

How to live in...

# Istria Croatia

Our new guide is packed with local knowledge to help you track down what to eat and where to go for the best foodie experiences when you travel

feature KRISTIN VUKOVIĆ



The daily market at the harbour in Rovinj

Croatian cuisine is defined by its regions and the many influences over the centuries that left imprints on its culture and food. Mediterranean and central European, elements of German, Austrian, Hungarian, Italian and Turkish cuisine are reflected in different parts of the country's rich gastronomy. Istria (Istra in Croatian), in north-western Croatia, was most

strongly influenced by neighbouring Italy, and has at times been part of Italy. Pasta, gnocchi, polenta and risotto are all common dishes within the cuisine.

This lush, heart-shaped peninsula in the Adriatic is famous for seasonal produce such as truffles (tartufi), wild asparagus (šparoga) and a plentiful supply of fish and shellfish from the local coastline.

## Local hero

David Skoko, who has appeared on *MasterChef Croatia*, comes from a family with four generations of fishermen. His family-run



restaurant, Batelina (+385 52 573 767), serves the daily catch in traditional ways, making use of less expensive fish after the best is sold for profit.

'Dishes such as shark liver pâté and monkfish tripe were born under the influence of those crazy uncles and old fishermen who had to eat them in order to prove their manhood,' he says.

'We have worked on these dishes to make them suitable for those with less extreme palates. We want to serve everything that a fishing net takes out of the sea – from first-class fish to the tiny shrimp that keep our waters clean.' See page 132 for one of David's recipes.



Rovinj old town perched on the Adriatic

## 3 things locals are eating now

**Raw seafood** Often referred to as 'Mediterranean sashimi', raw fish drizzled with olive oil is having a moment with foodies. Damir & Ornella ([damir-ornella.com](http://damir-ornella.com)) in Novigrad serves a 'sea-to-plate' raw seafood degustation, artfully filleted tableside. Also, try oysters from the Limski Kanal, prized for their intense, briny flavour.



**Olive oil** Croatian olive oils received nine awards at the 2016 New York International Olive Oil Convention, six of which were from Istria. A good-quality extra virgin Istrian olive oil has a piquant, peppery taste and a scent evocative of freshly cut grass. Many are produced by individuals or small cooperatives so they have 'local' flavours. You'll find it drizzled on everything.

**Marenda** Most Croatians eat soup once a day, often for marenda, the equivalent of elevenses. Since the workday, even in offices, can start at 7am, this provides an energy boost before lunch. Don't expect to get much done while it's marenda time – take a break yourself and look out for marenda set menus. A popular dish is Jota, a bean & sauerkraut stew with bacon, which is like goulash.

## 5 foodie travel tips

### Try a tavern

Locals won't be surprised if you stop them and ask for their favourite local konobas (taverns) – casual establishments where you'll find some of the most authentic cuisine. Try simply grilled fish drizzled with piquant Istrian olive oil and garnished with parsley, paired with a glass of crisp, dry malvazija wine.

### Go green

Fresh produce such as deep green blitva, a type of Swiss chard, ruby-hued peppers, purple figs, multi-coloured carrots and giant green cabbages are popular. If you have access to a kitchen, take advantage of green markets and

fish markets, which can be found in almost every town and city. Wandering through stalls offers a good opportunity to mingle with locals who are selling their wares or shopping for food.

### Ask about daily specials

Due to the number of English-speaking tourists, almost all restaurant menus in Croatia have English translations, and most servers speak English. It's worth asking about seasonal and off-menu items. Dishes such as maneštra, a vegetable and meat stew, is usually only made at home. It could be the staff meal of the day and they might be willing to serve it to you.

### Slow down

Istria's burgeoning slow food movement encourages visitors

to try specialist local ingredients. In Buzet, touted as the city of truffles, Toklarija (+385 91 926 6769) is one of Istria's most intimate fine dining experiences. In his family's 600-year-old converted olive mill, Nevio Sirotić serves a changing daily menu, including truffles in season. The Tartufo Vero project ([istria-gourmet.com](http://istria-gourmet.com)) lists other premium restaurants in Istria that offer seasonal truffle-based menus.

**Drink rakija** A distilled spirit made from fruit, rakija is part of Croatian culture and a symbol of hospitality. It is customary to have a glass before and/or after your



Truffles from Istria are a delicacy

meal, and to look your fellow drinkers in the eye, clink glasses, and consume the entire shot at once. Traditional Croatian rakija varieties include travarica (herbal), šljivovica (plum), medica (honey), višnjevac (sour cherry), smokva (fig) and biska (mistletoe).





## David Skoko's fried red mullet with aubergines

**SERVES 4** **PREP 15 mins** **COOK 1 hr**  
**MORE EFFORT**

4 red mullets  
2 aubergines  
50ml soy sauce  
2 garlic cloves, finely chopped  
1 small red chilli, finely chopped  
2 tbsp honey  
300ml groundnut oil  
rice flour, for dusting  
coriander (micro if you can find it), to serve

- 1 Cut the fillets off the red mullets, leaving each fillet attached at the tail so you can snip through the bone and lift the double fillet off joined by the tail. Sprinkle the fillets with a little salt.
- 2 Cut the aubergines in half lengthways and cook on both sides in a dry griddle

pan until soft. (Or slice and cook, flesh-side down, on a baking sheet under the grill for 40-45 mins until the skin has blistered and the flesh is soft.) Leave to cool, then peel. Cut the flesh into 1cm cubes, add the soy sauce, garlic, chilli and honey, and leave to rest for 30 mins.

- 3 When you are ready to serve, heat the oil in a large frying pan. Dust the skin-sides of the fillets with rice flour and, keeping the fillets sandwiched together, shallow-fry in the oil for about 3 mins each side. The inside of the fillets will turn slightly red when they have finished cooking. Once cooked, drain on kitchen paper.

- 4 Divide the aubergine between four plates and sit a double fillet upright on each, then sprinkle with the coriander.

**GOOD TO KNOW** fibre • 1 of 5-a-day  
**PER SERVING** 259 kcal • fat 12g • saturates 2g • carbs 18g • sugars 14g • fibre 6g • protein 17g • salt 0.4g



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# 10 things to eat and drink

## Black risotto

Known locally as crni rižot, this is made with cuttlefish or squid, olive oil, garlic, red wine and squid ink, which gives an intense seafood flavour and black colour. Popular all along Croatia's coastline, this dish will turn your mouth and teeth black – but it's worth it.

## Boškarin

The white-grey, long-horned Istrian oxen are a gourmet delicacy. Boškarin is served at top restaurants and konobas (taverns) in a variety of ways, including as carpaccio; in savoury sauce with pasta or gnocchi; as salami or steak; and boškarin tail soup.

## Brodetto

Also called brudet, this fisherman's stew hails from from Italy's Marche region. Traditionally, fisherman cooked it over an open fire using the catch of the day. They would add ample vinegar to the pot to preserve the stew for a couple of days. Like Italians, coastal Croatians use a tomato base in this dish.

## Buzara

This simple dish of mussels in a wine broth with garlic and breadcrumbs is popular all along the Croatian coast. Buzara means 'stew', and the preparation is similar to the way the French make moules marinière.

## Fritule

Commonly found on the Adriatic coast, these donut-like fried pastries vary from region to region – egg yolks, raisins, grated lemon or orange rinds, and even rakija or rum can go into the mixture. Traditionally served during the holidays, these are popular and highly addictive, so you can usually find them year round.

## Fuži and pljukanci

Fuži is quill-shaped homemade pasta made by cutting 5 x 5cm squares and wrapping each piece around the handle of a wooden spoon. It's often served with a truffle cream sauce or mild red sauces including beef, boškarin, chicken, rooster or wild game. Istrians also love chewy, hand-rolled pljukanci – pasta that resembles the shape of green beans – and njoki (gnocchi).

## Istrian ham

A good meal frequently begins with a platter of pršut i sir (ham and cheese). Istrian pršut is made of skinned pork leg, which is dry-salted with sea salt and seasoned with natural spices such as pepper and garlic, and sometimes bay leaves and rosemary. Unlike southern coastal Croatia, where Dalmatians smoke their ham, Istrians air-cure their meat with the strong northern wind of the Bura. Istrian ham is aged for at least 12 months, and up to 18 months depending on weather conditions. The resulting product has a special aroma and moderately salty taste, which pairs well with cheeses from the region.

## Malvazija and Teran

Istria's signature wine varieties are Malvazija and Teran. Malvazija, an easy-drinking white wine with good minerality and apricot and apple notes, pairs well with seafood dishes. Teran, a robust red, goes well with meat dishes including boškarin and pršut.



Fuži pasta

## Peka

Popular throughout Croatia, this tender meat & vegetable dish is also called ispod čiripnje (under the bell) – literally food that is cooked under a terracotta or iron lid over burning embers. Peka can include octopus, lamb, veal or chicken, and is often accompanied by potatoes.

## Truffles

Istria's Motovun forests contain some of the highest concentrations of truffles in the world. Croatian tartufi are not as well known as Italian, but some say they have a stronger aroma. They're certainly less expensive than their Italian counterparts – a multi-course meal with a generous amount of truffles costs half what it would on the other side of the Adriatic.