

Jake Emen, Special for USA TODAY Published 6:58 a.m. ET Nov. 6, 2017



## A tasting tour of Croatia



(Photo: Jake Emen, for USA TODAY)

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"Croatsians, they don't know what they have yet," says Giuseppe Somma, executive chef at Restaurant Pjerin in the Hotel Villa Dubrovnik. "They have fantastic cheese, fantastic wine... they have everything. And now they have passion. If you don't have passion, you have nothing."

Somma is from Italy, which is also where he received his culinary training, and he believes that people in Croatia are just beginning to scratch the surface in terms of bringing their country's culinary treasures to the world. At Pjerin, he does his part by offering high-end, modern Mediterranean fare, with new interpretations of classic dishes and techniques. "Croatian cooking is Mediterranean cooking, with some Italian and some Croatian influence," Somma says.

A gourmet trip to explore Croatia's tastiest treats may take a visitor from the Dalmatia region, where a bounty of seafood is mixed with traditional cooking methods, from "under the bell" preparation to the world-famous oysters from the Bay of Mali Ston, and from cheese made on Pag Island, north of Zadar, to wine country in Samobor, outside the capital city of Zagreb.

"Everything here has its own story, this is what I love," says Antun Filipec, owner and winemaker at Filipec Cellar. While he could be talking about the totality of Croatian specialties, right now he's specifically referring to the table in front of us: his Bermet, an aromatized wine his family has been making for more than 200 years, as well as his spicy Samobor mustard, and an assortment of locally made charcuterie and cheeses. Everything made with care and showcased with pride, bringing family traditions to the world.

"Here in this area, every house has a vineyard," says Krešimir Ivančić, owner and winemaker at Winery Ivančić - Griffin Sparkling Wines. "Tradition is in every house." Yet, as with Somma's modern interpretations of food, Ivančić is reinventing wine production in the Plešivica region, using advanced, high-tech methods such as cryomaceration alongside a perfectionist turned mad scientist mentality to hone even the tiniest of details in his production.

While even a casual wine drinker understands the impact of terroir, regional factors play a huge role in other gourmet specialties, such as oysters. "Oysters grow only here because of the fresh water, there must be perfect conditions," says Denis Dražeta, a third-generation oyster farmer in the Bay of Mali Ston. Mussels are ubiquitous in Croatia's waters, but the oysters uniquely thrive in this bay, where a mix of fresh water and seawater, and active currents, work together to produce brightly vibrant and flavorful oysters which have been globally renowned since winning an award at the 1936 World Exposition in London.

Tiny regional differences come into play again with one of Croatia's best-known specialties, Paški Sir, or Pag cheese. Pag Island is home to about 8,000 people, and more than four times as many sheep, and its cheese is the unique result of the island's highly salty environment and the herbs growing here, which make up the sheeps' diets.

"Pag equals cheese, that's the first thing that comes to mind," says Bernard Maržić, a local guide taking me on a tour of the Paška Sirana factory, one of three main producers of the cheese along with a handful of tiny family farms. "It has a particular aroma, you can feel that this is the Pag cheese. This is how Pag tastes in winter."

Elsewhere, a local method of cooking may be one of the key culinary contributions of a particular place. That's the case with Dalmatia and peka, or the under-the-bell technique of slow cooking food on a hot brick surface in a pan enclosed by a metal covering, or bell, which is covered with hot coals. "We only use what they used before us," says Marin Vukorep, who hosts cooking classes at his family farm in Čilipi, a small coastal village. No fancy kitchen gadgets here. All that's needed to produce a stellar meal is the farm's produce, a choice cut of meat, and a combination of coal, brick and iron. The technique goes back at least three or four centuries in the region, with veal and octopus being two popular choices to use in the dish.

Croatia is truly a gourmand's paradise, and it's easy to embark on your own adventure. Wineries such as Filipec Cellar and Griffin Sparkling Wines are generally open to the public although both recommend scheduling a tour in advance. Paška Sirana doesn't host public tours at the factory, however they have an official cheese shop in Pag. Many local purveyors don't offer any direct means of contact, only accepting bookings from guides and travel companies. An operator such as Black Tomato can provide transportation and guides while customizing an itinerary, whether it's learning how to cook under the bell in the Dalmatian countryside or oyster farming in Mali Ston.

Browse the photos above for a virtual culinary tour of Croatia's tastiest specialties, and see more across the Mediterranean below.