



**JANKO ŠTEKAR**  
Farmer and Winemaker

## KMETIJA ŠTEKAR: SNEŽATNO, GORIŠKA BRDA, SLOVENIA

Driving through the dizzying roads of the Italian / Slovenian border brought back a similar feeling to when I used to hike on the Virginia / West VA border. Besides the constant shifting of gears in the car, it was the sheer wildness of the region that was enough to trip the memories; the thick density of flora and fauna, the intensity of incalculable shades of green and blue. There are old bridges everywhere and there's an evident local affinity for it's waterfalls and cold rivers.

I visited the Gorizia regional border with Slovenia several times, but this was my first time going across the border to Slovenia, and fortunately to visit one of

my favorite cantinas in the world; Kmetija Štekar. I had planned to visit them earlier in the winter of 2020, but the swift closure of the border luckily forced me to wait



until late-June amidst the orchard harvest. They had just finished picking all of the



**"Tradition is important to us, but we are never confined by it.**

**We like to find out how far we can go in the cellar: to push the winemaking to the limit; to see what we can get away with."**



## JANKO WITH HIS SPARKLING CHERRY WINE

cherries and plums, and the figs were almost to peak ripeness, but I'd arrived during the harvest period I only could have dreamt of: apricots and peaches. I'm not always head over heels for indulging in orchard fruit to begin with, but these little sapid stone-fruit bombs of delight were so damn delicious. I mean we are talking fruit you can tear open with your thumbs and the stone just falls out of the fruit. I would say they're almost as good as their wines.

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I first tried and became obsessed with Kmetija Štekar's wines after moving to Italy as you can often find their wines in *bacari* in Venezia and famous *enoteche* in Milano. However, I hadn't realized the gastronomic potential of their extended maceration wines until I tried them in tasting menu pairings at restaurants *Relae* and *Amass* in Copenhagen. In short, when you become obsessed with a winemaker that has been pioneering experimental vinification methods and natural wine practices for 17 years, you never imagine

you'd get the opportunity to work with them a few years down the road.

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On the road from Padova to Snežatno, I stopped in to



say hello and taste some old wines with Sasa Radikon in his tasting room in Oslavia; right on the Slovenian Border. Just a seven minute drive from there, I arrived at the Kmetija Štekar cantina, farm and agriturismo just



in time for a quick pasta lunch with the cordial winemakers, Tamara Lukman and Janko Štekar.

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Some years before, Janko ran a genealogical survey and found that his property where he currently grows vines and makes wine has been under the Stekar name since 1672. Although he can't be sure



they were making wine all those years, to his knowledge, he's the 5th generation of Stekars that made wine where he still makes wine today.

Just like the children of Janko and Tamara, Janko grew up working with his parents and grandparents on the farm with dreams to travel and maybe try a different type of work at some point. Janko did spend quite some time traveling and studying, but at age 25, his emotional attachment to life on the farm and an unlikely offer from his father to take 50% ownership of the property pretty much sealed the deal. As Tamara puts it, "he was born a farmer."

Janko's mother and father are near over 80 years and have since retired, but farming is like breathing for them. It's like they feel ill when they are not tending to the fruits and vegetables, so his mother still tends to the orchards and garden, and his father works for for a few hours here and there in the vineyards.

When Janko took over managing the cellar, he continued some conventional winemaking practices that his father had started with. In 2003, he noticed the native yeasts on the grapes were enough to activate fermentation, and stopped using lieveti selezionati all together. 2010 was when he converted completely to natural winemaking and started working towards organic certifications.

As a studied tourism specialist, Tamara first met Janko in the nearby city of Nova Gorica, where she was working at a local travel agency. After

discovering their mutual love of live music, the rest is history. Tamara regularly works in the cantina and is involved in the winemaking process, as well as rallies all of her extended family to work together with them during harvest. She also manages the office and their beautiful bed and breakfast attached to the cantina.

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Shortly after I arrived on the first day, a calming summer rain came rolling over the colli, and a quick nap became inevitable.

Janko and I regrouped a few hours later on the front patio for a glass of fresh cherry juice, followed by a bottle of his new dry and bubbly black cherry wine. It was intended to be a type of cider, but all the sugar fermented and the alcohol shot up to 11-12%. It was truly delicious. If you like to drink Lambrusco Grasparossa made in metodo ancestrale, this cherry wine is going to blow your mind.



Shortly after this piccolo cherry-tivo, we all went out for dinner at Ošterija Žogica; a relaxed local outdoor restaurant that's in the middle of the forest, directly on the emerald-green Soča river, and in the shadow of the world's longest stone arch railroad bridge.

We were joined by Tamara and two of their children Mattia and Katarina, along with Miyoko, WWOOFer from Japan. While we all imbibed to bottles of Jankot 18', Mlaka 18' and Pinot Draga 15', I slowly worked my way

through a whole roasted trout with potatoes. The potatoes and herbs were placed in an oven sheet with the fish and tied up like a small sack before roasting, then presented at the table as such. It was awesome to say the least.

At the table, their 19 year-old son Matija started to



tell me all about how he is studying and writing old school hip-hop music, and how he wants to make music like Slum Village. In between his music life, he works regularly on the farm and in the cantina, and has become a big part of the winemaking process along with Janko and Tamara. Matija will actually be making some interesting work study trips next year, for example working at Champagne Tarlant during bottling in March. Can I just go ahead and say that I absolutely love the idea of a rapper/winemaker that actually makes the wine.

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The next morning at 6 AM, I met with Miyoko and Janko for coffee and then Miyoko and I jumped on the trailer attached to Janko's tractor, and we set out to start harvesting some apricots.

Janko started to climb the tallest of the trees to shake the branches for us to catch loose fruit, all while telling us stories about the affects of WWI in their region. In fact, during the war, all of their vineyards on their property became a soldier camp and required them to remove all of their vines.

Throughout the morning we collected several cases of two different varieties of apricots and some late harvest plums that were grafted to an apricot tree.

While Janko was picking the fruits, he would always think about and mention Tamara. Even when there was only one fully-ripe fig, he picked it, inspected it with a light press of the thumb, and said "Tamara will love this one; first of the season."

After we all brought the fruit up to the house, Janko took me through the vines and explained to me their agricultural practices. He even revealed his low-key Sagrantino di Montefalco vines hidden in his vineyards. He was so passionate about the grape, he transported the vines from Umbria, and then uses the grapes sometimes in experimental vinifications when there's time. He said that if the harvest is not too sporadic and intense, he has time to think and be creative. For example, Janko's obsessed with botrytis, so he allows a small amount of Merlot to completely mold over and tries to make sweet wines. It rarely works out, but in 2004, the conditions were incredible and so he released a limited run of a fascinating oxidative Merlot passito-style wine that resulted in a hazy golden color. He also has a love for wines of the Jura, so he releases ever so often Vin Jaune style wines after years of aging in bottle. They also have a distillery to make grape spirits, and they even produce and age their own salumi.







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