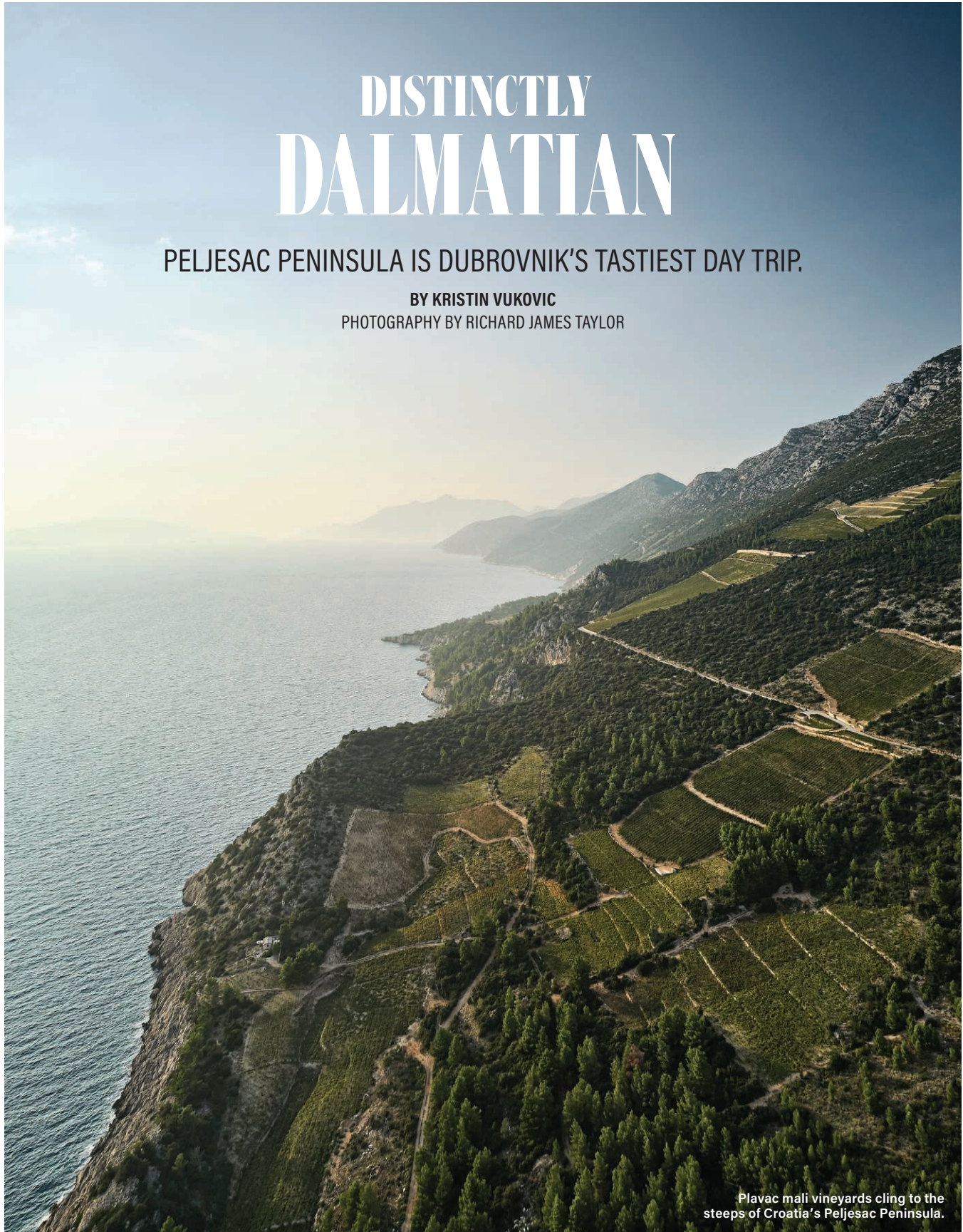


# DISTINCTLY DALMATIAN

PELJESAC PENINSULA IS DUBROVNIK'S TASTIEST DAY TRIP.

BY KRISTIN VUKOVIC

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD JAMES TAYLOR



Plavac mali vineyards cling to the  
steeps of Croatia's Peljesac Peninsula.





Oysters fresh from Mali Ston Bay and (inset) Saint Hills' faux orange dessert made with candied orange peel and white chocolate mousse.



**“YOU WANT TO EAT** oysters already?” asked my guide, Ivan Vukovic, shaking his head. It was 9 AM.

Our waiter at Konoba Baca in the town of Ston on Croatia’s Peljesac Peninsula, however, didn’t blink at my order. “*Naravno*,” he replied (“of course”), returning a few minutes later with a plate of freshly shucked European flats.

Farmed in Mali Ston Bay, a sheltered marine reserve, these Protected Designation of Origin oysters have a distinctive flavor that comes in part from the mineral-rich water of karst springs. Mixing with seawater, it produces bivalves with a briny minerality that lingers and awakens the senses. They’re delectable at any time of day, but I drew the line at breakfast wine – there would be plenty of winetasting to come.

About an hour’s drive north from Dubrovnik, Peljesac Peninsula is the perfect day excursion for wine and oyster aficionados. And now it’s more accessible than ever, thanks to the new Peljesac Bridge, opened in July 2022, which connects Dubrovnik and the southernmost region of Croatia with the rest of the country; previously, travelers were required to pass through a narrow strip of Bosnian coastline with border control. The island of Korcula is also easily accessible from Peljesac via a short ferry ride from the peninsula’s tip.

This famous Dalmatian Coast wine region provides ideal growing conditions for Croatia’s plavac mali grape,



## Dining

most likely an indigenous descendant of ancestral zinfandel and another old Croatian variety, dobričić. In the peninsula's premier Dingac wine-growing region, steep vineyards plummet into the Adriatic. Combine its specific terroir with more than 2,800 hours of annual sunshine, and you get peak plavac mali.

Aside from some of the region's best shellfish, Ston draws travelers for salt pans that date to Roman times and for its more than three miles of snaking walls constructed over centuries, beginning in 1334. Pre- or post-oysters, visitors can walk these fortifications connecting Ston and the village of Mali Ston to take in sweeping views of Mali Ston Bay, but Ivan and I had an appointment at Edivo, Croatia's first underwater winery, so ten half shells the better, we pressed on.

EDI BAJURIN AND Ivo Segovic's grandfathers both owned vineyards on Pelješac, so wine-making was in the Edivo

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founders' blood. Bajurin's idea for aging wine in amphorae was hatched after his sister gave him a gift basket for his birthday that contained a bottle of wine with a piece of an amphora on it. “Throughout history, people transported liquids in amphorae on wooden ships, and there are plenty of old sunken ones in the sea around Pelješac,”

said Bajurin, an avid diver who's found several broken pieces of amphorae on the seabed. “But it was only after my sister's gift that the idea was born to close the glass bottle in the amphora.” People were skeptical about the idea of an underwater winery. “Ivo's father said that everybody was laughing at us,” Bajurin recalls.

After aging for a year in Slavonian oak barrels, the plavac mali is bottled, encased in amphorae, and stored to continue aging 60 to 80 feet underwater for at least 550 days. The sea provides darkness and a constant temperature of 60 degrees, which are essential for developing the wine's dark-berry flavors and aromas. Visitors can pick up a Navis Mysterium amphora with a bottle of wine still encased in it – a natural work of art dotted with oyster shells, which attach themselves to the exterior during the aging process. “Every bottle is unique, shaped by the sea,” Bajurin said.

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"Harvesting" Edivo's underwater-aged wine and (right) Villa Korta Katarina.



A HALF HOUR up the peninsula, Ernest and Ivana Tolj's family-owned Saints Hills Winery earns international acclaim for its reds – all made from plavac mali grapes (the winery produces *Wine Enthusiast's* highest-rated Croatian exports). With rich plum and cherry notes and an earthy finish, vintages from its Sv. Lucia vineyard in Dingac showcase the varietal best. "There's no grape in the world that would function better in this crazy, sunny, stony, windy terroir," Ivana said. "It's Dalmatia in a bottle."

Saints Hills also wins praise with its restaurant, which requires an advance

reservation. Still, at lunch I was somewhat surprised to learn that a few diners had made the day trip from Split in central Dalmatia, which would have been unimaginable before the bridge opened. The seasonal three-course, wine-paired menu rotates weekly between "the Land" and "the Sea." Two highlights from my sea-focused lunch that riffed on traditional dishes: *brudet*, a Croatian fish stew, reimagined with squid and handcrafted *paccheri* pasta in a slow-cooked tomato and red wine sauce, and an orange-shaped dessert made with candied orange peel and

white chocolate mousse that celebrated traditional Dalmatian *arancini* (candied orange peels).

Travelers looking to spend more than a day exploring Peljesac can do no better than a suite at Villa Korta Katarina & Winery, located near the peninsula's tip in the town of Orebic – the passion project of Americans Lee and Penny Anderson, who traveled to postwar Croatia in 2001 to provide humanitarian aid to the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina and fell in love with Dalmatia and its wines. Situated near the shore on sprawling grounds, which include a swimming

## Dining

pool and a hot tub with a cascading waterfall, the villa is fit for royalty.

Korta Katarina can arrange a guided tour of its Dingac or Postup vineyards – some of the area’s steepest and rockiest – or the estate-grown zinfandel next to the villa and winery. As I toured the Dingac vineyard, the car stuttered on the steep uphill and I caught my

breath a few times. But the views really took my breath away: Surveying the determined vines clinging to precarious slopes, I understood why plavac mali reaches its potential here. “If the grapes suffer, it’s much better quality,” enologist Ante Cibilic told me.

Later, in Korta Katarina’s lavish tasting room, the five-course menu

featured a refreshing asparagus and spring onion gazpacho with scampi topped with potato chips. A sampling of the winery’s portfolio included Reuben’s Private Reserve, named after Lee Anderson’s father. It was a standout expression of plavac mali – as full-bodied, complex, and bold as Peljesac’s wild and rugged terroir.

## Prime Time Peljesac

**STAY** Antiques collected during the Andersons’ travels fill **Villa Korta Katarina & Winery**, lending distinct personalities to each of its eight suites overlooking the Adriatic and the nearby island of Korcula. *Doubles from \$2,075, including breakfast daily and private, one-way airport transfers to or from Dubrovnik or Split.*

**GO** Virtuoso travel advisors can work with **Leonidas Travel** to craft custom itineraries throughout Croatia and its Peljesac Peninsula. Active day-trip options from Dubrovnik include a day of cycling around Peljesac, with a stop in Ston and a visit to the family-run Milos Winery. After working up an appetite, take a boat to visit oyster and

mussel beds, then sample oysters directly from the sea and indulge in mussels *buzara*, a traditional preparation with olive oil, garlic, wine, fresh herbs, and breadcrumbs. *Departures: Any day through 2023; from \$950 for two.*

**Calvados Club’s** full-day culinary Peljesac excursion from Dubrovnik features a tour and winetasting at Milos Winery, which produces some of Croatia’s best organic wines; a private winetasting and lunch at Korta Katarina; and a stop at Skaramuca Winery, one of the peninsula’s top producers. The day concludes with a tour of Ston’s salt pans and city walls. *Departures: Any day through 2023; from \$1,885 for two.* ♥



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