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## The red revolution with help from abroad

By Kester Eddy

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Ludvik Glavina remembers how his heart was beating when he first began cutting back the grapes from his family's vines.

"My father didn't like it. He loved lots of grapes, big yields. And in the whole community, farmers were saying; look at the Glavinas, what are they doing? It was like a revolution!" he chuckles.

This was in the late 1990s, and Mr Glavina senior was well-known for his fresh wines, especially reds, which his family had produced for three generations in Smarje, a village high in the hills of the Slovenian part of the Istria peninsula.

But his son, who had returned to the family home only in 1991, felt the land and local grape varieties had more potential – and he was determined to tap it.

"I thought the tastes from here could be a discovery, for Europe and the world, and that for example, refosk, a local grape, could produce high-quality, complex wines," he says.

A decade on, Ludvig Glavina, now marketing under the Santomas label, is one of the leading wine makers in the country, with sales of both international and local varieties – including refosk – in the US, western Europe and Japan.

"We know Bill Clinton likes our wines, especially our Antonius Sauvignon 2001," he says with pride.

But starting out was not so simple. Fifteen years ago, after a career in commerce, including a stint running an office in Romania, Mr Glavina was aware that when it came to modern techniques in both cultivating grapes and wine making, he had a lot to learn.

So he turned to Claude Gros, a French oenologist recommended by a friend, for advice.

"Claude and I started to work on the refosk in a Bordeaux style. He supported me very much, and he shared my vision for the variety, and understood our soil and climate," he says.

The desire for a complex wine led to experimenting with oak ageing, and to the strict control of grape yields, which he typically limits to one bunch – about 1.5 kg per vine – to maximise the mineral content.

The first endorsement of his work was not long in coming, his 1999 refosk, from his best parcel, won a silver medal at the San Francisco wine fair in 2002.

"This was the first international recognition that I was on the right road," he says.

The award boosted awareness of the Santomas label both at home and abroad – exports now account for 40 per cent of the 60,000-80,000 bottles a year – and the same 1999 refosk vintage is currently Slovenia's most expensive domestically-made wine, selling for as much as €195 a bottle in some restaurants.

Robert Gorjak, a leading Slovenian wine specialist, believes Mr Gros was the key to Mr Glavina's rapid success.

"Mr Glavina is one of few who dared use foreign consultant winemakers. With Claude's help, he has changed the way we look at the refosco [refosk] grape; he's made it worthy of ageing, and drinkable at last," Mr Gorjak says.

Producing high-quality wines has a cost however, and with cellar prices of €10-25 a bottle for the better oak-aged reds, Santomas is not an easy sell in the highly competitive international market, says Caroline Gilby, a UK-based wine writer and consultant.

"Personally I like the Santomas label, but they are on the pricey side and need to be hand-sold by people who can explain they are wines unique to that corner of Slovenia.

"It's the position for most Slovenian producers, as they are unlikely to be able to hit the volumes and pricing required for true mass market exposure, they need a niche," says Ms Gilby.

Sensing this, Mr Glavina is pressing on, and sold an investment in 2005 to finance the building of a spectacular winery of local stone, complete with a tasting room for 45 guests.

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"Since May we have been open on Fridays and Saturdays [in season]. Visitors probably account for 10 per cent of sales. It's an important outlet," says Tamara Glavina, his daughter, who joined her father three years ago in the venture.

The pair are continually experimenting with grapes and winemaking methods, while expanding the vineyard, which now stands at 24 hectares.

Quizzed as to the total investment, Mr Glavina stops to think. "The winery cost was €1.6m, but I've never worked out the total money in the vineyards. You know, it would give me a headache," he says with a hearty laugh.

"I know I won't get a return in my lifetime. I don't need it. I live here in this lovely village, with friendly people, where my family has now made wine for five generations. That's what's important to me," he says.

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