search of prey over the lines of vines that dominate the landscape. Only then does a car pull up on the gravel outside, spoiling the time-capsule illusion. It

CURIN – CHAMPION OF KOG

The village of Kog is a mere 3km as the crow flies from the Puklavec tourist farm, but about double that by road. Almost every home has a vineyard, none more respected than that of Stanko Curin (pictured above). The walls of Curin's cellar entry hall are festooned with certificates, while upstairs a cabinet in his office groans under the load of medals and cups – all awards, both domestic and international - for his wines. "I was a lorry driver. I'm self taught. I only began making wine in 1963," he relates, his hands shaking as he pours a Pinot Gris from 2005. "You know, I sell this in France, between 4,000 and 5,000 bottles a year," he confides, beaming at his success in penetrating one of the world's toughest markets. Curin gives a running commentary, updating on each wine's alcohol and sugar levels, its awards and successes at home and abroad. Curin has retired from the front line now, leaving that to his daughter and son-in-law, but he is still to be found in the vineyard in deepest winter examining each vine for the grapes just right for the late harvest. We tasted wines from bottles of just 0.25l, each holding a special late selection, and each getting decidedly sweeter as sugar content rises to extraordinary levels. "This 2005 Sipun has 220 grams of sugar and 9 grams of acid. When I go to heaven, I will take this for St Peter. Maybe I can run his cellar with this one," he says.

- Curin's cellar is not generally open to the public, and can only be visited by appointment.

has Ljubljana plates (the capital is some 200km distant) and unlike the stricken clock, this arrival is more than symbolic. While most foreigners associate Slovene tourism with the dazzling lights and lurid colors of competitive skiing, increasing numbers of visitors are discovering the delights of rural tourism in the country's far corners, and this car has brought the first arrival for a birthday party that evening.

In hamlets like Zasavci, where matriarch Andrea Puklavec bakes traditional bread and roasts chickens the size of turkeys (raised by her son on a nearby farm), tourism is an economic life-line in an area otherwise largely devoid of industry. "Many of the young people leave this region to study in Ljubljana and just don't come back because there are few job opportunities. The break up of Yugoslavia hit us hard here (Zasavci is just 5km from the Croatian border), so tourism is vital for bringing in money and jobs," says Andrej Vrsic, director of tourism for the nearby town of Ljutomer.

Although the numbers for last year are still being added up, Vrsic says visitors are clearly increasing. But tourism here is driven by more than just tasty bread and juicy,

LJUTOMER – ORMOZ WINE REGION

The Ljutomer – Ormoz Wine Region is an area of roughly 15km by 8km located between the Mura and Drava rivers in northeast Slovenia, close to where Hungary meets Slovenia and Croatia. It is approximately 300km from Budapest, most easily accessed by road by crossing into Croatia and driving via Cakovec. (Note, if returning with wine, as Croatia is not an EU member, to avoid customs problems be sure to cross directly into Hungary via Lendava or Hodossy.) There is also a daily train to Ljutomer Mesto and Ormoz, departing Budapest Deli at 12.50. Return train leaves Ormoz at 10.26, Ljutomer at 10.46. Return fares are a super deal HUF 7,800. The region contains dozens of wineries, many of which are not open unless by appointment, while others accept guests off the street. Accommodation at tourist farms is typically available at EUR 20 – 25 per night. However, the older generation generally speak German rather than English as their second language. If your concern is language, try accommodation with Sloveniaforfamilies.com. This is a tourist company renting holiday cottages run by two British expatriates based in Murska Sobota, a short drive north of the Ljutomer-Ormoz wine region (and it has its own wineries nearby).

LJUTOMER TOURIST OFFICE: <http://www.jeruzalem.si>

ORMOZ TOURIST OFFICE: <http://www.slovenia.info>

pointing to a line of poplars about 5km to the west. "In the Middle Ages, crusader knights going to Palestine liked these hills so much they built a church on the highest point, over there. They named it Jeruzalem, after the Holy City," he says. Whether or not all the knights, having built their place of worship (and presum-

name. At the same time it has invested heavily in new wine making technology, and now managing director Ivan Serec, appointed just last year, has initiated a special emphasis on wine tourism. Central to this is a new hotel and dining facilities at Jeruzalem, designed to appeal to both coach parties eager for traditional food and the a la carte connoisseur seeking only the best fare. "The Jeruzalem investment, as well as other facilities to hold seminars and promote wine, represents a whole new move into wine tourism," Serec says.

"Tourism is vital for bringing money and jobs."

– Andrej Vrsic, Director of Tourism in Ljutomer

mammoth chickens, as the master of the house, Francek Puklavec, is keen to explain. "First we had people coming to buy wine, and they wanted to taste it. Then they wanted to eat, so we needed dining facilities. Then they wanted somewhere to sleep, so we needed accommodation. That's why we have built what we have today," Francek says.

In his cellar, Francek is enthusiastically pouring wines for tasting. The dominant variety is Sipon – the Slovene term for Furmint – but his offerings include Laski (Welch) Riesling, Chardonnay and Muscat Ottonel. All are enjoyable, but recent special selection Chardonnay lives up to its name. "I've got just 3,000 bottles of this. I've never had another one like it. There is 25 years work in this wine," he says. There are many small wine makers similar to Francek Puklavec all over Slovenia. But vintners in these parts enjoy another advantage, says Andrej Vrsic,

ably tasted some of the local wine) could find the will to continue is open to conjecture. Whatever, eight centuries later winemakers here use the name to differentiate their wines from the crowd. None has exploited this advantage better than Jeruzalem-Ormoz, a former wine cooperative and now the largest single producer in the region, which has its main base 8km to the south, in the small town of Ormoz. A few years ago the company redesigned its labels to emphasize the Jeruzalem

QUALITY TOURISM

It is also a huge leap towards quantity tourism that is some distance from the rustic simplicity of the Puklavec farm. Not that Francek seems in any way in awe of the competition building up. Indeed, he has total faith in his business model. "I know my cellar is very simple. I have not got the most modern technology. But here with my wine I work from my soul to reach your soul," he says. ☆



▲ IT'S ALL A IN A DAY'S WORK: The Puklavec family (above left) outside their tourist farm. Ivan Serec (above right) MD of Jeruzalem-Ormoz Winery shows off his wares.