



JUST ADD SALT

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Harvested by hand as they have been for centuries, the salt marshes of the eastern Adriatic feed a rich culinary offering, with “white gold” seasoning everything from the soil in ancient olive groves to **Croatia’s** award-winning cheeses

A cloud of dust billows in our wake as we crest a hill. The island of Pag, a grizzled finger of ashy karstic rock just off the northern coast of Dalmatia, stretches cinematically in front of us. A narrow ridge of land stretches out below: on one side, the mineral-blue sheen of the Adriatic’s Velebit Channel; on the other, a watery latticework of salt flats that make up Solana Pag.

Salt might be the most crucial agent of flavour we have on our tables today, but in days gone by it was the difference between being hungry or being fed. One of the pivotal developments in civilisation, its discovery as a food preservative during the early years of the Roman Republic elevated it from commodity to valuable currency – it was used to pay soldiers (hence the word “salary”), as well as exchanged for gold. Cut to centuries later, and the Venetian Empire – the whole economy of which was built on the salt trade – monopolised all saltworks along the Adriatic coast, including Solana Pag, which became responsible for more than 10 per cent of the empire’s entire economy.

Solana Pag is still Croatia’s largest sea salt producer, its salt certified by the EU as a protected designation of origin (PDO) product – a type of geographical indication aimed at preserving the origin of foodstuffs. Here, the bura, a powerful northeastern wind, the island’s barren landscape and its high number of annual sunny days combine to create a unique, slightly sweet-tasting salt. The microclimate is so singular that it’s led to the PDO status of Pag’s local cheese, Paški sir, too. Made using milk from the 40,000-odd sheep that graze on the land’s salt-sprinkled wild pastures (only robust herbs like sage, sea fennel and thyme are able to survive these harsh conditions), Paški sir is a local delicacy that has recently earned the island recognition on the global culinary stage. (In 2018, the cheese won Super Gold at the Global Cheese Awards, while the island’s biggest cheese producer, Sirana Gligora, won five awards at the UK’s 2021 Great Taste Awards.) ▶▶



“Our cheese is more than just food – it’s a taste of our land and part of our identity,” says Toni Herenda, a manager at Sirana Gligora, as he cradles a plate-sized wheel of it in his arms, before flipping it gently back into place on an ageing rack. “We literally treat it like a baby. My grandfather was a shepherd with a small Paški sir farm and my wife’s father is a producer, too, so cheese really is in my bones. It feels nice to do something that’s so connected to my family’s heritage.”

One thing is certain: this isn’t the kind of cheese you’d just chuck into a sandwich. At almost €100 per 2.6kg wheel, it’s something islanders share as a gift or savour for very special occasions, rather like single-malt whiskies in Scotland, port wine in Portugal or Wagyu beef in Japan. “We pay the highest price per litre of sheep’s milk anywhere in the world,” says Martina Pernar Škunca, another manager at the dairy. “It takes between 16 and 19 sheep to produce a 2kg wheel of cheese, so it’s a very low yield, which makes it all the more special.”

When the time does come to enjoy the delicacy, we’re told it’s best eaten with Drniški pršut – a traditional Dalmatian prosciutto that’s dry cured by the bura. “You won’t go to many homes in Croatia without being served a plate of cheese and pršut,” says Herenda, just as one is slid onto our table in the dairy’s upstairs tasting room.

Sure enough, the further inland we head, the more plates of cheese and pršut seem to appear around us. In Drniš, a small town south of Pag, we meet local farmer Ante Reljanović, who holds the record for the largest pršut in the world (at a hulking 22.5kg). We gather around his long wooden dining table and, as if on cue, a huge platter of honey-coloured cheese and dark, wafer-thin pršut is set down in front of us.

Describing the intricacies of the meat’s production, Reljanović tells us that he only uses local Dalmatian salt to cure the pršut. “It’s the only thing I trust,” he says, reeling off the health benefits of using natural salt. Asked how important pršut is to his family, he laughs: “I don’t even go to the doctor without bringing some! We usually eat it every day.” I can see why, as I relish its deep, nutty taste with a triangle of cheese, then reach instinctively back to the plate for seconds.

Back up the coast at Solana Nin, a similarly ancient saltworks to Solana Pag, harvesters have just laid down their tools. It’s 12pm, which signals the end of the working day. One of only two producers left in Croatia that still harvests all of its salt by hand, Solana Nin employs 20 field workers, who are out on the flats between 6am and 12pm, stopping at noon in order to avoid the afternoon heat. >>







“There’s no official school to teach our trade, so all our skills are passed down intergenerationally,” explains Sanja Stamenić, a manager at Solana Nin, as she runs a handful of salt through her fingers. “Most people who work here have learned the skills from their father or grandfather. Each and every grain we produce has been through someone’s hands. We harvest our product in exactly the same way the Romans did, with sun, wind and patience.”

The morning we arrive, it’s just rained. “It takes an average of 21 consecutive sunny days to produce one grain of salt. When it rains, we can’t harvest; we just start again,” shrugs Stamenić. Looking out across the empty, waterlogged marshes, I imagine the backbreaking work that’s just been lost to last night’s rain and marvel at her stoicism.

Back on Pag, we head to the island’s northern tip. Just when we think we can’t go any further, a sprawling grove of over 80,000 wild olive trees unfolds gently towards the sea before us. Covering more than 400 hectares of scrubland, the Gardens of Lun have been harvested by the local community since the 11th century. Protected by the island’s unusually salty soil against the usual viruses and bacteria that tend to kill olive trees over time, some of these trees are said to have been growing in the gardens for around 2,000 years.

“I’ve been harvesting olives here since I was a child,” Ivan Šanko, a sunny octogenarian, tells me proudly. “Most families in the village look after at least one tree, and every single tree in the grove has an owner.” He gestures broadly across the horizon. “Our family looks after 150 of them, and you can tell whose is whose from the markings on the bark. Our family’s trees all have a yellow line etched into them.”

Šanko points at a small scratch on the gnarled trunk of a tree, then taps its base with his foot. “These are my roots,” he adds. “These trees have been handed down through generations of my family for over two centuries. Every summer, my children and grandchildren come here and we spend a few days harvesting the olives together. It’s a family tradition – we always end up singing as we do it. It makes us all very happy.”





DO

SOLANA NIN

ILIRSKA CESTA 7,
23232 NIN
solananin.hr

First opened more than 1,500 years ago, Solana Nin is one of only two saltworks in Croatia to still harvest its produce by hand. Visit the on-site museum or join a saltworker experience to try your hand at harvesting for yourself.

SIRANA GLIGORA

FIGURICA 22A, 23251 KOLAN,
HRVATSKA
gligora.com

The mothership of local Paški sir cheese, Sirana Gligora is an award-winning, family-run dairy on Pag island. Take a tour of the factory floor, then enjoy a tasting of its famous cheeses, all paired with delicious local wines.

OLIVE GARDENS OF LUN

MASLINARSKA ZADRUGA LUN,
TOVARNELE 96D, 53294 LUN
olive-gardens.eu

Home to some of the most ancient olive trees in the world – many of which are over 2,000 years old – these gardens have been tended to by the community for centuries, and can be explored via electric buggy on a group tour.

A TASTE OF

NORTH DALMATIA

EAT

KONOBA BOBA

BUTINA 22, 22243 MURTER
konobaboba.hr

Fusing the bounty of North Dalmatia's traditional, seasonal ingredients with a contemporary approach to Croatian cuisine, this indoor-outdoor seafood restaurant offers three or five courses, as well as a top-notch tasting menu curated daily by chef Vjeko Bašić.

AGROTURIZAM KRISTIJAN

ROŠKI SLAP-NP KRKA,
22320 BOGATIĆ

Splash your feet in the spray as you feast on cheese and pršut at this welcoming tavern set in the mouth of a waterfall. Housed in an old mill situated within Krka National Park, the small restaurant draws in crowds for its local delicacies and strong cherry liqueur.

PELEGRINI

JURJA DALMATINCA 1, 22000 ŠIBENIK
pelegrini.hr

A showcase of historic Šibenik's rich gastronomic heritage, influenced by both Venetian and Ottoman flavours, this ambitious restaurant from award-winning chef Rudolf Štefan is located in an ancient palace that offers some of the finest harbour views in town.