

# Istria's Culinary Evolution

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The Croatian peninsula of Istria hangs like a cluster of grapes from the Slovenian border, a stone's throw from Italy.

Like a child of divorced parents, Istria's custody volleyed back and forth depending on the era's spoils of war. In the 15th century, Austria and Venice split the peninsula in half. At the end of the 18th century, Austria took all of Istria, but it reverted to Italian rule in 1919 for approximately 25 years. Then Yugoslavia claimed it after World War II, until the Independence of Croatia in 1991.

Because of the long Italian influence, Italianate cooking is prevalent: pasta, pizza and prized olive oil. Austria's influences can be seen in pastry and Germanic styles of charcuterie. Slavic accents take the form of hearty stews with flavourful spicing.

With these influences, Istria has carved out a unique heritage of indigenous artisanal foods. *Prsut* is similar to prosciutto, but it's smoked and more flavourful than its Italian cousin. Slices of fresh *prsut* are often delicately sautéed in olive oil and finished with a splash of wine. *Pag* is a sheep's milk cheese from the town of the same name. *Pag* of various ages often appears as a cheese course for comparative tasting.

Istria is also home to a prodigious wine industry, which has recently begun to export its vintages. Visitors are as likely to take a wine tour as they are an olive oil tour to taste a range of award-winning oils. The peninsula's other treasure is the abundant



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truffle, used in just about everything, including sweets.

The cuisine specializes in fresh, simple fish and seafood. Fish always gets a light touch, most often grilled, stewed, baked in sea salt or served raw. *Buzara* is a braising style with tomatoes, garlic, herbs and white wine or lemon. Cutting-edge chefs are cooking *sous vide* style, a method of cooking food in vacuum-packed bags immersed in hot, temperature-controlled water kept at a low heat for a long period of time, which intensifies the inherent flavours and keeps food juicy.

For casually rustic food, Istria has the *konoba*, a family-run trattoria with groaning boards of hearty food. Many of them use the *cripnja* or *peka*, a large cast-iron pot on legs with a perforated lid that is designed to go into a wood stove on top of hot embers. It gets hot fast and stays hot, imparting smoky flavours to lamb, pork, large pieces of fish or vegetables.

Istrian restaurant culture is cosmopolitan, though critics consistently laud three Istrian restaurants, each of them on the Adriatic seaboard.

In the small port town of Novigrad in the north, **Damir e Ornela** serves 'Istrian sushi,' which is actually sashimi, since rice in Istria is usually turned into risotto. Damir also fries and grills, but people consistently swarm to the busy 28-seat *boite* for its thin slivers of fresh fish anointed with local olive oil.

Some of Damir's surprising matches are sashimi with truffle, or raw sole with polenta and wild asparagus. Damir's daughter, *Mattea*, has also taken up the sashimi knife while her mother, *Ornela*, makes the restaurant's pasta.

**Monte** is in Rovinj, in the middle of the coast, a spot for posh Italian-Istrian food and bold flavours done in a modern style. As a starter, you may be presented with a quartet of miniatures to taste: *prsut* with melon foam, a sashimi sampler, foie gras and tapenade. The house favours degustation menus with wines matched to courses along



©SIME BOTTLE OF MOSCATO WINE



©SIME PRSUT AND PAG, TYPICAL ISTRIAN FOOD.