

# CONNECTING PEOPLE, BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Stripping away the glamour, **Marcy Gordon** heads to Croatia to discover the true work of a wine importer.

“I should import this! How hard can it be?”

Many wine lovers traveling in a distant land sip a local wine and consider this thought. So, when Blue Danube Wine, an importer of Eastern European wines, invited me to tag along for two weeks to visit producers and scout wines along the Dalmatian coast in Croatia, I didn't hesitate to say yes.

Yes, to leisurely days tasting wine in luxurious coastal settings. Yes, to living the glamorous life of a wine importer.

I quickly learned, however, that wine importers must be well prepared for the rigors of the road and palate. The schedule is packed, the pace unrelenting. We tasted more than 60 wines and barrel samples before lunch. Long days of tasting were followed by evenings evaluating sample bottles and taking detailed notes.

And on the road, often there's no map. We got lost several times and detained by the police. We raced three hours in the pitch-black night around the Pelješac peninsula without a GPS to catch the last ferry to Korčula, arriving with four minutes to spare. We couldn't find the hotel, because it had changed its name but not its signage. We finally checked in well after midnight.

That was only day one.

Off-road, importers, I learned, must be masters of sketchy directions:

*Turn right past the building with the pink balcony. Follow a dirt track. Turn left at the big boat by the olive trees. Keep going until you see the airport flight path markers.*

That's how we found one of the original Zinfandel grapevines known as Crljenak Kaštelanski. Trekking to the vineyard, we saw the famous vine identified by an aluminum dog tag with a serial number and pedigree around its trunk. Not exactly sacred surroundings, but thrilling all the same.

The wineries here are not grand estates. Several are bleak, communist-era remnants of Yugoslavian state production. Some tasting rooms are winemakers' homes—centuries-old stone buildings where we would

gather around the family table with bountiful spreads of breads, cheeses, olive oils, cured meats, tuna, capers and homemade confections. If the surroundings were humble, the hospitality was grand.

I discovered that the life of an importer is not about fancy chateaus and grand meals. Rather, it's about connecting with people over a glass of wine and, often, a home-cooked meal. Most everyone we visited has been part of a winemaking family for generations, and by doing business or breaking bread together, you become part of the family, too.

On Hvar Island, we were set to tour the famed Zlatan Otok winery, founded by Zlatan Plenković, an icon and legend of modern of Croatian wine, who recently died. But his son, Marin, guided us somewhere more personal.

He led us to a small cemetery, adjacent to the winery, that overlooks the sea. It's there that we stood over his father's grave. The weight of the father's legacy braced upon the son's shoulders was at once palpable and heartbreaking. We never did see the winery. It wasn't important: Marin showed us all that mattered.

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REBECCA BRADLEY

