

A harvest in Karso!

by Douglas Gayeton
pictures by Lam Wolf



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WHAT THEY'RE EATING
"pasta fatta in casa con
ragù di maiale e vitello"
(homemade pasta with pork
+ veal ragù made by
Benjamin's wife)

Where
are we?
At Prulke
Benjamin's
vineyard near
the village of
Prepotto ITALIA
13 September 2011

FIELD
BLEND
Malvasia and
Vitovska

(1 basket = 15 kilos of
grapes = 8 bottles of wine)



This far-flung section of Friuli-Venezia Giulia is home to three leading winemakers who are creating some of Italy's best white wines. Their annual harvest reveals how they overcome the challenging terrain to make it.

EDI KANTE STANDS IN HIS VINEYARD, perched on the dry, rocky hills that overlook the Gulf of Trieste. He scoops up a handful of red soil and lets it sift through his fingers. “Terra rossa is the blood of a Carsolino,” he says. The term is the local name for this coveted, rust-colored earth, and a Carsolino is a resident of Carso, this tiny wine region in the far southeastern reaches of Italy’s Friuli-Venezia Giulia region. “It is worth gold to me, because there is so little of it.”

Carso is made up of a cluster of villages and vineyards balanced atop a plateau that juts dramatically from the Adriatic Sea. Its name is the Italian word for karst, a limestone landmass that has eroded over millennia and become laced with runnels and underground grottoes. The hardscrabble vineyards here are scratched out of

unforgiving rock. Sturdy stone houses that dot the region are roofed in stone shingles to protect against the mighty bora winds, which can blow off the Adriatic at more than 120 miles per hour, lashing vineyards and stripping their topsoil. Unforgiving, maybe, but the unique climate and terrain define the area’s wines. The iron-rich but rocky, porous soil, and nearby sea that ushers in warm breezes, impart a distinct minerality and pronounced aromatics to the area’s grapes that are unlike any other in Italy.

A half hour north of Trieste, Italy’s easternmost city, Carso straddles the border of Slovenia. The boundary is so permeable and has shifted so many times throughout history that the street and village signs are written in Slovenian and Italian. If you haven’t heard of Carso or its wines, you’re not alone. It remains a mystery to many Italians. But you’ve probably heard of the region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, which is also home to better-known wines from the Collio and Colli Orientali del Friuli regions that lie to the northwest of Carso.

While names such as Livio Felluga, Livon and Gravner have put Friuli on the map, insiders are keeping their eyes on Carso, where a small group of independent and creative winemakers are harnessing the challenging terrain and employing natural

winemaking methods to produce distinctive wines that cannily reflect their personalities. These character-intense bottles are rapidly becoming some of the best in the country.

Carso is known for varietals such as pinot bianco, malvasia and the indigenous red grape terrano, a local variety of refosco, but it’s the vitovska grape that reigns here. It’s the pride of the region, one the people will tell you best reflects their viticulture, and it grows only in Carso on both sides of the border. Marked by its signature golden hue, and potent aromatics of fig and wild herbs balanced by razor-sharp acidity, vitovska thrives here and is, in fact, a product of the terroir.

Kante is the father of Carso wine, and the first winemaker from the region to gain any sort of international recognition for his endeavors. He, along with Benjamin Zidarich and Sandi Skerk, are the veritable triumvirate of Carso winemakers. “They represent three generations of winemaking in Carso, even if they are close in age,” says Sandro Sangiorgi, a widely respected Italian wine writer and educator, as well as the editor of the gastronomic journal, *Porthos*, who has written about Carso. “When producers spend time together, inevitably a regional character of their wines emerges, as well as the personalities of individual producers.”

When I first tasted vitovska and learned about this group of winemakers, I was determined to go there and work their harvest.

I STOP AT KANTE’S WINERY for a crash course in harvesting. He meets me in the driveway dressed in his usual dapper style, with fashionable red pants, a blue gingham shirt and his signature thick-framed designer glasses.

“You have arrived for the best harvest in 10 years,” he says, extending his hand. “Each vintage is an expression of the light that a winemaker experiences throughout the year and quantifies day by day ... Wine is the concentration of sun, and in 2011, the light was spectacular. The better the light, the better the wine.” We walk into one of his vineyards, which will be harvested in the coming days. The hillside is bathed in nearly palpable, honey-colored light.

“The quality of light in Carso is better than in almost any other region in Italy,” Sangiorgi says. “In Italy, it is hard to find a place where the light hits the leaves, bunches of grapes and the land like it does in other areas in Europe. For example, if you listen to some producers from Mosel or Rheinfalz or even in Champagne, they explain that the inclination of the sun’s rays impacts the aromas and perfumes of the wine more than anything else.” It’s not by chance that Carso makes such aromatic wines, whether they be terrano, vitovska or even chardonnay.

Kante shows me how to clip the ripe bunches of grapes, and it’s straightforward and simple. Just snip the bunch at the stem, pull off any dried or rotten grapes and leaves, and drop it in one of the red collection containers laid out that are called cassette.

After my tutorial, we go into his cellar. Kante was the first winemaker to invest so extensively in Carso. He spent several years in the 1990s blasting out his »

"Zemlja Raza"



vitevska

*(red earth)

...is the blood
of the Carsolino."

- Edi Kante

Korance Vineyard
(near the village of Dales)



From left: Carso straddles Italy's border with Slovenia, and signs in the area are written in Italian and Slovenian; harvesting vitovska in Kante's Korance vineyard; grapes fermenting in barrels; Zidarich pressing grapes in his cellar.

cellar from the solid limestone bedrock. He set the standard for cellars here, and an imposing one it is. At 60 feet deep, it could double for the Bat Cave. Utilitarian in construction, its circular shape steers airflow, and it has three levels, one for each stage of the winemaking process. On the top level, Kante ferments and finishes each wine. On the second level, which he keeps at 59°, he ages wine in barrels. After bottling, wines go to the lowest level, where they're stored at 54°.

Some say Kante is the most traditional of the triumvirate. But tradition is relative in Italy, with a younger generation of winemakers fast turning to natural winemaking, a loose term for an approach that employs as little intervention as possible on the part of the winemaker, in essence letting nature take its course. It's one of the philosophies that guides the majority of winemaking in Carso, and while Zidarich and Skerk fall into this category, Kante isn't quite as entrenched in it. He believes the winemaker's charge is to coax the grape into the bottle, and as one of the few winemakers in the region to plant such a range of international varieties, his wines are characterized by

the same elegant restraint that marks his demeanor. "Kante recognized the potential of Carso, something that others had a difficult time imagining," Sangiorgi says, adding that Kante's approach leans on the side of reserved. "[His] winemaking style is based on control ... [and a] technical enological education."

For one of his top-tier wines, Little Blue Selezione, he blends merlot, pinot noir and cabernet sauvignon with terrano. Kante also has had success with chardonnay, which seems like a counterintuitive choice for the tough terrain, since it's a notoriously delicate grape. But his vineyards turn out a splendid rendition of the varietal, proving that going against the grain can go a long way when one's intuition is strong. In addition, his pinot bianco is unlike your average pinot bianco. It's marked by heightened notes of pear and a full body balanced by the characteristic Carso acidity, but with a touch of salinity blown in from the nearby Adriatic. Kante does, however, take a natural approach to winemaking in some areas: in his vineyards, he avoids pesticides, and in the cellar, he refrains from adding sulfur to stabilize his wines.

When we leave the cellar, Kante points to the vineyards and says, "Il Carso è terra senza terra." Carso is land without land, which I take to mean that part of the winemaker's job is to nurture the terrain. He explains that to plant the vineyards, he had to physically cart in soil. With nothing but hard limestone to cling to, the bora winds sweep away the topsoil, which has to be hauled in from the sinkholes and gullies where it's deposited, often miles away. Looking at the vineyards that claw the rocky terrain, it seems as if the vines are the ones anchoring the soil to the land, and that they grow out of a tentative marriage between the transitory dirt and the enduring stone.

THE NEXT DAY I'M UP WITH the sun to meet Benjamin Zidarich in his vineyards for my first day of harvest. I walk the short distance to his winery from my agriturismo in the heart of the tiny village of Prepotto.

I find Zidarich near the entrance to his cellar, where he's preparing vats for the day's harvest, and we walk to the vineyard to meet up with the other workers. We'll



be harvesting his prized Prulke vineyard, which Zidarich replanted in 1988 with vitovska, sauvignon blanc and malvasia. When he harvests this vineyard, all the grapes go into a single blend.

“Once upon a time, winemakers in Carso used to make one white wine and one red wine with the grapes that they had,” Zidarich says. “This field blend recalls that tradition. The grapes are harvested by hand, placed in the same vat and allowed to ferment.” His Prulke wine is one of his more complex. It can be a bit closed when it’s young, but seems to integrate over time with a hint of salinity and grassiness balanced by dried apricot. He also aims for ageability, a unique aspect of Carso white wines. “I really believe that, as a sort of new category of wine, the Zidarich wines will show the ability to age for 25, 30 or 50 years,” says Zidarich’s importer David Weitzenhoffer, head of A.I. Selections, based in Long Island City, N.Y. “It has the same kind of stuffing as a great Loire chenin, white Hermitage or even nebbiolo, for that matter.”

I expect there to be a flurry of anxious activity at the vineyard, with workers rushing about at a fevered pace, but there are only a handful of men and women,

from age 16 to what must be 70, casually milling about. All the workers are from the area, either from Prepotto, or just across the border in Slovenia, and they’ve been working with Zidarich for years.

Cheerful strains of banter in Slovenian and Italian flit through the rows of grapes as they fill empty cassette at a steady but leisurely pace, with the calm, precise movements of seasoned pros. I take a cue from the others and don’t rush. I fall into a steady rhythm. There is something meditative about the process. Snip. Clean the bunch, drop into the cassette, repeat.

After three hours in the vineyards, I’m thankful when we break for lunch and head to the shade of the trees that ring the small vineyard. Zidarich’s wife unpacks food and bottles of wine from the back of their station wagon. People open cold bottles of vitovska, and pass plates of penne with pork ragù and yellow tomatoes. There’s a salad of field greens with hardboiled eggs, and plump purple beans with chunks of crusty bread and local hard cheese. After 45 minutes, we regroup and lay out the plan for the second half of the day.

After another hour in the vineyard, Zidarich takes me to his cellar. A large

limestone cistern with intricate carvings of vineyards guards the entrance. Zidarich is the sturdy stonemason to Kante’s precise sartorial presence. He’s solidly built, with the well-fed vitality of one who knows how to enjoy life, and a hint of mischievousness in his eyes.

Zidarich studied under Kante, and his mentor’s influence, while apparent, hasn’t eclipsed his own style. “The wines they make are quite different, but both zero in on displaying, first and foremost, the area where their wines come from,” Weitzenhoffer says.

Zidarich’s cellar is impressive; grandiose, even. He’s carved out a labyrinthine space, connecting several deep caverns beneath his winery with soaring bridges and catwalks, and carved pillars. If Kante’s cellar could be the Bat Cave, Zidarich’s evokes a drawing by M.C. Escher. But, he says, “I didn’t build a large cellar in order to make a lot of wine. The design is based on aesthetics, tradition, functionality, but above all naturalness. It was designed to have a low environmental impact. For example, the various levels allow me to employ gravity to move wine from one floor to another. And the cool air »

WINE BARRELS

Dandi only uses old barrels to ferment + age his wine. This allows it to breathe as it ages without affecting its flavor profile. The larger casks are eight years old and made of Slavonian oak.

*Ferrano
(a red wine)*

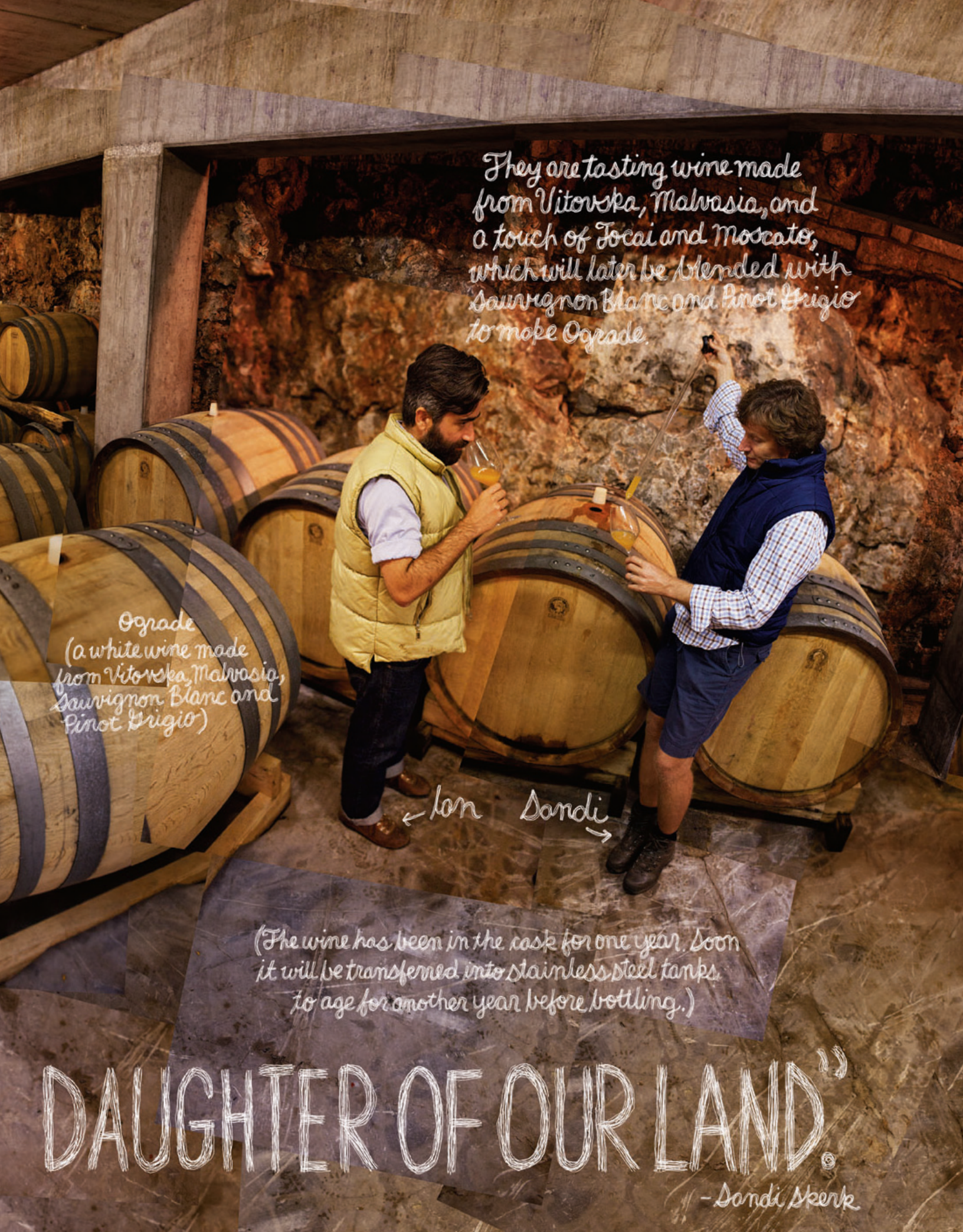
THE CELLAR

("LA CANTINA")

Aside from agriculture and winemaking, Carso is renowned for its stone craftsmanship. Dandi's friend helped him carve this wine cellar out of solid Karst limestone ("roccia calcarea carsica" in Italian).

The work took three years.

“VITOVSKA IS THE

A photograph of two men in a wine cellar. The man on the left, wearing a yellow vest, is holding a glass of orange wine. The man on the right, wearing a blue vest, is using a long-handled tool to draw wine from a barrel. The cellar is filled with large wooden barrels and has a stone wall in the background.

They are tasting wine made from Vitovska, Malvasia, and a touch of Tocai and Moscato, which will later be blended with Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Grigio to make Ograde.

Ograde
(a white wine made from Vitovska, Malvasia, Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Grigio)

← Iori Dandi →

(The wine has been in the cask for one year. Soon it will be transferred into stainless steel tanks to age for another year before bottling.)

DAUGHTER OF OUR LAND.

- Dandi Skerlek



from below chills the cellar so that I don't have to use electricity to do so."

Winemaking, when broken down to its rudimentary process, is simple. Pick the grapes. Remove stems with a mechanical destemmer or, less commonly, by hand, and pour the grapes into open vats. Fermentation begins when yeast consumes sugars in the grapes and produces carbon dioxide and ethanol. Most conventional winemakers will add selected inoculated yeast. But the Carso winemakers, as with any committed natural or traditional winemaker, do not add a yeast strain to ferment the grapes. They rely on "native" yeasts, which exist naturally on the grapes and in the cellars.

Zidarich's larger-than-life cellar is also filled with gargantuan wooden barrels called botti, his preferred vessel for aging. "All of my wines are fermented and aged in wood," he says. "I prefer to work with wood because it breathes." After an initial fermentation of about two weeks, the grapes are pressed and returned to the botti before being moved to smaller barrels to age deeper in the cellar, a method borrowed from the old Piedmont houses in Barolo, and a practice Kante and Skerk also follow.

But he departs from Kante in the length of time he leaves his white wines on the skin during fermentation. In this regard, the three winemakers are divided down generational lines, with Kante giving his white wines virtually no skin contact before pressing, Zidarich roughly two weeks and Skerk several months. While Kante is more surgical, aiming for a laser-like wine, Zidarich takes a broad-shouldered approach, trusting that his wines can handle, and in fact benefit from, a rougher (though no less skilled) technique.

"Zidarich is a producer who has taken the best of Kante and has the ability to absorb or learn from other winemakers," Sangiorgi says. "He has incredible vineyards, probably the best in Carso in terms of quality ... If someone doesn't know Carso, Zidarich's wines are the most representative of the region, and will make you fall in love with the area."

SANDI SKERK'S WINERY is just down the road from Zidarich's estate, and is the smallest and newest of the three. While Kante and Zidarich are outspoken in their pursuits, Skerk's winemaking approach is quiet and meditative.

I find him by the front of his winery hosing down his destemmer machine. I'm the first to arrive, so we walk through the vineyard we'll be harvesting as he tells me how he abandoned a career as an engineer to take over the family business in 2000. "I tried various professions, but making wine is the one I most identify with," he says. "I rediscovered my origins and deep tie with the land, Carso, the place where I was born and raised."

His first move was to replant the vines and convert to natural agriculture. The old vines were trained on cement trellises, and he felt the natural approach would bring the land and vineyards back into balance. As we walk through his vineyards, he says that he has had success with malvasia, pinot grigio and other varietals, all of which are important to him, but vitovska is the heart of his operation. "[It's] the daughter of our land," he says. He plucks a grape and shows me how to check for sugar content with a spectrometer, a telescope-like tool that indicates when the grapes are ripe and ready to be harvested.

Skerk put his engineering experience to work when he built his cellar. He



From left: Breaking the “cap” on an open vat of fermenting grapes; Skerk’s blend of vitovska, malvasia, tocai and moscato straight from the barrel; pouring a glass of Kante’s pinot bianco; Zidarich’s cellar, with the large barrels called botti; a 1993 bottle of Kante’s age-worthy sauvignon blanc; barrels in Kante’s cellar; wine fermenting in Skerk’s cellar, with one of his modified vats on the right.

devised a plan to cut the rock with diamond studded mining cable. With the help of a friend, they threaded it through grottoes under the site of the winery and sliced a clean square out of the bedrock. The simplicity of the cellar belies the complexity of this operation, but its sharp corners and precise cuts echo his winemaking style. He is methodical and succinct with his wines, letting the grapes speak for themselves. This reflects in the lightness of his wines, which are expressive without being domineering.

“[Skerk] recognizes that he is privileged to have grown up in and live in Carso,” Sangiorgi says. “In fact, his wines are happy. They are full of life ... he may very well have the most long-term perspective on what Carso wines will be in the future.”

Unlike Kante, he lets his grapes stay on the skins for months at a time, fully extracting their flavors and colors. He leaves them in vats until January or February, an unusually long time for white wines, but a growing trend among natural winemakers.

“Maceration is a necessary step in natural winemaking,” he says. “We use it to extract all the qualities in the skins.

If you don’t extract them from the skins, you are going to have to add them some other way.”

He also doesn’t hesitate to experiment with blends, and one of his best wines, Ograde, is a combination of two separate blends, one of malvasia and vitovska, and the other of sauvignon blanc and pinot grigio. He also applies his engineering prowess to his vats, which he modified with a metal top that allows more heat to escape than the unmodified vat, so he can easily regulate the temperature of the fermenting wine. If fermenting wine gets too hot, the fermentation process will be interrupted and ruin the wine.

Skerk hands me a glass poured from barrels holding last year’s harvest. His wines spend at least one year in the barrels before being transferred to steel containers, where they settle before being bottled. Tasting young wine straight from the barrel is one of my favorite ways of experiencing it, because it draws a clear picture of how wine evolves over time. I ask him what he looks for when he tastes wine from the barrel. He takes a sip. “I look for the elegance and character of the grape varietal,” he says.

He goes to another barrel that contains a blend that will go into his Ograde. He dips a long, syringe-like tube called a wine thief and pulls out a sample. It’s a 2010 field blend of vitovska and malvasia, with small amounts of tocai and moscato. The wine is cloudy from the long maceration and bursts with bright citrus and honey flavors, and a youthful agrodolce bite. It gives a crisp pucker and its perfume of apple blossoms explodes out of the glass.

As we prepare to go, I realize that while a day during harvest starts in the vineyards, it ends in the cellar. The harvest isn’t just about picking grapes—it’s the weather that leads up to it, the suspense in waiting for the grapes to mature, then getting the grapes into the cellar, where they truly come alive. Perhaps more than any other wine region I’ve visited, these steps are at the mercy of the terrain in Carso. Ask too much about maceration time and technique, and Zidarich in particular will say you’re not asking the right questions.

“I do what I do so [you] can ask about the terroir,” he’ll say. “So [you] can learn where we come from, and why our land is special.” □



THE WINEMAKERS' TABLE

1. Toni, a local friend of Edi's, makes "salami insaccato" with casings from the large intestine
2. Jamar, a local cheese aged four months in a grotto, is produced by Dario Zidarich
3. Hard-boiled eggs with olive oil and local Terrano vinegar is a snack from Edi's childhood
4. Kante Vitovska 2009
5. Skerp Malvasia 2008
6. Zidarich Malvasia 2009
7. Starec Tergeste Extra Virgin Olive Oil



Edi⁴

Sandi⁵

LISTEN:

The philosophy of winemaking runs deep in Corso. At the edge of Edi's vineyard, a limestone slab is set with local fare, and the discussion turns to the principles driving these vintners' efforts.