Via Slavonia & Baranja

Issue 4 Free edition
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EDITORIAL

How to *stay* **warm in winter**

By **Mislav Matišić, Deputy Director of the Osijek-Baranja County Tourist Board**

One of the perks of publishing several times a year is that we get to say once again that Osijek-Baranja County remains among the most welcoming destinations in the world. So it's no surprise that our fourth issue opens with the smiling faces from our campaign posters, as it's these people who truly embody what it means to be great hosts. We also continue to celebrate our title as the European Wine Region, and in this issue we invite you into the world of sparkling wine as described by our resident *House Sommelier (@kucnisomelje)*. The outstanding Slow Wine Train is another story worth savouring – a slow-paced, wine-fueled ride to the Erdut Peninsula that delighted everyone on board. We also present a must-visit wine spot in Đakovo, the Bačva Wine Cellar, offering not only fine local wines but also a range of products made by hardworking Slavonian hands.

Although we live in an era of global warming (or, more precisely, a typical interglacial period), we still always hope for frosty, white winters. Whatever the weather, the temperature is bound to hover around zero, which is perfect for us to share our favorite ways to warm up. And where better to start than the Bizovac spa, where even the most sensitive ones among us won't stay cold. The water springs at 96°C, making it the warmest iodine-rich thermal saline water in Europe. For a spicier kind of warmth, there's always kulen – and the best ones come from Valpovo, home to some of Croatia's most awarded *kulen* makers. You can also count on tamburica music to heat things up, especially when local virtuosos play our beloved Pannonian tunes. And for those who prefer an urban beat, the HeadOnEast Festival proved that culture and creativity can thrive even in winter temperatures. Speaking of warming spirits, few things rival the fine brandies of Mr. Emerik, crafted in honor of his pet white goose.

Sadly, geese are becoming rarer these days, so *what is it that still turns the plains white in winter? Is it snow or swans?* You'll still find plenty of swans at Kopački rit, along with the proud Podolian cattle that once dominated the fields. It used to snow regularly, here and on the farmsteads of northern Bačka, where we're taking you to the traditional Bunjevac winter gatherings (prela). They're the perfect excuse for a winter getaway, just like many other cold-weather activities featured in this issue, along with a selection of authentic local gift ideas for the festive season. And perhaps the most magical gift of all would be a visit to the Christmas lipizzaner ball, where these noble horses perform their graceful choreography to perfection. Speaking of nobility, our heritage tour leads through the estates of Našice, Valpovo, Čepin, Erdut, and Osijek – a city where *lege* and *legice* now reign. Osijek is a place quiet enough to hear your own thoughts, yet lively enough to never feel bored. It certainly isn't quiet in the new Franjo Krežma Concert Hall, currently the most modern in Croatia with an interior resembling the curves of a *tamburica* or a traditional čardak, the latter perhaps more familiar to *Babaseka* than to today's *lege*. Babaseka, a playful and modern take on our rich cultural heritage, is one of our true ambassadors – much like Bernarda, owner of *Studio apartment Ondine* and the first recipient of the Local Host Award in our region.

We begin and end with the people who bring all this to life – our local hosts, the true heart of our success in tourism. Year after year, they help us set new records. Because, in the end, the best kind of warmth isn't found in spas, wine, or music, but under the roofs and in the smiles of locals.

Via Slavonia & Baranja

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We're **no models** or *actors!*

BY **IVANA RAB GULJAŠ**

Vedran Grizbaher (b. 1988) teaches Italian at Osijek's Second Grammar School, he is a licensed tour guide, volunteer at the PLANTaža NGO, a nature enthusiast – and the man behind the alter ego *Biljkin Otac* (*Plant Daddy*). Together with his parents, who helped bring his dream of continental tourism down from the clouds to reality, he turned his dream into a genuine family project. In his holiday home in the Baranja village of Lug, aptly named *House of Biljkin Otac*, Vedran encourages guests to enjoy themselves while leaving as little trace on the environment as possible and only taking home the nicest memories, including those of his heartfelt hospitality. "You can't fake a warm welcome – it either comes from the heart or it doesn't," he says with a smile.

Ana Martinov (b. 1997) holds a master's degree in economics and runs *OPG Martinov Ana*. In the Baranja village of Zmajevac, she and her family own *Etno Kuća Martinov*, a winery and open-concept restaurant. "A simple story that begins and ends with a love for wine, food, and tradition. That's Baranja. That's us," say the Martinov family. Ana sees Baranja as a true hedonistic oasis where all the senses awaken. "The richness of nature's flavours here is incredible, and you'll experience the most genuine hospitality. I truly believe this is where you'll find Croatia's warmest hosts." Ana has a degree in tourism marketing, yet her knack for making people feel welcome is both inherited and learned.

Dinko Glavaš (b. 1987), teacher of music, lives and breathes music, which is also where his link to tourism begins. He teaches tamburica at Beli Manastir's Music School, but most have known him as the frontman of *Tamburaški sastav Kas* since 2009. The band has toured across Croatia, Europe, the United States, and Canada. "Wherever we've played, we've had a very warm welcome, but none compares to the welcome you get in Slavonia and Baranja. The peaceful environment, the beauty of the landscape, the superb food, and the warmth of the people – it's like the whole world condensed into this small corner," says Dinko. His band *Kas* celebrates that same spirit in their song *Naš Osijek*: *'Everything changes, but not the warm Slavonian soul'*

Zvonimir Kalić (b. 1991) is an entrepreneur, farmer, and singer-songwriter of spiritual music. "It's my way of thanking God for a life filled with joy and togetherness," he says. Through *OPG Kalić Zvonimir*, his family grows organic industrial hemp, producing over 50 products under the *Croaticanna* brand. They're now expanding into tourism: "We welcome organised groups and provide educational visits about sustainable hemp production," Zvonimir explains. For him, the region's strongest assets are its people, the warm-hearted Slavonians, along with its natural beauty, cultural heritage, gastronomy, and, of course, its song.

Special line Osijek–Erdut

BY **KATARINA ANĐELKOVIĆ**

Did you know that one of the slowest trains in Europe runs between Osijek and Erdut? This fun fact was confirmed by none other than Croatia's best-known Brit, Paul Bradbury. And on Tuesday, 20 May 2025, at noon exactly, that very same train departed the Osijek station – this time as the *Slow Wine Train*.

The Osijek-Baranja County Tourist Board organized this event to celebrate the prestigious title of RECEVIN Dionisio European Wine Region 2025, as well as to mark the launch of its famous Wine Month. At the same time, it served as the official launch of the third issue of this very destination magazine, centered around all things green and sustainable, and hospitable.

The passengers boarded the train in Osijek, where their wine journey toward Erdut began. At the entrance, they received their train tickets, duly stamped by a smiling conductor. As the train slowly rolled through the fertile plains of Slavonia, its passengers enjoyed a selection of fine wines from the Erdut wine region – Vina Erdut, Siber, Brzica, Antunović, Magistra, Royal Hill, K55, Danubio, and Jakovac. This tasting on rails was guided by renowned Osijek wine expert Damir Zrno. Naturally, the wine was

paired with a selection of local Danubian cheeses, nuts, and fruit.

Upon arrival in Erdut, the guests visited the Vina Erdut winery, where sparkling wine and strawberries awaited, followed by a walk through the vineyards overlooking the Danube. Visitors had the opportunity to learn more about the winery's new products, upcoming projects, and events – including the popular *wine & paint* workshops regularly held on site.

The adventure continued to Aljmaš, where the scenic K55 winery and distillery hosted a tour of their cellar and century-old vineyards of *Graševina* and the once-forgotten *Kadarka* variety. With premium wines and authentic vineyard delicacies at a *wine picnic*, the guests enjoyed a breathtaking view of the confluence of the Drava and Danube rivers. The K55 winery and distillery regularly hosts wine picnics, parties, brunches and all kinds of other events.

The return trip to Osijek also took place by train, featuring a delightful musical surprise for all passengers, which was the perfect finale to this unique wine journey.

The *Slow Wine Train* was much more than a train ride — it was an immersive experience of the Danubian terroir, a celebration of wines, landscapes, and people whose dedication produces the finest drops of this region.

The event was co-financed by the European Union through the Interreg Danube transnational cooperation programme, as part of the #RomansWineDanube project.

The hottest saline water springs **in Croatia**

BY **KATARINA ANĐELKOVIĆ**

At the heart of the spa complex lies *Aquapolis* – a water world featuring eleven pools

If you're looking for a place to unwind, relax and recharge, the Bizovac thermal spa is the perfect choice. A quick twenty-minute drive from Osijek will take you to this spa destination that offers relaxation in warm thermal water, the comfort of modern accommodation, and the unmistakable hospitality of Slavonia.

Water from the depths

Drawn from a natural geothermal spring discovered in 1967, the water here emerges at an astonishing 96°C – the hottest iodine-rich hyperthermal saline water in Europe. Almost as salty as seawater, it is rich in iron, iodine, and other minerals that provide unique therapeutic properties. Thanks to its composition and natural heat, the water is used to alleviate various health issues.

It helps with skin conditions such as psoriasis and atopic dermatitis, provides relief from rheumatic and joint pain, and supports recovery from respiratory problems like asthma and bronchitis. In therapy, it is used to speed up postoperative recovery and reduce swelling. The warmth of the water promotes blood vessel dilation, improves circulation, and boosts oxygen and nutrient delivery to tissues – all of which aid muscle regeneration and overall healing.

Beyond its physical effects, thermal water also offers psychological benefits: the soothing warmth promotes relaxation, reduces stress, and enhances mood.

The standard spa ticket grants access to both the indoor and outdoor thermal pools. The indoor pool temperature ranges from 35°C to 37°C, while the outdoor pool maintains 35°C to 39°C. During the summer months, at least one indoor thermal pool remains open for visitors.

Aquapolis – water fun for everyone

At the heart of the spa complex lies Aquapolis, a genuine water world featuring eleven pools, of which nine are indoors. These include semi-Olympic and recreational pools, hydro-massage and air pools, whirlpools, children's pools, and cascading waterfalls. Among the highlights are the musical cave and massage jet zones.

In summer, Aquapolis transforms into a lively hub of fun and socializing. The outdoor area features an open-air thermal pool surrounded by greenery and a massive wave pool covering over 2,000 square meters, with eight wave types and various depths for swimmers and non-swimmers alike. Around the pools you'll find water mushrooms, slides, waterfalls, and spacious sun terraces with loungers and umbrellas.

During the warm season, the atmosphere is reminiscent of a summer festival with the Americano Bar, cocktail bar, grill bar, Caffe Bar Sunčica, and sweet corners serving a variety of desserts. The animation team organizes games for children and adults, while weekends often bring entertainment programs and late-night pool sessions with music.

In winter, Aquapolis moves indoors. That's when the thermal and hydro-massage pools, whirlpools, saunas, and peaceful relaxation zones truly come to life. Warm steam and calming silence create the perfect ambiance for rest and rejuvenation. Inside the complex, guests can find the Snaša restaurant and the Aqua Bar, perfect for a tasty break or a hot drink.

Where to stay

The accommodation within the spa is modern and directly connected to the thermal pools, wellness area, and restaurant. Guests can choose between Standard, Wellness, and Thermal packages, which include half-board service, unlimited swimming in the thermal pools, Saturday night swimming, and, depending on the package, extras such as massages, sauna access, or hydrogymnastics.

For those seeking more privacy, there are holiday homes, guesthouses, and apartments in the surrounding area, ideal for family or weekend getaways in a peaceful environment. Among them are the Majetić, Sudar, Vuković, and Jureta family properties, as well as *Apartment Šokica* and holiday homes *Time Out*, *BAZ*, and *Antunović*.

Experience the Bizovac countryside

The area around Bizovac preserves the spirit of authentic Slavonian tradition. Don't miss the Ethno House Abljanovci in Habjanovci, where visitors can step back in time and experience rural life as it once was. You can also visit local family farms (*OPGs*) and famous kulen producers, such as the Novosel and Barić families, to taste a slice of Slavonia.

Guardians of tradition, happy to share their know-how

From Petrijevci to Veliškovci and Gat, on a stretch of just 20 kilometres, you'll find a concentration of some of the finest kulen producers in Croatia.

BY **IGOR MIKULIĆ**

Is there a secret recipe for the best *kulen* (or *kulin*)? Do the great masters of this Slavonia, Baranja, and Syrmia delicacy keep their little, closely guarded secrets? That's a question many lovers of *kulen* would love to have answered.

We know that making *kulen* starts with top-quality pork from mature pigs. The meat is minced and mixed with salt, hot and sweet paprika, and garlic, then packed into pork casings. The filled sausage, at this stage still a semi-finished product, is gently smoked and left to age for several months. Only then does it earn the name *kulen*.

Stacking up the awards

It sounds simple, yet this most prized of pork products hides countless details that determine whether a *kulen* will be decorated with the epithet good, very good, excellent, or truly exceptional. These aren't exactly trade secrets: most producers are happy to share their know-how with anyone eager to learn. Still, even the greatest masters will tell you – just as top winemakers do – that a *perfect kulen*, like a perfect wine, simply doesn't exist.

Yet, according to the country's leading tasting competitions over the past two decades, there is an area in the east of Croatia where the best *kulen* is consistently produced year after year,. This region is known as Valpovština. From Petrijevci to Veliškovci and Gat, within a mere 20-kilometre radius, you'll find around ten of the most awarded producers.

Heading east toward Valpovo, the first stop is Gat, home to perhaps the most decorated producer of them all, Slađan Novosel. The Novosel family has earned over 200 awards at various competitions. Their advantage lies in a fully integrated process: they raise their own pigs and grow their own feed. So when a *Kulen Novosel* leaves their modern aging chamber, it's truly a farm-to-table product.

In Valpovo itself, top-quality producers include Josip Gazdić, Nikola Barišić, and Ivica Brkić, while nearby Vlatko Šovagović and Damir Perak from Ladimirevci, Zvonko Barić from Nard, and Zlatko Birovljević from Petrijevci complete this elite circle.

The Valpovo school of kulen

Nikola Barišić, a kulen producer for over 20 years and mentor for the next generation, speaks of a true *"Valpovo school of kulen"* in Željko Garmaz's book *Kulen – Croatia's Finest Meat Delicacy*. The founders of this "school," Josip Gazdić and Željko Švajhofer, laid its foundations decades ago within the former Valpovo meat industry.

Today, the alumni of this *Valpovo school of kulen*, clustered within a 20-kilometre radius, are the driving force behind one of Slavonia's strongest brands. *Kulen* remains the most valuable product made from pork and the very pinnacle of traditional meat craftsmanship.

It's all about the people

According to Prof. Goran Kušec, PhD, one of Croatia's leading *kulen* experts, consultant, and head of judging panels at national *kulen* competitions, the real secret lies in the people themselves. "I believe the key to successful production is the people," he says. "I know the *kulen* makers of Valpovština, they work with incredible love and attention. They possess great knowledge and experience, often built over generations. They understand that every small detail matters, and they give each *kulen* personal care. Before it's fully cured, it passes through their hands several times. Today, there are almost no secrets left in production, and what's remarkable is how openly these producers share their knowledge with others. They are also deeply rooted in tradition," explains Prof. Kušec, a former student of the late Professors Antun Petričević and Krsto Benčević, two of the greatest authorities on *kulen*.

Every piece of Valpovo kulen is made with care, passing through the makers' hands several times before it's ready

Be it in a **concert venue** or in a **local restaurant**, the tambura *strikes the same chord of emotion*

BY **MAJA CELING CELIĆ**

When it comes to tamburica music, Osijek has never been in a better place, says Mario Zbiljski, named Croatia's best tamburica instrumentalist by the Croatian Musicians Union, recipient of the 27th Porin Award for the best folk music album. "Nowadays we have the *Pajo Kolarić Orchestra*, which is an academic ensemble, the Franjo Batorek Tamburica School, and the Franjo Kuhač Music School Orchestra, whose 16-year-old Petar Vlajčić is a top soloist and national champion in his category," explains Mario proudly.

He recalls that the first person to open the doors of classical music to the tamburica was Hrvoje Majić, the lead player (*primaš*) of *Zlatni Dukati*, in the early 1990s. "That idea caught on with me too," says Zbiljski. "Majić was a pioneer, and the rest of us made our own plans to keep developing it." According to him, tamburica music evolved in two directions: "One was the professional, tavern-style path – as Josip Andrić wrote in *Tambura Paje Kolarića* – when five or six players would gather to perform their own arrangements for entertainment. The other was cultural amateurism, where orchestras performed composed tamburica works and classical arrangements."

This year marks a century of tamburica music in Osijek, and to celebrate, the Museum of Slavonia will host an exhibition centered around this traditional instrument. "It's dedicated to Josip and Leopold Rohrbacher, brothers who laid the foundations of artistic tamburica music in Osijek and beyond. They also founded the Croatian Tamburica Association in 1937. The period between 1920 and 1944 was the golden age of tamburica – both professional and artistic," says Zbiljski. The exhibition, open for about two months, will focus on tamburica craftsmanship, the lives of musicians, and the evolution of tamburica music.

Zbiljski concludes that globalization has opened the tamburica's path into the world of music, and he sees a bright future ahead. "I have an excellent collaboration with the Kulen Travel agency, which promotes the tamburica globally – for example, to American tourists visiting Slavonia. We don't play *bećarac* for them, but film music and similar pieces – and their reactions were so good they invited us to perform in the U.S., which we plan to do," he adds with a smile.

And for the first time ever – the tamburica university program

A successful and fruitful future for the tamburica is also predicted by professor of arts Davor Bobić, one of the founders of the Master's Study Program in Tamburica Performance at the Academy of Arts and Culture – the first such program in Croatia and indeed, the world. "Many European countries have protected their traditional instruments through academic programs," Bobić explains. "We realized it would be a great loss if the tamburica – our most recognized traditional instrument – didn't have its own academic degree. And where better to establish it than in Osijek, the cradle of tamburica artistry?"

The road to launching the study program took eight years and faced considerable resistance, even within academia – but they succeeded. "There is a young generation of tamburica players who understand the turning point we're at today," Bobić notes. "To continue working with quality, we need a systematic approach – more composers writing for tamburica and creating original literature. That's the foundation for the instrument's development."

A tamburica player's life

Dinko Glavaš, frontman of the tamburica ensemble *Kas* and tamburica teacher at the Music School in Beli Manastir, started playing the instrument as a child in primary music school, continuing later with the *Pajo Kolarić tamburica Society*, various ensembles, and for the past sixteen years, with *Kas*.

"So far, I've toured the U.S. five times, and performed in China, Canada, and across Europe. Tamburica brought me all that – and I dare say, the more you practice and devote yourself, the more the tamburica gives back," Dinko shares.

During the week, he says, the band rehearses new songs for the weekend to stay current and offer what the audience loves most. "Weekends are always busy with lots of gigs, concerts, weddings, and events that bring joy to our audience," he says. As his favorite performance, Dinko recalls the closing concert at the Osijek Stadium, where they performed *Grad na Dravi* for 12,000 people.

Our horned friend

BY LUKA JAKOPČIĆ / KATARINA ANĐELKOVIĆ

Sometime in the early or mid-Middle Ages, perhaps from the Ukrainian region of Podolia, after which it was named, a breed of cattle arrived in the Pannonian Plain. Over time, this animal would become a defining symbol of the region's vast steppe landscapes. As the breed diversified into several regional subtypes across Central Europe, Croatia became home not only to the well-known Hungarian Grey but also to the Slavonian-Syrmian type of Podolian cattle, known here as *Podolac*.

An endangered species

Whether grey or Slavonian-Syrmian (and if you can tell the difference, drinks are on the house!), this indigenous breed has shaped the landscape of Slavonia and Syrmia for centuries. It was once indispensable in agriculture, particularly for plowing fields and pulling carts. At the start of the 20th century, the Podolac made up around 90% of the livestock in Slavonia, Baranja, and Syrmia.

But with the rise of modern agriculture and intensive farming – sworn enemies of our freedom-loving horned beast – the Podolac's fortunes quickly turned. Over the next ninety years, the breed came close to extinction.

In recent times, however, growing awareness of the importance of native species and the increasing market value of ecological farming have led to a revival of this noble and nutritionally valuable breed. Now, the Podolac is classified as an endangered species, and its preservation has become a priority for safeguarding the biodiversity and cultural heritage of Slavonia and Syrmia.

While driving through Kopački Rit, you might spot a few grazing freely. The breed is now increasingly raised on sustainable farms, where it's used to produce high-quality meat and milk. Beyond its economic value, the Podolac plays an important ecological role, helping to maintain grasslands and prevent the spread of scrub and overgrowth.

Vardarac-style perkelt

The Slavonian-Syrmian Podolac is a true symbol of the cultural heritage and identity of Slavonia and Syrmia. Preserving it means not only saving a breed from extinction, but also preserving the traditions, landscapes, and ways of life that have defined this region for centuries.

A champion of this revival in Osijek-Baranja County is the Citadela restaurant in Vardarac. Head over there to taste the exceptional perkelt made from Podolac cattle raised on the restaurant's nearby farm. Served with homemade pasta, fresh cheese, and crispy bacon, this Vardarac-style perkelt offers one of the most authentic gastronomic experiences in Baranja – and beyond!

Preserving the Podolac means not only saving a breed from extinction, but also safeguarding the traditions, landscapes, and ways of life that have shaped this region.

Bačva – Đakovo's barrel of *hedonism*

BY IGOR MIKULIĆ

In just one year since opening, Bačva Wine Shop and Tasting Room in Đakovo (Matije Gupca Street 3) has earned a reputation as a must-visit spot for all hedonists, especially those who appreciate fine wines, fruit brandies and other spirits, as well as delicacies such as premium olive oil, jams, Slavonian cheeses and cured meats.

Bačva (Croatian for barrel) was opened in June 2024 by Tanja, her brother Branimir, and his wife Tatjana Spajić. As Tatjana explains, she and Branimir handle the procurement, partnerships, event organization and communications, while Tanja is the heart and soul of the place, a friendly face for every guest. "Our family business grew out of our love for wine of Slavonia and Baranja, where we all grew up, but also from Istria and Dalmatia. We fell in love with the wine story, and *Bačva* is the result," says Tatjana.

Đakovački vezovi souvenir

In cooperation with Apostol Winery and with the support of the City of Đakovo and the Đakovo Tourist Board, Bačva created a special wine label dedicated to the Đakovački Vezovi festival. For the first time in the event's 59-year history, unique editions of *Dualis* and *Graševina* wines were produced, becoming the official souvenirs of the 2025 Đakovački Vezovi.

Only Croatian winemakers are represented at Bačva.

> "Our main goal was to provide a platform for small, boutique wineries whose excellent labels were previously unavailable to wine lovers in this part of Croatia. Now, we offer an impressive selection from the smaller producers, complemented by some of the rarer labels from renowned winemakers, the finest olive oils from Istria, and spirits from local distillers in the Đakovo area," Tatjana explains.

The offer is further enriched by premium local cheeses and cured meats, so visitors are particularly delighted when they can enjoy authentic Slavonian flavors with a glass of wine.

The Spajić family envisioned *Bačva* as a cozy, charming space, and they designed it with great care, from brand creation to interior design. Located just a few steps from the monumental cathedral, Bačva's terrace is now considered one of the most beautiful in Đakovo. Building trust with the guests is key. Upon arrival, Tanja greets everyone with a welcome drink, creating an instant sense of warmth and familiarity. The prices are another pleasant surprise, as they are practically identical to those at the wineries themselves.

> "You can buy a bottle of top-quality wine here and enjoy it with friends on our terrace at retail price – this sets us apart from other establishments," says Tatjana.

Bačva has also become a place of learning for all who appreciate the culture of the table. Not long ago, sparkling wine in Đakovo was reserved for New Year's Eve or special occasions, while now it is often served as an aperitif.

"We want to show people new ways to enjoy quality drinks. We thus regularly organize winery presentations, usually led by the winemakers themselves, as well as cocktail parties, food-and-wine pairings, and evenings combining wine and art. All to create a complete experience for both the palate and the soul," Tatjana concludes.

Zagorka's novel *Knight of the Slavonian Plain* – a guide to a **hedonistic journey** through Slavonia

Old noble estates and the forest hideouts of outlaws, once brought to life in the pages of Marija Jurić Zagorka's novel, now tell stories of fine hotels, wineries, restaurants, and outdoor adventures.

BY **MISLAV PAVOŠEVIĆ**

Ever wished you could step between the pages of a book you were reading and live out the adventures of your favourite characters? Allow us to suggest you spend your long winter evenings with Zagorka's novel and once the spring sun warms up the Slavonian plains, set off on this exciting journey, page by page.

Pejačević castle, Osijek – Retfala

For your "literary expedition," choose Osijek's Retfala as your base, home to a lesser-known but central setting of the novel, the Pejačević family castle. Today it houses a private clinic, so you can't tour the interior, but even a glance at its baroque façade evokes the luxury and romance of the 18th century. Visit the impressive *Opus Arena Stadium* just across the street, take a stroll or ride along the riverside promenade, and enjoy a taste of 21st-century luxury at the nearby *District Boutique Hotel*.

Water gate and Pejačević houses, Osijek – Tvrđa

Like the heroine of Zagorka's story, follow the Drava downstream to Osijek's *Tvrđa*, the old citadel. You won't find magicians with potions here, but just past the *Water Gate* lies *Holy Trinity Square*. Here you'll find the former Pejačević residence, now craft brewery *General von Beckers*, where you can savour a rich dark *Mangulica* beer. At the western end of the square stands another Pejačević house with a baroque statue of the Virgin Mary, and just around the corner you can dine or stay overnight at the famous *Merlon*.

The confluence of the Drava and Danube – Adamović-Cseh Estate, Erdut – Aljmaš

Downstream from Osijek, the 18th-century banks of the Drava were home to river "pirates" who ambushed passing boats. The pirates are long gone, but the mysterious floodplain forests remain, and they're best explored by bike along the *Porić Trail* or through the vineyards leading to *Erdut Tower* and the *Adamović-Cseh Manor*, now home to *Erdut Wines* with its legendary 75,000-litre barrel. For breathtaking views of the Danube meanders, visit one of the local wineries that also offer accommodation, such as *Vinotel Brzica*.

Prandau-Normann Castle, Valpovo

Much like Zagorka's heroes, let your path take you to *Valpovo Castle*. Its massive Gothic tower was built by the Morović family, proud members of the Order of the Dragon, defenders of Europe from Ottoman invasions. In the 18th century, the Prandau barons and Normann counts transformed the fortress into a baroque palace. Learn more about its history at the *Regional Museum of Valpovo*, then relax at the *Hotel and Restaurant Park* at the edge of the castle park.

The Adamović estate and historic Korođgrad, Čepin

Beyond courtly intrigues and love affairs, Zagorka's novel is, at heart, a grand *outdoor* adventure. While the trip from Osijek to the Adamović family estate in Čepin is now a short drive, in the 18th century it would have been a perilous trek through bandit-filled marshlands. By the 19th century, the swamps were transformed into fertile farms like *Ovčara*, famed for delicacies made from the local *pfeifferica* pork. Try some at the *Crna Svinja Restaurant*, unwind at *Hotel Materra*, and then explore the surroundings by bike – from the ruins of *Korođgrad*, said to hide stolen treasure, to the charming *Zelenkrov Hotel & Café* at the entrance to Čepin.

The end of the Slavonian outlaws, Našice

The dense forests of the *Krndija* mountain were once the stronghold of Slavonian outlaws, who often targeted the Pejačević family's estate and castle in *Našice*. You can visit the castle and its scenic fishponds, enjoy dinner at *Našički ribnjaci*, and spend a peaceful night surrounded by nature. The last and most famous outlaw, Čaruga, was captured in 1925, marking the end of more than two centuries of the somewhat "romantic" age of Slavonian outlaws from the forest.

The people of Osijek, *much like their city, have mastered the* art of balance

Ana Kurtović, Helena Sablić Tomić, and Krešimir Lacković share what makes Osijek and its people who they are

BY **IVANA RAB GULJAŠ**

"As a psychologist, I always carry a bit of *déformation professionnelle* in my back pocket. But when it comes to Osijek (and Osijek's people), that becomes a bit tricky. It's hard to stay objective about a city that's not just a point on the map, but an emotional space I'm immersed in", reflects Professor Ana Kurtović of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek, when asked to help us describe the kind of hosts Osijek's visitors can expect to find here.

According to Professor Kurtović, the people of Osijek largely draw their character from the city they live in. So what is Osijek really like, and what are its people like?

At a serious advantage

"I'd say Osijek has the rare combination of calm and vibrancy, like the person who's found perfect balance through therapy. With its 22 parks and the river Drava whispering that we should go with the flow, this city seems to have invented *mindfulness* long before it became a trend. Psychological research has long shown that spending time in nature, near water and greenery, can help reduce stress, increase connection, and stimulate creativity. If that's true (and it is), then Osijek has a serious advantage. And so do the people of Osijek!" she says.

As a university city, Osijek beats the constant pulse of youth. "Students are like spontaneous daily wake-up calls – they remind us that energy, curiosity, and ambition aren't privileges of the young, but choices of anyone willing to keep learning. I work with them daily, and I can confirm: they are the city in motion and its rhythm, its psychological vitality, and, for me personally, a great inspiration."

In her words, Osijek isn't a metropolis that grinds you down, but a space that lets you breathe. "A city with enough quiet to hear your own thoughts, but enough life that you never get bored. And if you ever need a bit more stimulation, you don't have to look far. Summer concerts along the Drava, urban festivals, art,

and culinary events will wake even the sleepiest among us. In short, Osijek's people (just like their city) know how to find balance – between calm and rhythm, reflection and good fun. And that's no small feat, not for a human nor a city," she concludes.

Culture in motion

Academic Helena Sablić Tomić, Dean of the Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek, notes that the people of Osijek have always gravitated toward cultural content that steps beyond the mainstream. "In the last decade, I've noticed a strong rise of independent organisations and alternative art emerging from our urban landscape. Osijek's neighbourhoods are turning into stages for events, and young artists are breathing new life into forgotten spaces. The independent scene keeps growing, stepping out of traditional venues and into the community, into clubs, onto the streets, creating new culture enthusiasts. It's wonderful to see the city come alive during any cultural event that brings people out to the promenade, the Old Fortress (Tvrđa), the Park of Culture, the Urania Cinema, the Cultural Centre, or the park near the *Školjka* installation," she says.

In her view, Osijek's people are "culture in motion" – they walk proudly through the city's open-air stage, enjoying street art, performances, and concerts. "Osijek also nurtures a culture of living, so every event here becomes a fusion of art and the art of life, making Osijek truly a *human-scale city*," she concludes.

Linguistic treasures

This magazine's Croatian language editor, Prof. Ana Mikić Čolić, co-authored (with Mirjam Milas and Lorna Rajle) the book *Osječki gradski govor - Jezične dumine Osječana (Osijek Urban Dialect - Language Curiosities of Osijek's Citizens)*. The text combines academic research with a popular-science approach, making it a kind of Osijek-themed keepsake. Since locals use this city dialect in everyday informal situations, pick up a few words from the book and you'll understand them better and fall for Osijek even faster.

Passion in the stands

That "in-motion" energy, of course, applies to sport, says Dr. Krešimir Lacković, sports journalist at *Glas Slavonije* and Assistant Professor at the Sjever University. "People love to swim and row on the Drava, run, walk, and cycle along the ever-stretching promenade. They keep building their muscles in the city gyms. In recent years, we've been sending a new image to the media and social networks, and instead of *bećari* and *snaše*, we are now represented by the sculpted *legice* and *lege* of the *Kopika* beach," he says with a laugh.

He reminds us that Osijek has produced Nobel laureates, an Oscar winner, and a World Cup Golden Boot winner, "a combination unique in the world. Science, culture, and sport are part of our identity. The University, the Theatre and...? *Opus Arena!* The most modern and beautiful stadium in Croatia has become a tourist attraction in its own right. The Gradski vrt sports hall has hosted numerous world and Olympic champions, especially during the annual Gymnastics World Cup," he notes.

According to Lacković, you can best feel the soul and pulse of Osijek – and its people – at sporting events. "In the stands, even the calmest locals are moved with an immense passion. There's a special emotion when the Croatian national team plays here, especially the *Vatreni*. It's love and pride, infused with defiance," he drives the point straight into the net.

Slavonia and Baranja in an urban *outfit*

In the heart of the plains, where the sounds of tamburica and the *šokačko kolo* dance have preserved the spirit of community for centuries, new rhythms have begun to echo. In places once crossed by trade routes, young creative spirits now meet, such as extreme sports enthusiasts, DJs, and street artists. Slavonia's urban culture festivals prove that tradition and contemporary urban life can coexist and even complement each other.

1st stop

BY **MIRNA ŠMIT**

Pannonian Challenge

One of the most recognizable symbols of Osijek's urban identity, and indeed of continental Croatia, is the legendary Pannonian Challenge. For over 20 years, this festival has brought together the best of extreme sports while promoting urban culture, continental tourism, and Slavonia and Baranja as destinations that, alongside rich gastronomy and culture, offer world-class sporting experiences. Each May, Osijek's skate park becomes a magnet for top athletes from across the globe, competing in three disciplines: INLINE, SKATE, and BMX. The BMX category made its Olympic debut in Tokyo, but long before that, riders who would later become Olympic medalists had already performed their jaw-dropping tricks right here. Beyond the competitions, Pannonian Challenge hosts vibrant concerts and celebrates hip-hop and breakdance culture, featuring dance battles and exhibitions by Croatia's and the region's best *action sport* photographers.

2nd stop

Oscans

For street art lovers, the Oscans Festival is a must-visit. This relatively new event has quickly won the hearts of Osijek's residents and visitors alike by transforming the city's public spaces into open-air galleries. Abandoned walls and hidden corners become art canvases, where visitors can watch graffiti, murals, and installations come to life in real time. The Oscans come with a challenge, though. Each year, artists are given a new theme – not to serve as boundaries, but as inspiration for the artists' creative freedom. Whether it's an emotional landscape, social commentary, personal story, cultural identity, or abstract vision, authenticity is key. The festival's charm lies in its interactivity, and visitors are encouraged to join workshops, create their own art, or simply chat with the artists. DJ sets and chill-out zones on the grass complete the picture, and you've got the perfect fusion of art, music, and community.

3rd stop

Galoop festival

Held in Đakovo at the end of June, Galoop Festival marks the start of summer in Slavonia and Baranja. Founded by a group of young enthusiasts from the *ARLA Association*, it proves that some of the best festivals grow from a community's own creative energy. Set in the lush surroundings of *Strossmayer Park*, Galoop attracts audiences not only from Đakovo but from all over Slavonia and Baranja. Its programme features artists from the Croatian and international indie, alternative, experimental, dance, and electronic scenes, creating an atmosphere that transcends boundaries. With its blend of styles and inclusive spirit, Galoop appeals to audiences across all ages. For all who want to experience the perfect mix of music, people, and summer vibes, Galoop is the festival to be. If you're planning a trip to Slavonia and Baranja, make sure Đakovo is on your summer itinerary.

4th stop

HeadOnEast

Set across more than ten locations in Osijek's baroque *Tvrđa*, HeadOnEast is much more than just a festival – it's a celebration of life, flavour, sound, and joy. Designed as a "showroom" of all the events that fill the calendar in Slavonia and Baranja throughout the year, it embodies the region's creative and hedonistic spirit. As autumn paints the plains in golden hues, HeadOnEast becomes a showcase of the East's finest: winemakers, brewers, chefs, small producers, artists, and musicians all gather in one place, while stunning light installations by Hungarian artists add a touch of magic. Blending gastronomy, music, creative workshops, and immersive art installations, HeadOnEast redefines hedonism and invites every visitor to discover their own definition of pleasure and write their story of Croatia's East.

Everyone's and no one's ***Baba Universalis***, both in person and in souvenir form

BY **IVANA RAB GULJAŠ**

Babaseka is an utterly genuine character, drawn by the multi-talented Tomislav Livaja from his own well of intellect, art, emotion, and life experience.

Leaning against a massive turquoise wooden gate on Osječka Street in Sarvaš, a village near Osijek, awaits my two-in-one host – Tomislav Livaja and his alter ego, *Babaseka*, the village granny. When we spoke on the phone he asked if he should become the Baba. Since I know Babaseka quite well, though, both from social media and events where she's either hired to mingle with visitors or perform her stand-up, Tomislav met me "off-stage" for the day.

Dreams becoming reality

We had our cup of coffee with homemade elderflower juice, properly "baba-style." Though Babaseka isn't physically present, her traces and spirit fill the house. The old home once belonged to a judge of tragic fate whose 1927 photographs Tomislav still keeps. The property with the house, courtyard, and its land stretches over a vast area. Here, and at his other home in the Baranja village of Dubošević, Tomislav dreams of creating an *art incubator* in the coming years. His incubator will provide a safe, creative space for art therapy, residencies like the ones where he took part in Iran, Germany or Belgium..., and workshops for both children and adults. For now, the house regularly hosts *Trobozanke*, a group of kindred spirits and folklore leaders: five women and four men who, as he says, "sing mainly for themselves." Recently they've officially performed in the Czech Repuwblic, though, and Berlin is next. Tomislav is the leader of the ensemble, as he has been one for a number of cultural associations, and has just become head of the County Centre of Excellence for Art, based at the Beli Manastir grammar school, where this Master of Fine Arts works his day job as an (beloved) art teacher.

Born in 1991 in Slakovci, Tomislav grew up in Privlaka, his mother's hometown, which is where the original Babaseka, his grandmother Anica lived as well. She was recognized as an authentic ambassador of the region's spirit and a true tour-

ism brand. Souvenirs with her image, produced by Tomislav's small craft business *Stara fela*, have become sought-after items at fairs, shops, museums, festivals, and online. Locals and visitors alike fall for Babaseka at first sight and at first *baba* chat.

"Babaseka isn't a Šokica drag queen, though some have tried to label her that way. I don't mind drag performers, but Babaseka doesn't have that vibe or aesthetic. She does balance between folklore and subversion – that, I'll admit," says Tomislav.

Babaseka stepped out of anonymity when Tomislav illustrated Filip Golubov Car's book. "It was during the pandemic when I made 24 illustrations for the book, but inspiration struck and I ended up drawing a hundred more. All of them inspired by Baba! I started posting them online, and one day my friend Maja Zec commented that it would make a great T-shirt! That's when it clicked: T-shirts, tote bags, badges, magnets, patches, aprons, music boxes, puzzles, cake tins... I started small. It was October 2020, and by February, during Carnival season, my friend Filip suggested we wear Baba costumes. I had a folk costume skirt from Sonta, but I lacked a matching top, so I stitched a bit of fabric together. I added the Lennon-style sunglasses – and Babaseka was born. Her spirit resonates with everyone because she's everyone's and no one's granny," he smiles. "*Baba Universalis*," I joke. "Yes – the all-granny, the *borg-baba*," he replies. "Maybe the *Blade Runner baba*?" I add, and we both burst into laughter – not mocking her, no way.

The artist, the teacher, the craftsman

Jokes aside, slipping into a skirt was never enough. Babaseka isn't a mask, nor merely a parody. She's a deeply honest creation, the artistic offspring of a painter, graphic designer, sculptor, writer, singer, and player of bagpipes, *diple*, flutes, and *samica*; an expert in the folklore of Slavonia, Baranja, and Syrmia, a gifted educator, and a natural comedian. Babaseka embodies his authentic (re) interpretation of tradition and modernity, the sacred and the everyday, the personal and the collective.

Souvenirs bearing her face have become genuine cultural artefacts as they're proudly local, yet universally relatable, carrying the signature of a versatile artist who refuses to sell a sugar-coated version of rural life.

"And that's just fifteen percent of what I've got planned," he says with a grin as we part ways.

Address

Stara fela Craft Studio
Osječka Street 37, Sarvaš

Facebook

Instagram

BIJELI GUSAK DISTILLERY

Proud of their ***gin***, though fruit brandies ***reign supreme***

BY **IGOR MIKULIĆ**

Concours International de Lyon 2025 gold for the wormwood liqueur *Pelin*, silver for the elderflower liqueur - these are the latest international recognitions for the Bijeli Gusak sistillery from Đakovo.

Founded in 2013 by Emerik Pišl, a journalist by profession, and Ivana Petrošanec Pišl, an agricultural engineer, the family farm *Bijeli Gusak* began with planting plum and apple orchards. Now, those orchards of nearly two hectares of plums, some apples, and 4.4 hectares of walnuts yield plenty of organic fruit.

Following Slavonian tradition and simple good sense, fruit that isn't eaten fresh should never go to waste. For the Bijeli Gusak family, that meant turning it into premium fruit brandies and liqueurs. Ivana and Emerik launched their distillery in 2019.

Their production started during the COVID-19 pandemic, truly a baptism by fire, yet Bijeli Gusak has firmly established itself on the market. The foundation of their production lies in fruit brandies – plum, apple, pear (*Williams*), and apricot – made from their own fruit and that of nearby producers. And then there's the gin – the product that quickly put them on the map. Soon after starting the distillery, *Bijeli Gusak* became only the second producer in Slavonia and Baranja to make gin, and their *No. 1 Gin* immediately won gold.

Bijeli Gusak is a genuine family farm, with every family member involved in production: Ivana, Emerik, and their three daughters. Emerik remains the master distiller, though.

"When we created it, we kept experimenting by adding ingredients, testing, weighing, distilling, until we achieved something unique. Stylistically, it's a *New western style* gin, which means it doesn't follow conservative standards but reflects the new trends of craft distilling," says Emerik. Based on that award-winning gin, they later developed Sloe Gin, a premium product made from wild *blackthorn (Prunus spinosa)* that grows near their organic orchards. "How much do we produce? Well, as much as the birds leave us," Emerik laughs.

Over the years, they have expanded their production to include brandy, vodka, and several liqueurs. The *Pelin* liqueur, as proven by its gold medal in Lyon, is of exceptional quality, while the elderflower liqueur has become a local trendsetter. "We're proud of our gins, but fruit brandies still reign supreme," says Emerik. In just five years, the *Bijeli Gusak* brandies, gins, and liqueurs have won dozens of medals for quality at national and international competitions.

"We send our products to competitions mainly to test them and to hear what the experts think. Medals are a confirmation that we're on the right track. We experiment, we play, and we truly enjoy creating new drinks. I can't resist tweaking every new batch a little – within the rules of the craft, of course – and that's what makes each one unique. I believe that's the biggest advantage of craft distilleries," emphasizes Emerik.

All their products can be tasted and purchased at their tasting room in Đakovo (Petra Preradovića Street 124) or in their online shop.

And as the story comes full circle – the name *Bijeli Gusak* (white gander in Croatian) isn't by chance. It was inspired by a real white gander that once proudly led the Pišl family's flock on their farm.

A sound box of astonishing *beauty* and acoustics

BY **IVANA RAB GULJAŠ**

This architectural gem is none other than the Franjo Krežma Concert Hall, part of the Osijek Cultural Centre. With 420 comfortable seats, its beauty will take your breath away the moment you step inside. And during a performance, its remarkable acoustics will enchant audiences and musicians alike. Since its grand opening on 27 September 2024, marked by a concert of the Croatian Radiotelevision Symphony Orchestra and pianist Konstantin Krasnitsky, conducted by Pascal Rophé, the hall has hosted numerous acclaimed artists.

Art historian Grgur Marko Ivanković beautifully described it as "a sound box reminiscent of the interior of a traditional Slavonian tamburica and a wooden granary (čardak), whose planks formed part of the landscape of every Slavonian village and even some corners of Osijek." According to him, the award-winning Osijek architect Damir Vrban masterfully reinterpreted and harmoniously integrated these two traditional elements, "and the visitors feel the pleasant warmth, as if embraced by a space radiating Art Nouveau elegance, simplicity, and lightness." The interior design features solid oak flooring and wall cladding made of soft, curved spruce and pine boards, giving the space a unique texture and resonance.

The second-largest concert hall in Croatia, it bears the name of Franjo Krežma, the celebrated violin virtuoso born in Osijek in 1862. Ivanković also points out the bronze sculpture of Krežma by renowned Croatian sculptor Vanja Radauš, located in the very heart of Osijek in the passage that fittingly bears Radauš's name.

So, if you're a music aficionado, check out the concert program at kulturni centar website, as there's surely something that will strike the right chord. This season's lineup includes performances by Ida Gamulin, The King's Singers, the Panonska filharmonija, Zagreb soloists, the Roby Lakatos Ensemble, and many more.

Not from Champagne, but they're *impressive* just the same

Even if they don't come from Champagne, the sparkling wines of Slavonia and Baranja are rising fast on the regional and international stage.

BY **JURAJ PADOVAN, @kucnisomelje**

You know the moment when everyone's reaching for rakija as an aperitif, but you secretly crave bubbles in your glass? Well, dear wine lovers (and those about to become one), it's time to raise your glass and toast to the fact that Slavonia and Baranja are the new stars on Croatia's sparkling wine map! Forget the idea that bubbles are reserved for the French and their famous champagnes. We have our local favourites, though we can't call them *champagne* but *sparkling wines*! While they may not hail from Champagne, the sparkling wines of Slavonia and Baranja are indeed holding their own among the best on both the regional and global wine scenes.

Seductive style

The eastern Croatian sparkling scene is being shaped by wineries such as Belje, Josić, Enosophia, Siber, and Royal Hill, each with its own seductive style.

Belje, one of the largest and most prominent wineries in Slavonia and Baranja, proudly carries the title of a key representative of the sparkling tradition in eastern Croatia. Its winery and tasting room are located near the villages of Karanac and Kamenac in the fairy-tale landscape of Baranja. Belje's three sparkling wines offer a full range of experiences, each suited to different moments and tastes. *La Belle Grand* is perfect with fish, shellfish, and cheeses – ideal as an aperitif or alongside an elegant dinner. *La Belle Rosé* bursts with fruity freshness and pairs beautifully with light appetizers and fruit desserts, while *La Perla* is a softer, sweeter choice for more relaxed moments.

Located in Zmajevac, the heart of Baranja, the **Josić winery** is renowned for blending tradition with contemporary wine culture. The *Josić Cru Cru* sparkling wine is made from pure Chardonnay and pairs wonderfully with shellfish, cured meats, light salads and vegetables, as well as creamy risottos.

Erdut's **Siber** stands out as another gem of eastern Croatia, known for its unique sparkling wine made from Cabernet Sauvignon. It exudes authenticity and depth, perfectly reflecting the character of its local terroir. The *Siber Brut*, as the winery's only sparkling, is crafted from Cabernet Sauvignon and reveals complex aromas of red berries like rasp-

berry and currant, subtle spice, and delicate smoky notes. It pairs beautifully with smoked fish, poultry dishes, and traditional eastern Croatian meats and cheeses.

Royal Hill Estate, also from Erdut, will easily impress all sparkling wine lovers as it masterfully merges tradition and innovation on the vineyards of eastern Croatia. With five sparkling wines to their name, they open the door to a range of gastronomic and stylistic experiences. The lineup includes *Extra Brut Selection* (fresh and mineral, ideal with fish and shellfish), *Rosé Brut Selection* (fruity, perfect with poultry and cheese), *Extra Brut* (citrusy and light, pairs with sushi and white fish), *Méthode Traditionnelle* (brioche and almond notes, ideal with oysters and salmon), and *Rosé Brut de Pinot Noir* (sophisticated and complex, with prosciutto or elegant festive dishes).

Last, but not least, let us present **Enosophia** – a winery which has perfected the art of crafting sparkling wines for every occasion, be that the celebration of life's big moments or everyday pleasures. Their sparkling wines are a modern interpretation of Slavonian grape varieties and classic sparkling traditions, always radiating cheer and ease. Enosophia offers four distinctive styles: *Nice to See You* (fresh and light, great with salads and desserts), *Today Blanc* (Graševina and Frankovka blend, perfect with fish and sushi), *Today Rosé* (bright and fruity, made for daytime gatherings), and *Memoria* (from Riesling, complex and elegant, ideal with seafood and fine desserts).

What unites them all, naturally, is a deep love for the vineyard, the land, and the bubbles!

Trends

Trends? An explosion in recent years. More and more wineries from Slavonia and Baranja are giving their sparkling wines a distinctive local touch and modern freshness. And they're no longer reserved for special occasions – here, you'll find sparkling wine served with brunch, barbecue, a vineyard breakfast, or an open-air party. Who says a *Graševina sparkling* doesn't pair with *kulen*, *fiš paprikaš* or *Baranja cheese*? And let's emphasize that a rosé sparkling pairs surprisingly well with goose stew!
What ties them all together is exactly what defines the people of Slavonia and Baranja, an unshakable appetite for good food and good company.

Happiness grows when **shared**

The scents and colours of summer, the flavours of autumn, and the imprints of a hardworking pair of hands make for the most beautiful Christmas gifts.

BY **MAJA CELING CELIĆ**

In a time when we can have any item from anywhere in the world, let's choose to give something unique and different. As happiness grows when shared, for the one receiving the gift and for the one whose time, skill, and heart are woven into the local product or handmade creation.

Here are some ideas for your inspiration.

Pumpkin in Oil, Flour, and Seeds

OPG Knezičić is located in Satnica Đakovačka, run by young Benjamin and his family, who grow pumpkins to produce their distinctive pumpkin seed oil (bottled in 1 L, 0.5 L, and 250 ml), protein flour, and salted, spicy, roasted, or caramelized pumpkin seeds. This is the perfect gift for foodies and health enthusiasts alike. You can find their products on-site, at Bačva Wine Shop in Đakovo, or online.

Slavoniklo Sweet and Savoury

These days it's rare to find a producer who makes traditional homemade preserves in sufficient quantities, but OPG Slavoniklo from Gat, near Belišće, proves it's possible. Their ajvar is made exclusively from roasted peppers, salt, and homemade spicy tomato sauce. Their apricot and plum jams are enriched with rum and cinnamon, while chocolate spreads and hazelnut creams are based on their own acacia honey, also available in their range. Discover their products online.

Gašić cheese

Semi-hard, smoked, seasoned, cooked, or the squeaky fresh škripavac, each on their own or in a mix, make just part of the wide selection from the famous Gašić mini dairy farm in Beketinci. If you're not gifting them under the Christmas tree, then at least enrich your festive table with the excellent cheese, cream, yogurts, and other dairy delights.

Katini Lavandini

Climate change has helped lavender, immortelle, sage and rosemary flourish successfully in Slavonia and Baranja, rivaling their Mediterranean counterparts.

A fine example is OPG Katini Lavandini (katinilavandini.com), dedicated to organic cultivation of medicinal herbs and their transformation into essential oils, natural cosmetics, and herbal preparations. Ointments, creams (especially their *anti-age* line), macerates, hydrolats, balms, and serums are just part of the varied offer coming from this remarkable family farm in Tenja, near Osijek.

House of Vedma

For those who like to explore a bit deeper, step into the world of House of Vedma, founded by Kristina Marušić from Osijek. She creates candles, scented wax melts, and wooden decorations in a *gothic and witchy* style, inspired by nature and Slavic mythology. Her candles and waxes are made from natural soy wax, eco-friendly, gentle, and cruelty-free. Enter the enchanting world of a hidden forest cabin by the Drava River, surrounded by ferns, moss, and the scent of wild herbs.

Verbena Jewellery

Viktorija Križanović from Osijek also finds inspiration in the world of plants and handcrafts unique pieces of jewellery combining silver, brass, copper, and steel. Her earrings featuring the sage leaf motif are made using the *lost wax casting technique* with an imprint of a real leaf cast in silver. The ginkgo leaf earrings have already become favourites, and this autumn she has added a new design inspired by the Slavonian oak, created through engraving and cutting. Find her work at the artOs Gallery in Osijek's Tvrđa (Fakultetska 4) or online.

Simone Design

Backpacks, wallets, handbags, clutches, watches, and other urban-chic fashion accessories signed by Simone Design are well-known in Croatia and beyond. Be sure to check out their winter scarf collection, made from unique fabrics combined with leather and metal details. Explore their shop at Sunčana Street 1b in Osijek, or visit their website.

Okusi sreće by Pavica

Those who prefer lively, traditional motifs will find joy in the creations of Pavica Varga from Valpovo. Her straw bags, fabric tote bags, and backpacks adorned with motifs of poppies, cherries, flowers, checks, and polka dots brighten up grey winter days and bring back the magic of summer full of colour, fragrance, and warmth.

Bring joy to both the maker and the one your gift is meant for

Starring – **the maned nobles**

BY **SUZANA ŽUPAN**

Let us set the scene: it's the festive month of December, wrapped in winter chill, yet glowing with the warmth of Christmas and the sweet anticipation of a new year. It's Saturday, 5 p.m. The lights go on, the murmur in the audience fades, and silence fills the indoor riding hall of the Đakovo State Stud Farm.

The Christmas Ball of the Lipizzaners begins – a musical and theatrical spectacle starring none other than these *maned nobles*. Their manes are neatly brushed, their bodies strong and sculpted, their movements perfectly trained in dressage under the saddle or in the graceful rhythm of a carriage ride. Like well-rehearsed dancers, they earn admiration and applause with every performance. Their movements are aristocratic, graceful, and pure.

Riders, carriage drivers, and dancers in crinolines, tailcoats, and elegant hats revive the spirit of courtly balls and dances, magical carriage rides whose wheels carve lines into untouched snow, and the chivalrous charm of gentlemen courting ladies with dance cards. They bring back the times of enchanted forests, fairies, and mysterious tales.

Organised by the Đakovo State Stud Farm , in partnership with Nobiles de Croatia Association and with guests from Kobilarna Lipica, this unique equestrian musical performance is the most spectacular of the stud farm's four annual events and one of the region's most popular tourist attractions.

For eleven years now, the Christmas Ball has been in high demand, and its loyal audience eagerly awaits each new edition. This year's 12th edition will once again feature two performances, at 5 p.m. and 8 p.m., attended by around 1,200 visitors from all over Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Vojvodina...

Each year's story is fairy-tale-like and unique, sprinkled with magic, where good always triumphs over evil. The performance brings together 50 horses and 150 dancers, riders, drivers, and performers, while the interplay of light and music heightens the drama and beauty of the spectacle.

Tickets are available from October 1st.

TOP 5 Experiences to keep warm

1. Karanac winter fair

By the end of November, the ethno village of Karanac is filled with the aroma of homemade delicacies and mulled brandy, accompanied by the cheerful sound of tamburica, all in the name of the winter fair. The fairgrounds are the meeting point for more than 60 producers of cured meats, traditional dishes, and all kinds of handicrafts. There's plenty of cooking there, too: steaming pots bubble away over open fires, and carp is grilled on wooden stakes (*rašlje*). The food tastes best when eaten with a spoon or even with your fingers!

2. Advent Fairs

Nothing says "winter" like twinkling Christmas lights, wooden booths, and the aroma of mulled wine wafting through city squares. With its colourful array of homemade winter dishes and aromatic drinks, Advent in Osijek transforms the historic Tvrđa district into a fairytale stage of concerts, performances, and festive surprises. For children, it's a season of pure magic, especially with the Christmas Tram gliding through the city. The Advent spirit shines just as warmly in Đakovo, Našice, Belišće, and Valpovo, each adding its own local touch to the holiday glow.

3. WineOS

When the January frost grips the Drava, Osijek turns into the capital of the wine world. The WineOS Fair of wine, delicacies, and the art of good living celebrates its 11th edition this winter, gathering winemakers from eastern Croatia and beyond. Over two days of masterclasses and tastings, even absolute wine beginners can learn the art of wine appreciation under the guidance of experts and renowned sommeliers.

4. Winter Wine & Walk

Baranja and wine are inseparable in every season, but the winter edition has a special kind of magic. The famous Baranja Winter Wine & Walk takes participants on a nine-kilometre trail through the wine capitals of Suza and Zmajevac, where wine cellars open their doors to serve local winter delicacies. It may be cold, but the spirit stays warm and the *winter kit* includes cozy hats, rain ponchos and other surprises to keep the participants smiling all the way.

5. Đakovo Bušari & Baranja Buše

January and February are the season of carnivals and masquerades, and nowhere do they come to life quite like in Đakovo and Baranja. Each village preserves its own traditions, but the largest and most vibrant celebrations are the Đakovo masked carnival (Bušari) and the Baranja Buše traditions. While in Đakovo the costumed groups from across Croatia parade through the streets, the *Buše* of Baranja preserve and celebrate their centuries-old customs. Hidden behind their woolly or brightly decorated masks, they ring bells, dance, and play music to drive away winter and call for spring to return.

BY **KATARINA ANĐELKOVIĆ / MISLAV MATIŠIĆ**

Life flows at a gentle pace…

Sombor whispers beneath the shade of plane trees, Subotica dazzles with its Art Nouveau charm, and between them, the salaši quietly preserve the spirit of the old Pannonian world.

BY **KATARINA ANĐELKOVIĆ**

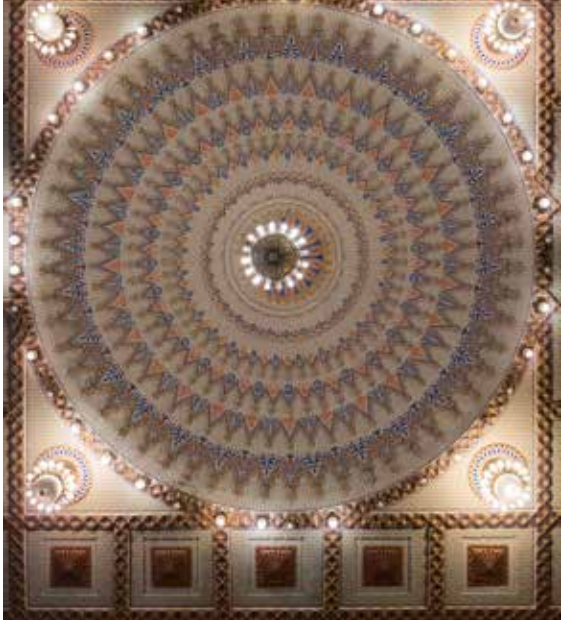
"Life flows at a gentle pace..." – thus sings Zvonko Bogdan, and thus life unfolds on the left bank of the Danube. The tamburica players follow the rhythm, keeping alive the traditions cherished in Sombor and Subotica, two towns whose histories were deeply shaped by the Bunjevac Croats. Sombor whispers beneath the shade of plane trees, Subotica dazzles with its Art Nouveau charm, and between them, the *salaši* quietly preserve the spirit of the old Pannonian world.

The green city and heart of the Danube basin

Sombor lies in the north-west of the gentle Bačka plain and is known as the greenest city in Vojvodina, where every street rests in the shade of tree-lined avenues, and horse-drawn carriages are still a daily sight. Its Town Hall, Milan Konjović Gallery, and Holy Trinity Square tell stories of a time when life moved slowly. Sombor is also the birthplace of Zvonko Bogdan, whose songs capture the essence of this land where tamburicas, horses, and endless plains connect Bačka, Baranja, and Slavonia.

The city and its surroundings hide a wealth of natural beauty, most notably the Gornje Podunavlje Special Nature Reserve, a first-category protected area stretching along the left bank of the Danube. Part of a vast wetland complex linking Hungary and Croatia, it has held Ramsar status since 2007. Visitors can enjoy eco-educational trails, birdwatching, photo safaris, and guided excursions through pristine Danube forests, especially along the Karapandža Educational Centre and the Štrbac and Bestrement trails.

In the heart of this region lies Bački Monoštor, alongside Sonta, one of the largest Šokac (Croatian) villages in Bačka, surrounded by river branches and canals accessible only by bridges. The Šokac community here still speaks, sings, and weaves much like their kin in Baranja. Be sure to visit the Mali Bodrog Ethno House, over 150 years old and preserved in its original form, and the Novitet Dunav Weaving Workshop in Bezdan, a state-protected cultural monument where traditional textiles are still made. The locals are masters of fish stew (riblji paprikaš), so don't miss the beloved taverns along the Danube, like Čarda kod Švabe, Pikec, Kod Carine, and Šebešfok.



Art Nouveau splendour and Bunjevac soul

About 60 kilometres north, the twin city of Osijek – Subotica – welcomes visitors like an open-air museum of Art Nouveau architecture. Its magnificent City Hall, the Raichle Palace, and the Subotica Synagogue rank among the most beautiful examples of the style in this part of Europe. Nearby, the Palić lake offers serene walks, excursions, as well as the famous Zvonko Bogdan Winery, an architectural gem of Pannonian Art Nouveau design where visitors can savour fine wines while gazing across endless vineyards.

In the nearby village of Tavankut, the Bunjevac Croats preserve their traditions, language, and culture. A unique local treasure is the Gallery of Straw Art, the only one of its kind in the world, featuring intricate works made entirely from straw, and the Balažević Ethno Farm, which keeps the authentic Bunjevac heritage alive. Here, guests can stay overnight, enjoy local meals, and even learn to dance traditional Bunjevac folk dances to the sound of tamburicas.

Salaši – guardians of the rural way of life

The countryside between Sombor and Subotica is dotted with *salaši* – traditional farmsteads once built by herdsmen and farmers, now transformed into peaceful oases of rural charm. Here you can taste homemade food and wine, take part in farm work, go horseback riding or carriage driving, try your luck at fishing, or simply enjoy the silence of the plains. Out of about a hundred salaši in Vojvodina, some thirty welcome visitors, including Naš salaš, Sedam dudova, and Dida Hornjakov salaš near Sombor; Majkin salaš, Salaš Đorđević, Jelen salaš, Vinski salaš Čuvardić, and the Zvonko Bogdan winery salaš near Subotica.

ONDINE, ZMAJEVAC

Bernarda and Mario
Hosts of the year

BY **MISLAV PAVOŠEVIĆ**

Remember the old scenes from the Adriatic coast, with the smiling ladies and grandmas proudly holding their *"Zimmer frei"* signs up? Back then, the handwritten boards promised a warm family welcome and a genuine connection with your hosts – people who quickly became your friends. Over time, though, the authentic spirit faded as the original coastal grandmas were outnumbered by a new generation of property owners whose only link to their vacation homes is a title deed.

That's precisely why the Croatian National Tourist Board and the Ministry of Tourism and Sport launched their new project "Your Host – Local Host", to highlight the rare gems who still offer guests an authentic, personal experience in a sea of private rentals. Among the selected hosts listed on their website, you'll find Ondine, a studio in Zmajevac in Baranja, whose owners, the Fuis family, were named Local hosts of the year for Osijek-Baranja County at the 2025 Croatian Tourism Days.

Bernarda and Mario transformed their traditional wine cellar, known locally as a *gator*, into a cozy tasting room for local wines, brandies, fine distillates, and delicacies, along with a stylish 4-star studio apartment. Yet what truly delights their guests isn't just the elegant interior, but the hosts themselves. They are always smiling, always waiting with their now-legendary apple and cheese strudels, a shot of homemade rakija for a warm welcome, and happy to have a friendly chat about the wide variety of experiences that Baranja offers. With their heartfelt hospitality and prime location on the popular Baranja wine road, it's no wonder they've earned top scores – a perfect 5.0 on Google and 10/10 on Booking.com!

Find Bernarda and Mario on Facebook – *Studio apartment Ondine* or simply give them a call at **+385 91 955 1908** and enjoy an unforgettable stay in the heart of Baranja.

The capital of *legos* – Osijek, Croatia (not Denmark)

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