

FRAGRANCES AND SAVOURS OF CROATIAN LIBURNIA

1.

How can we best describe Liburnia? Well, **as** a treasure-trove of unique gems of our natural, historical and cultural heritage. It is a symphony of diverse images and sounds, of various fragrances and savours. The County of Primorje and Gorski kotar lies in what was once the western part of that ancient, mystical province which, like bonding tissue, through space and time, both grafts together and divides magical Istria and sweet scented Dalmatia, the blue Adria and golden Pannonia. Of the Mediterranean and of continental Europe, cosmopolitan and yet so familiar. Comprising three different and yet so closely interwoven entities: the karstic littoral, the islands of Kvarner, and the forest-covered **mountains of** Gorski kotar.

2.

The natural world of this region has been blessed with rare biological **diversity**. The County is a dynamic weave of specific habitats of Central European flora and fauna, of the Alps, of the karst of the Dinaric Alps, and of the Mediterranean. Its landscapes shift dramatically – from barren karst **and** macchia to forests of holly oak and pine; from pastures and meadows, to arable fields, gardens, orchards and vineyards. Countless bears, wolves, wild boars, lynx, deer and chamois roam through the **County's** forests. Avid nature lovers will cherish the free flight of the **griffon** vultures and eagles, as much as they will revel in the glorious wealth of the marine world.

3.

The geographical position of this part of Croatia, the shortest link between the civilisations of the Mediterranean and those of Central Europe, has on occasions been **its blessing and at other times its downfall**. Its history is just as rich as its natural heritage. For centuries this small region has been a place where, just as on any town square, different peoples **and** nations have come together, lived, traded, merged, and even fought. The experience of living is millennia old, but memories of the aboriginal peoples of these parts are still retained: the warlike Iapodes, the Liburnian pirates, Greek sailors, Celtic horsemen... For seven long centuries the Romans built roads and fortresses, which the Goths and the Avars lost no time in razing. In the seventh century AD, Liburnia fell to Croats, to whom it has belonged right up to the present day, whether united or divided, free or occupied, and despite Charles the Great, the Venetian Doge, the Habsburgs, Napoleon, the Italian Duce, and the Serbian Vožd.

4.

The saga of Liburnian cultural heritage **tells** of thousands of years of human habitation within its borders. It tells of the wealth of monuments from divergent cultures, of kings of Croatian blood – Tomislav and Zvonimir; of its

own Glagolitic script. It also tells us about the civil rights that its cities and free municipalities enjoyed for centuries; about the princes of Zrinski and Frankopan; about arts and the inventions that sprang from its soil. And all that related in the Croatian tongue, that itself, with its three main autochthonous dialects is as rich and varied as one could possibly imagine.

5.

Human habitation in almost any region is inevitably linked to the traditions of agriculture and fishing - the life sustaining threads so essential to the essence of city life. After all, the fruits of the earth, its waters and the sea, together with the specific features of indigenous cuisine, comprise just some of the global foundations of the cultural identity of any nation, region or country.

6.

Today, at the end of the 20th century, the County of Primorje and Gorski kotar is approaching the zenith of its millennia-long development and ascendancy. Sadly, that development has often been centralised, haphazardly and with little or no planning. One aspect to have been almost entirely neglected, is agriculture. Many traditional crops and production processes have silently disappeared. Slowly and relentlessly, invaluable segments of the identity and characteristics of the County were being eroded. The symphony of the diversity of fragrances and savours was gradually obscured by phoney internationalism.

7.

The establishment of an independent Croatian state and of a system of Local County self-administration finally ended this journey into oblivion. As its direction for advancement, the County has opted for sustainable regional development and what is known as Agenda 21. **It** has begun to implement a long-term Programme for the Revitalisation and Development of Food Production, based on the uniqueness of the diversity, quality and indigenous values of local products and traditional family holdings.

8.

In the same way, the County has rejected conventional agriculture in favour of **organic farming**; a system which focuses on production of food that is ethically acceptable, ecologically pure, socially just and economically feasible. In short, a system that does not devastate nature but which instead contributes to its production by replenishing exhausted soil, polluted waters, rescuing endangered biological diversity and scarred natural landscapes. In keeping with the best European democratic traditions, in that process of transformation the local authorities have found willing partners in members of the non-governmental association, Eko Liburnia, itself a member of the International Federation of Organic **Agriculture Movements** - IFOAM.

9.

The main aim of the County Programme is to create a regional cornucopia filled with quality, organically grown and indigenous dishes and drinks; a cornucopia which will, indeed in the only way possible, encapsulate and introduce to the palate of every visitor the symphony of the diversity of local savours and fragrances.

10. THE OLIVE TREE

The olive tree is a sacred tree, symbolising immortality, fertility, peace and plenitude. It is a symbol for the Golden Age itself. Its trunk is the blazon of the Moon, its leaf the sign of the Phoenix-like nature of life. 6,000 years before the birth of Christ, man first extracted oil from the fruit of wild olives. It took him three thousand years to cultivate them, which he did in the Biblical expanses of Palestine and Syria.

Arabian wisdom teaches us that the Mediterranean extends as far as the olive tree will grow. It was Greek mariners who brought saplings of this noble tree to the shores and islands of Liburnia. Perhaps it was Jason and his Argonauts, in search of the Golden Fleece. No one knows for certain. The culture of olive growing and processing flourished in Roman times. The oil produced in Istria and Liburnia was especially appreciated by the Romans due to the imperial quality of that "liquid gold" – as Homer called it.

To the peoples of the Mediterranean an olive tree is regarded as a mother. Regrettably, the Croatian story about olives is neither romantic nor beautiful. Over the last two centuries the number of trees has been reduced from 30 million to 3 million. It is no wonder, therefore, that the County Programme began symbolically with the revitalisation of olive tree cultivation. The Programme is centred on both reviving old and planting new olive groves; equipping oil works, setting up a County Centre and a nursery of indigenous sorts. It is thanks to this Programme, and the new "Maslina" Punat Company oil press, that the high quality of Liburnian olive oil has made a dramatic comeback, its value being recognised by both markets and experts alike.

11. FRUIT TREES

The olive tree is indisputably the queen of the County, but it is by no means its only fruit tree. Its unique ecological diversity makes this area a veritable paradise for fruit connoisseurs. The fig, for example, takes over from and expands the Mediterranean boundaries at the point where the olive gives way. Alongside the fig, there are also sweet cherries and apricots. Then, there is the sweet chestnut, as well as walnuts, the hazel bush and almonds. The **County's** plums, apples and pears are something quite special, as are its **different berries**. The County basket overflows with delicacies produced from fresh and processed fruit. And let's not forget the traditional fruit brandies!

12. THE GRAPEVINE

The grapevine is the tree of life and cognition. A prolific fruit-bearing wine-stock denotes fertility and passion; a wild one, falsehood and infidelity. That

is why people say that the olive tree is a mother, while the grapevine is a mistress. He who will not give himself totally, with love and passion, should not expect fruit. The County tale of this tree of life bears out the veracity of this adage. About fifty years ago the island of Krk alone boasted 2,500 hectares of vineyards. Today, there are less than 1,200 hectares in the entire county. The old sorts of vine to be found along the littoral and on the islands are gradually becoming extinct. There is no one left to love the mistress – not even for the love of its child – wine, that life-giving liquid, a drink of revelation and truth.

Fortunately, there are exceptions to this story. One such is the old town of Vrbnik. Only God and the Vrbenians know why their range retained its vine, when for decades viticulture had failed to pay its way. Their perseverance, patience and love of the grapevine and wine did, in the end, bring their rewards. At the beginning of this decade the three co-operatives in Vrbnik – “Vrbnik”, “Katunar” and “Gospoja” began to apply modern technology. The result is a more noble, and a better than excellent Žlahtina. The spirit-stirring bouquet and palate of this quality, dry white wine elevated it almost overnight to one of the most sought-after and most appreciated of wines.

The story of Vinodol, *Vallis Vinarea*, an area that gained its name from wine, is totally different. Through an irony of fate, new plantations of the tree of life were planted here by the banished people of Vukovar, hard working folk whom the War of Independence drove from their ancestral homes and vineyards. And so, the Žlahtina of the south and Traminac of the north have become neighbours, thus linking the Littoral and Pannonian Croatia.

The aim of the County Programme is to revive and expand the culture of the grapevine, and to improve production of its noble juices. To that end, incentive is being given to the planting of new vineyards; old family cellars are being revamped, and new ones established. Should the Programme succeed in finding a sufficient number of true lovers of this capricious plant, the Žlahtina of Vrbnik could soon be joined by some other sorts of quality wine from other parts of the County.

13.

On the territories of Liburnia the *polis* of Antiquity survived throughout the Middle Ages and up to the New Age as a result of the legal institution of a free municipality. The economic base for survival and the livelihood of the municipalities was secured by agricultural crops that could be grown on the meagre soil. For Liburnia is a karstic land where intensive farming methods, such as those seen in the lowlands of fertile Pannonia, could never be applied.

The County of Primorje and Gorski kotar possesses an unfavourable structure of agricultural lands. For every hectare of arable land, there are two hectares of mostly karstic **pastures**. Plough-fields and gardens account for just 4% of the County's territory. However, the existence of a wide variety of ecological conditions permits the cultivation of many crops and guarantees a year-round

supply of fresh vegetables to the market place. The problem is the fact that for decades only one-third of the County's precious arable fields are under cultivation.

But here, we again meet the placid, hard working people of Vukovar. For years, their fields in Pavlomir have supplied the Vinodol Littoral with tomatoes, green peppers, onions and lettuce, thereby proving that even Liburnian soil can provide a **decent** living. The Programme also encourages the cultivation of the well-known potato of Gorski kotar, and the vegetables of the the islands – such as those grown under cloches by "Agroprom", on the island of Krk.

14. HERBS & MUSHROOMS

Botanists claim that the flora of the County numbers over 2,700 species – almost as many as in the whole of Austria, whose area is twenty times greater. This is one massive, open-air pharmacy, offering an incredible variety of medicinal and aromatic herbs, some of them being endemic. Determined to protect the nature, the Programme has also initiated the organic cultivation of medicinal herbs in the highlands and on the islands.

County`s forests are famous for their mushrooms. Each spring and autumn the rains draw out the rare morel, welcome the wolf's bread and royal agaric mushroom. It has to be said that the local folk truly relish their mushrooms. So much so that on occasion even the odd Satan's mushroom is picked. Consequently, the Programme recommends, and offers the local population, an opportunity to grow and enjoy safe, but no less tasty capped ladies, such as champignons, **oyster mushroom** and shi-take. Most growers produce them in more-or-less ordinary premises. "Gljiva" Vrbovsko is far more original – they grow their champignons in a railway tunnel that was never used, and in an atomic shelter which, thank God, never had to be utilised for its original purpose.

15. LIVESTOCK

This area was preordained for livestock breeding. The quality meadows and grasslands of Gorski kotar make it a typical mountain livestock raising area. The karstic pastures of the littoral and the islands are of poorer quality, being fit only for smaller **ruminants**.

16. CATTLE

In all cultures and civilisations, cattle have always played a very important role, and with good reason. Economically speaking, cattle-breeding is the most vital of all the branches of animal husbandry providing so much for the humankind – meat, milk, butter, cheese, suet, hide, hair, manure, and work.

However, at the beginning of this decade, there was a mere 3,500 head of **cattle** within the County. The remaining cows were roaming and grazing to their hearts' content on the increasingly empty meadows and pastures. Now, thanks to the Programme and the "PIK" Company Rijeka, the numbers of this

sedate provider are rising. Particularly in the Mrkopalj area, where "Gorje", the first cattle breeders' association in the County, has been founded under the auspices of Eko Liburnia. The largest farm in the County is also located here, in Begovo Razdolje – a village situated at the highest altitude in Croatia – where the resolute Francisković family, a role-model for all, tend 30 head of cattle.

The County basket could not be imagined without milk and everything that comes from it – squeaky cheese, cream and butter. This is what a typical milk ritual looks like on a representative Gorski kotar holding in Vrbovsko, run by atypical farmers with a doctor's pedigree.

For centuries, milk was carried to Rijeka by the milkmaids of **neighbouring** Grobnik. Every day, come rain or shine, they would hump it on their backs down to the town. The city honoured them for their centuries of hard work with a monument erected on one of the city squares, appropriately named Milk Square.

17. HORSES AND DONKEYS

The horse is a noble animal. It symbolises wisdom, common sense, light and speed. Liburnia has been breeding them for centuries for both the holy wars and for hard labour. On their backs, horses ferried people and cargo; and they drew the caravans that linked the Adriatic with Pannonia. With the passing of time horses became rare. Only a few held on to them, some out of nostalgia, others for the laborious work of the forests.

Today, on the threshold of a new millennium, their number in the County is increasing. But now, they are used for pleasure. If you ever happen to visit Vrbovsko, you will be able to ride a pure bred Arab or a full-blood English mount; to ride in a carriage or in a horse-drawn sled. If you do not believe us, when you get there, just ask Mr. Voloder or Mr. Šragalj.

The donkey is a close relative of the horse, but that does not prompt anybody to regard it as noble. Rather, people regard it as stubborn, patient, stupid and licentious. And, as opposed to the horse, in this County the donkey has become an endangered species. Believe it or not, in these parts it is far more difficult to take a photograph of a donkey than it is of a bear. If something does not change soon, this film record will become just another page in a history book.

18. SHEEP

Of all the animals to be found in the craggy karstic landscape of the Liburnian littoral and islands, probably the most valuable are sheep. The academician Branko Fučić writes: "This is an area of meagre vegetation..., with broad karstic pasture land where half-wild sheep roam free... Since pre-historic times, right up to the present day, sheep have ever been man's provider on this scanty soil. Sheep sustain them with meat, milk and excellent island cheese. They have clothed them in wool, skins and fleeces. The learned

people of these parts used sheepskin in the form of parchment, to write religious books, public codexes, contracts and other documents; on it they wrote their letters and poems. People used sheepskins to carry must and wine; they used them to make bagpipes, and sheep gut to make strings for their folk fiddles so they could sing of their joys and their sorrows. The entire civilisation of these parts has been defined by sheep; and so, when you see them perched on their four spindly legs on four stones, grazing on tufts of coarse grass, remember that".

19. GOATS

The goat, it is said, may not have come from the devil, but it surely resembles one. Despite that, the goat had been a faithful companion to the sheep on the austere grazing fields of Liburnia. And then, some strange people placed her outside the law, condemning her to thirty long years of banishment. Not even the fact that **neighbouring** Istria chose the goat as its historical emblem was able to help her.

Then along came some other people who, sponsored by the Programme, began to re-introduce them to the island of Krk, to the hinterland and to the deep forests of Gorski kotar. They proved that the goat is not necessarily a poor man's cow – goats milk, and meat from the young offspring can provide a good living, to say nothing of goats cheese. Just ask those who have titillated their palates with the island cheese cured in olive oil, produced by the Gržetić family of Kras. Or those fortunate few who have enjoyed Darko Tomažić's fresh cheese, in secluded village of Šajn.

20. BEES

Ecological diversity and biological heterogeneity make this County a veritable El Dorado for the nomadic beekeeper. His bees can feast on sage and heather of the islands, after which he transfers them to acacia and lindens of the littoral, and then sweetens it all in the mountain meadows of Gorski kotar. The bee amply repays this care with a wealth of products – honey, royal jelly, medicinal propolis, pollen and bees wax. And, almost incidentally, it pollinates plants – much to the delight of farmers and fruit growers.

The Programme approaches bee keeping with all the respect it deserves, for it is a known fact that without it there can be no organic farming. And so, in co-operation with the Eko Liburnia Association, it is encouraging the application of contemporary and ecologically sound technologies and protection methods in apiculture and introduction of modern equipment into the bottling shops of professional bee keepers, such as those in the companies "Apirudi-Apsyrtes" in Mali Lošinj and "Gorski" in Fužine.

21. FISH

The final movement of our symphony of diversity is dedicated to the most colourful sea in the world, one formed by mountain rivers and lakes. It could have easily been that the music of water could have been heard from the first movement, since the sea boundaries of this County are more extensive than

its land ones. Within itself the sea hides numerous challenges for a true connoisseur, impatient to re-savour all the wealth of the fragrances and savours of this vast blue field.

That is why we see our connoisseur on the waterfront at dawn, anxious to survey last night's catch : grouper and hake, pilchard and anchovy, the prawns of Kvarner, squid and musk polyp. Relishing the prospect, he is making serious plans – how to prepare this treasure, still scented with sea salt, to give it full justice – merely boiled or made into a brodetto, fry or grill it; or in a risotto. What a delectable problem! The decision made, come elevenes or lunchtime, the fish swims for the last time in sips of good wine. Come evening, our hero is back on the waterfront, seeing the fishermen off and keeping his fingers crossed for their luck.

Once sated with frutti di mare, our gourmand goes to the banks of the mountain rivers or lakes, to try his own luck. Or perhaps to abandon himself to yet another gastronomical pleasure, like trout or crayfish. He can rest assured that he will not return with either empty hands or stomach. A plentiful catch is assured by the fish farms of Gorski kotar, such as this one, owned by Božo Ožbolt in Čabar, and aided by the Programme.

22. CONCLUSION

When pondering the spirit of an area and its expression, no less important than any other aspect is its gastronomy, or "gaštronomija"- as the book by the sinful Brother Karlo from Dubašnica, a monastery cook book of the littoral, written two or three centuries ago, is called. This book tells of cod, the best cuts of round, rice, prosciutto bone, hare, shepherd-style potatoes and vegetable stew a'la monastery, beefsteaks, fish and eggs, and with regard to spices and so forth.

A message from the "gaštronomija" of a Glagolithic monk, an inveterate connoisseur, seems a fitting end for this film story about the fragrances and savours of Croatian Liburnia: "And when you are partaking in enjoyment, remember me, an unworthy sinner, a gourmet and a lover of fine drink, and say: if you are alive, may God grant you happiness and health, if you are not, then may He have mercy on your soul."

The Wordshop

Volga Vukelja-Dawe - Translator

Anthony J. Dawe - Narrator

10000 Zagreb - Jurjevska 12

C R O A T I A

Tel+Fax: 385 1 432 483

email: adawe@alf.tel.hr

23 January 1999