



ENGLISH VERSION

# Slovakia's **Hidden** **Gem**

VIAJUR  
WINERY

*Central Europe's small nation of Slovakia boasts over 2,000 years of winemaking history. Six wine regions stretch from Tokaj in the east to the foothills of the Little Carpathians in the west, earning recognition as a country focused on high-quality wines despite its modest scale. Among these, the Little Carpathian foothills and the Nitra region stand as Slovakia's two most representative areas. We visited VIAJUR, an innovative winery operating two estates in these regions.*

TEXT MANAMI TOMINAGA PHOTO AURELIEN FOUCAULT

**A** renaissance castle turned modern winery. Our visit took us to the estate nestled in the Little Carpathian foothills. Located near the Austrian border, about 20 kilometers northeast of the capital, Bratislava, in the historic town of Svätý Jur, it is known as Svätý Jur Estate. The facilities—including the winery, a Gast & Millau-recognized fine dining restaurant, luxurious accommodations, event spaces, and shops—are housed in a renovated 16th-century Pálffy family castle.

In the elegant Renaissance-style manor, we were warmly welcomed by head winemaker **Tomáš Džing**. Tomáš has been involved in winemaking since childhood through his grandfather, who was a winemaker, and his father, who operated a wine shop.

"I spent almost nine years in New Zealand, earning bachelor's degrees in viticulture and oenology while working at local wineries," he explained. After returning to Slovakia, he served as head winemaker at another winery for nine years before accepting the position at VIA JUR.

#### CENTURIES OF WINEMAKING HERITAGE

While VIA JUR Winery was established in 2016, winemaking at Svätý Jur's Pálffy Castle dates back to 1860. The first person to undertake winemaking here was **Katarína Pálffy**, the castle's owner.

After losing her first husband in war, Katarína married his close friend **Štefan Běhňák**, in accordance with her late husband's final wish. However, Štefan was forced into exile in Poland due to religious persecution. Although physically separated, he continued to care for Katarína—sending her letters instructing her to begin wine production so she could keep their finances afloat. The letters were filled with winemaking knowledge and business advice, which she successfully applied to the estate.

Through such circumstances, the small village of Svätý Jur became a royal town supplying wine throughout the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Winemaking here continued uninterrupted for centuries.

Guided by Tomáš through the castle courtyard, we encountered dignified bronze statues of Štefan and Katarína—the founders and first winemakers of the estate. Throughout the premises, signs featuring Linden tree motifs—once planted on all Pálffy family lands—are artfully displayed. The Linden tree is considered sacred by Slavic peoples as a symbol of prosperity and life.

#### FROM COMMUNIST HARDSHIP TO MODERN REVIVAL

However, Slovak winemaking endured hardship during the 41-year period of communist rule from 1948 to 1989. "Vineyard



area shrank dramatically, and winemaking knowledge was lost," said Tomáš. "In the 1990s, many people realized their family land, but since the winemaking tradition had been broken, they had no choice but to abandon it."

The Pálffy estate was no exception. The underground cellar's winemaking equipment lay in neglect while the manor became first an orphanage, then a veterans' hospital, before being left derelict. "It was in terrible condition. In 2016, we acquired the manor with investors, restored the deteriorated building, and revived the winemaking tradition," Tomáš explained.

He then led us through the production facilities. Descending the stone steps reveals underground spaces formed by the 16th-century castle's foundations. In the cool air, modern stainless-steel tanks and French oak barrels stand in rows—a



magnificent blend of ancient and modern, where secret rooms and crumbling corridors evoke the imagination.

#### TWO DISTINCTIVE TERROIRS

Slovakia enjoys a cool continental climate with significant day-night temperature variations that create ideal conditions for developing both refreshing acidity and concentrated fruit flavors.

VIA JUR Winery operates two estates. The first is the **Svätý Jur Estate**, which we visited—five hectares of terraced vineyards with cool night-time temperatures and granitic and sandy soils, perfect for the estate's signature style combining firm acidity and distinctive mineral notes.

The second is the **Farná Estate**, located about 100 kilometers south in the Nitra region. Farná encompasses 66 hectares (37 hectares of vineyards) with fertile loess loam soils and focuses on red varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. This region is the warmest in Slovakia, producing red wines with intense fruit flavors and well-balanced tannins, resulting in powerful, complex wines.

Both estates are organically certified and practice sustainable cultivation without herbicides, pesticides, or fungicides.

#### FREEDOM IN WINEMAKING

In this rich environment, Tomáš chooses to work within the "Slovak wine" category—the least restrictive classification within Slovakia's appellation system.

"Without any restrictions, we can grow any varieties we like and make wine exactly as we envision, which is great," explains Tomáš enthusiastically.

Currently, the winery produces about 150,000 bottles annually. In addition to international varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, they also work with Central and Eastern European grapes like Frankovka (also known as Blaufränkisch) and Slovak indigenous varieties such as Dunaj (named after the River Danubio) and Kras (after the River Hron).

VIAJUR's winemaking philosophy varies depending on the type and grape variety. Entry-level wines employ reductive techniques with cold fermentation and stainless-steel aging to preserve vibrant fruit flavors, while premium wines undergo more complex processes, including spontaneous fermentation with wild yeasts. Red wine production may incorporate whole-bunch fermentation, with open-top fermenters allowing manual punch-downs for precise extraction control.

For white wine production, aging in unique barrels combining French oak heads with Slavonian acacia staves achieves smoother, more balanced flavors. "The cooper told us not to complicate things, but they were convinced when they saw the results," said Tomáš.

Overall, VIAJUR wines share common characteristics regardless of variety: "Fruitiness and firm acidity—this character appears even in the warmest years. We can also produce intense wines without excessive alcohol," Tomáš notes.



Digitalized bronze statue depicting Felice and Katarina, the founders and first winemakers of the estate.



#### SLOVAKIA'S UNIQUE ASSET: THE DUNAJ GRAPE

Guided by Tomáš, we sampled various wines, but two especially captured the essence of what makes both Slovakia and VIAJUR so compelling.

The Slovak indigenous variety Dunaj was developed by Slovak engineer and ampelographer **Dezota Prospěšková** during the communist era. The grape was specifically bred to produce rich, intensely colored red wines even in Slovakia's cool climate. Thanks to its red flesh, the variety delivers deep color concentration and develops wines with rich plum flavors, moderate tannins, and a long finish. "In blind tastings, everyone wonders, 'What grape is this?'" but the reception is always excellent," Tomáš smiled.

This Dunaj variety has been selected as Slovakia's best red grape, and we're treated to the Dunaj 2022 Ars In Vitis 8241: a warm, full-bodied wine with fine

structure and elegance, aged for 12 months in 800L oak barrels. It was a delight—and a revelation of the potential hidden in this unusual variety.

There's also a special wine made from Riesling. "I created this wine as a homage to Katarina Palffy and named it *Riesling Lebkuchen*, meaning 'lebkeweed,'" explained Tomáš. This semi-sweet wine (12) demonstrates Slovakia's characteristic high acidity balanced with residual sugar, featuring layered flavors that transition from initial sweetness on the tongue to sharp, refreshing acidity.

VIAJUR's portfolio also includes wines with innovative packaging. They have introduced Slovakia's first canned wine production technology. This caught the attention of MW Elizabeth Gabayová, a wine expert, leading to a collaboration that produced a canned rose wine (6-10, 25cl) made from the indigenous Dunaj variety.

#### SUSTAINABLE PHILOSOPHY

One of VIAJUR's core philosophies centers on eliminating waste. Grape skins and stems are transformed into cosmetics—from face peels to lip balms. All fruits and vegetables grown on the estate supply the restaurants, embodying a genuine farm-to-table approach that ensures sustainable production practices.

#### THE FUTURE OF SLOVAK WINE

Although the winery produces wine at the highest standards, Slovak wines remain little known worldwide. "Slovakia rarely appears on wine maps," said Tomáš.

Yet he views this as an opportunity to ignite global curiosity. "Because people don't know about us, their surprise is greater when they taste our wines. Once they do, they discover wines of excellent quality that rival those from famous regions," he emphasized.

Today, VIAJUR wines are enjoyed domestically and exported to the U.S., East Coast, the United Kingdom, and Japan, with international recognition steadily growing. "We have supply arrangements with Michelin-starred restaurants in Italy and luxury resorts in the Maldives," Tomáš explained.

VIAJUR Winery has truly achieved an impressive feat, managing to make all the elements converge: extensive winemaking history, international perspective, solid expertise, innovative technology blended with traditional methods, meticulous facilities, and—last but not least—wonderful wines with a strong identity. In the romantic setting of the castle, Tomáš and his team are quietly orchestrating a revolution in Slovak winemaking well worth discovering.

**VIAJUR Winery**  
Address: Pevnosť 48A, 900 21 Svätý Jur, Slovakia  
Phone: +421 905 903 827  
<https://viajak.sk/en/>



The stone is located at the foot of the Latin Cathedral.