Slovenske Gorice,
the world of wine and viticulture

WINE PRESS
AND FLAX BARN IN DESTRNIK

Slovenske Gorice

As the name (Slovene Wine Hills) indicates, this is a world of wine and viticulture. The land reflects the cultural dimensions of wine and viticulture in life as part of the community of wine-growing hills. As a perception, wine marks the identity of these wine--growing places in its customs, songs, culture, painting, applied art, religious expression from birth to death, and the wine-growing festival on Saint Martin's Day.

Destrnik

www.destrnik.si
Janežovski Vrh 42
2253 Destrnik
+386 (0)2 761 92 50

The Press

In Slovenske Gorice, the term press refers to two things. On one hand, it is a wine press, a device used to press grapes, or a small building that stands in a vineyard and has a cellar, a wine press and a small room on the top storey.

The landscape

Hills and hills, / valleys in between, / meadows, forests / orchards and fields, / hills, hills, hills. Old wine cellars / along steep slopes, / dark taverns, / thatched presses / and white brick buildings.

Stranko Janežič

Slovenske gorice is a picturesque, slightly undulating hilly landscape in the northeast of Slovenia, dotted by peaks and the plains below them. Its valleys are interspersed with meandering streams and roads, along which farmsteads have stood for centuries. Farms are surrounded by fields, pastures and meadows. Shady slopes are covered by forests, while sunny slopes are covered by orchards and vineyards.

The current, heavily changed landscape of Slovenske gorice once had a special feature. Wine cellars, wine presses, wine cottages and vinedresser's houses, as well as homesteads of small farmers and cottagers, once lined ridge roads. To make work in vineyards easier, the master built a small building on his land, which housed a press, a storage room for tools, a small room where food was prepared when doing major work, digging, cutting, and harvesting. During major works, when digging or racking wine, the »tired« master could also spend the night there.

THE PRESS – THE BUILDING

The building of the press is wooden, mostly small and narrow, plastered and whitewashed, covered with a thatched roof. The simplest were wooden cellars, wine cottages, built using logs, with just a ground storey or with an additional storey.

The cellar was built from stone, vaulted inside, with a small opening for ventilation.

The building of the press serves a dual function. The top storey of the building houses the press, a room for tools and a small room, while the bottom storey houses a wine cellar.

Eaves were constructed over the entrance to the cellar. The cellar door was made of hard, solid wood, with strong fittings and a large lock and key, which was kept by the master of the house. The press was well protected, as miscreants would occasionally break into the cellar, drink the wine and cause damage.

The floor in the cellar was compacted earth, ensuring low temperatures and sufficient moisture in the cellar at all times. A wooden structure made of strong beams placed on the ground was used as the base for wooden barrels.

The master always kept some equipment and tools in the cellar: fermentation bung, sulphur strips, a candle attached to metal wires, which was used to light the barrel and check its cleanliness, wax to seal the wine barrel bunghole, a large wooden container with a built-in funnel for filling barrels, siphon (made from glass or a pumpkin, used to draw wine from barrels), funnel, hose, pumps, chains for cleaning barrels, replacement barrel hoops, pipes, decanters, glasses, bottles, large bottles in wicker baskets, small barrels and other items.

The history of grape pressing is as old as the history of wine itself. The oldest wine press is probably the foot or hand, with which man trampled and crushed grapes to squeeze grape must out of them, placed it in containers, where it fermented and became wine. Between 2007 and 2010, Armenian archaeologists in collaboration with Irish and American archaeologists in a cave complex known as Areni-1 in the Vayots Dzor province found the oldest wine press, dating back 6100 years.

A Roman relief from the 1st century AD shows that grape treading was still widely used as a means of pressing wine grapes during Roman times.

Preserved press with basket from the 16th century

However, vintners were not satisfied with trampling grapes with their feet and were looking for additional alternative solutions to better squeeze and produce more must from grapes and to get a better quality of wine.

Hieroglyphs and pictures of grape pressing in ancient Egypt show that as early as the 18th Dynasty (c. 1550–1292 BC) a kind of »linen sack« was used for pressing. Crushed grapes, stalks and pomace were placed in a bag, which was tied and tightly compressed with a large screw press. References in the Bible indicate that all ancient cultures knew the press.

The press named torcular, torculum in Latin (in Istria, torkla – olive oil press) was initially a simple device with a heavy stone, which was lifted with a large trunk using the principle of the lever. A basket (fiscina) with grape pomace was placed under the stone.

In his work De agri cultura (c. 160 BC), the Roman writer Cato the Elder described in detail the operation of the early Roman rock press with the lever. It was placed on a raised platform with a flat bottom, which was slightly tilted towards the outlet, from where the must flowed. The press had a large horizontal beam, under which the grapes were placed. Two vertical fixtures held the beam up in the front. The pressure was applied by a windlass that was affixed by a metal rope to the front of the beam and a user winding down that end. Another rope was wound around the »grape cake« to keep it in place.

In his work Naturalis Historia (c. 77 AD), Pliny the Elder (23/24, † 79) described a Greek-style press, where the windlass was replaced by a vertical screw that included a counterweight to increase pressure.

Despite the frequent descriptions of presses, they were not used very often and were quite rare. The device was large and expensive, and most Roman farmers could not have afforded it without the help of patricians. Instead, Roman farms more often used tanks or troughs where grapes were tread upon.

In his work De re rustica, Varro also described a type of wine known as lorca. This wine was produced by left over grape skins being soaked in water, then pressed again, thereby producing lorca, which was served to slaves and farm workers. This drink was also known in Slovenia, but was called pikola.

Wein press in Destrnik

Old roman press from 1th century (Foto: International Wine Review)

Medieval presses in the Eberbach monastery (Foto: Flickr)

By the 2nd century AD, the Romans began using the so--called »screw press«, which is the predecessor of the medieval basket press. The press included a large and strong beam with a hole cut out of the middle, with a screw fitted through. A large stone was attached to the base of the beam. Six to eight workers (usually slaves) would be divided on either side of the screw. The workers would walk clockwise, turning the screw, as the stone descended upon the grapes, providing added pressure with each turn. A hole at the bottom of the vat allowed the must to drain out into buckets or containers, from where it was usually moved by bucket into amphorae or barrels for fermentation.

In the Middle Ages, the press achieved greater technological advancement in winemaking, particularly in some religious orders. On 1 September 1351, Jans, the parish priest of Ptuj and vidame of Lipnica, bought a press from Valbno for the church of Ptuj in Pivska ulica in Ptuj, where the parish of Ptuj still has its vineyard on the castle hill.

The wooden press had a large cylindrical basket made of wooden planks connected at the top by a metal hoop and a heavy horizontal plate. After the grapes were loaded into the basket, the plate pressed down and the must drained between the slots into a vat or container.

Technological development in the 19th century also brought a revolution in the field of grape-pressing technology. The manual basket press gave way to the modern press, powered by a steam engine, which increased the efficiency of pressing. Modern hydraulic presses are in use today.

Grape harvest

Winegrowers and their whole families spent at least a week preparing for the harvest. They had to wash, clean and soak the oak barrels, vats, pails, grape baskets, buckets and more. Above all, they had to clean and prepare the press. They had to thoroughly soak the basin and ropes holding the grapes, as they had dried out during the year.

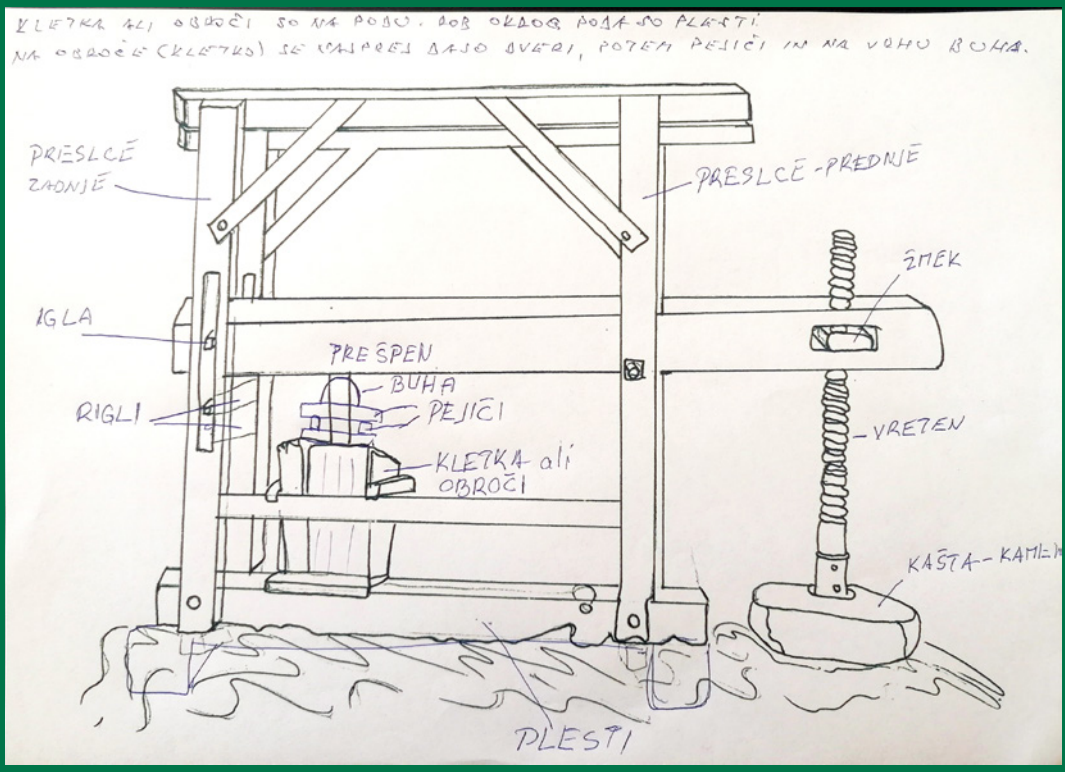
During the harvest, this great holiday, no housewife would dare give her neighbours and grape-pickers cause for gossip, so she prepared the best things available in the household. The aromas wafted all round, they baked white bread, potica and other goodies. Before the harvest, they slaughtered a young pig, a turkey, a hen or a chicken. Winegrowers filled the mortars with gunpowder, placed them on the top of the vineyard and announced the beginning of the harvest by setting them off.

Once all grape-pickers had gathered and had been served brandy and a piece of potica, the master arranged them throughout the vineyard. They picked grapes from the bottom up, row by row, all the way to the end of the vineyard.

Grapes were carried from the vineyards by so-called putarji using large grape baskets (puta). These were young, strong men who also kept an eye out around the vineyards, making sure that the harvest »was fair«, as the grapes yield the must and every grape counts.

These men carried special sticks (rovaš), on which they cut lines with a pocketknife to indicate how many baskets they brought to the tub in front of the press. For every tenth basket, they cut an X into the stick. The stick also served as support when walking uphill.

The grape-pickers cut grapes with special small pocketknives and filled their buckets. When their bucket was full, they called putarji: »PUTA« – this was always a time for some jokes, and putarji ensured good spirits with a joke of their own.



Picture of the press with descriptions of individual parts

Pressing started soon after lunch. Before there were mills for grinding grapes, the grapes had to be crushed by treading upon them first. Putarji washed their feet in a water trough and tread upon grapes barefoot. One continued treading, while another tossed softened grapes with a wooden shovel onto a pile to create a pyramidal grape cake, which they wrapped around in hoops to form a basket.

A special feature of wine-pressing in Slovenske gorice and Haloze is that the pressers formed the basket using 16 to 18 wooden hoops of birch or hazel. The number of hoops on the basket depended on the size of the press basin. The first hoop was the largest, and the last was the smallest. The person loading the basket had to estimate the amount of gathered grapes, so that he used a large enough first hoop. He set this hoop on the ground under the beam and determined the centre. The basket was loaded up high under the beam. The sweet must flowed between the hoops into the vat under the basin.

Afterwards, they placed heavy oaken logs on top of the basket, and on top of it a small log with a ridge on top, exactly in the middle under the beam. One of the pressers stayed on the basin, while two went to turn the windlass. Using the windlass, the beam was raised to the highest possible point, so that the beam could be locked from the back on the upper side into the fulcrum with wooden blocks. In front, they removed the wooden block from the fulcrum and started pressing. Then the pressers started turning the windlass in the other direction. The heavy beam lowered and pressed on the basket, causing the must to flow out in all directions. Another person had to watch out for the basket under the basis, through which the must filtered into the vat. It collected grapes, which had to be repeatedly shaken back to the basin. The first time they could not hang the stone weights; once the beam was in a horizontal position, they had to fetch the wooden block. The beam was raised again in the front by turning the windlass, and fixed at the back with one or two wooden blocks, then slowly turned again the other way to hang the stone weights, affixing a pole somewhere on the side so that the windlass would not unwind, which was very dangerous when the stone weight was hanging high. The old four-sided weights were made of stone on a wooden frame.

Down in the wine cellar, the master already had everything prepared for barrelling the must. They had already rinsed the barrels one more time, placed them on wooden support beams, added sulphur, plugged the barrels and attached the large wooden container with a built-in funnel. Then they started pouring the must into oaken barrels. The must was gathered from the vat under the basin, scooped up with a bucket or pail, carried to the cellar and poured into a barrel through the container with a built-in funnel. When the first barrel was filled for fermentation, the work continued until all the grapes were on the basin and the vats were empty.

Pressing was difficult work, but it was accompanied by an accordion player and a song.

The stone weights on the press slowly lowered and the pressers had to re-stack the grapes for the first time. They took apart the basket, took out some hoops, and placed these half-pressed grapes back into the basket and squeezed out the remaining must. During the second re-stack, the grapes were almost dry, but they re-stacked for the third time, as not a single drop was allowed to go to waste. »What's the sugar content of must?« the master would say, weighing it with a hydrometer for must (nowadays a refractometer) to determine its sugar content.

When the last barrel was filled for fermentation, a fermentation bung was attached to the wine barrel bunghole. Water was poured into the lower part of the fermentation bung, and a lid was placed on the open tube in the middle. When the must started fermenting after a few days, air could escape from under the lid of the fermentation bung, bubbling and making strange sounds. Each barrel produced a different sound: it was said that the must is talking. When the pressers finished their work, they were served a good dinner. In the past, grape-pickers were not paid in Slovenske gorice. The very next day, they had to go help their neighbours, relatives or friends pick grapes.

Not every vineyard had its own press; many vintners used a single press one after another. Thus, on the day after the harvest, the first vintner had to clear the wine press by nine o'clock.

THE FLAX BARN

Flax or linseed is one of the oldest cultivated plants. It grows to about 60 centimetres and has beautiful blue flowers. It was already known in the New Stone Age or Neolithic, but is nowadays grown all over the world, mostly in the Bela krajina region in Slovenia, primarily for the production of linen, while flax seed are used as medicine. In the past, there was no larger farm in Slovenske gorice that did not have its own flax barn (in colloquial Slovene, len [flax] – lenišnica [flax barn]). It was used for drying flax and hemp, from which flax-dressers produced flax fibres.

Flax fibres have always been subject to an urbarium-based tithe in Slovenske gorice. It was considered a small house tax and was calculated in pounds or in the number of bushels.

The flax barn was generally a simple, auxiliary wooden building, always placed some distance from the house and outbuildings due to the risk of fire. The multi-purpose building, where a wooden thresher for grains and a large sieve were stored in addition to a large flax breaker, various combs and wooden shovels, was also used for drying apples, pears and slices of other fruit.

The Destrnik Flax Barn is located in the middle of Destrnik, next to the press. In the flax barn, you can view the tools: breaker, flax scutcher, heckles, drying racks, combs for combing flax fibres and other accessories. When the master sowed flax, he knew whether he would need it for oil, linen or rope, as he had sowed flax for oil in September, and flax for yarn between March and April.

Stalk of ripe flax is golden yellow in autumn, and is pulled from the field together with its roots. This is followed by drying or retting, as the flax must be prepared for processing. As autumn nights are quite dewy in Slovenia, flax was spread over the field, allowing its hard woody tissue to ret because of dew and start to break. When the stalks of flax were picked from the field, they were shaken and put in the flax barn, where they were hung and dried.

Flax dressing (breaking, scutching and heckling) is used to remove the straw and woody stems from flax fibres. The tool used for breaking flax was a long wooden groove with a special wooden hammer (blade). Small bundles of flax were placed in the groove of the breaker and the hammer was used to break up the straw of the flax into shorter segments. When flax was cleaned by breaking and scutching, flax fibres were pulled through large heckling combs, or heckles, and the flax fibres were ready for spinning into yarn.

Spinsters wound spin the fibres on the spindle of the spinning wheel. During winter months, women would visit each other for spinning yard; at such gatherings, they would use their saliva as the binder to make yarn from flax fibres.

According to the guild rules of the Ptuj weaving guild from 1765, which also included the territory of the parish of Sv. Urban, a rural weaver was allowed to have a maximum of three looms. Craftsmen were not allowed to go from house to house offering their linen, or go from door to door looking for yarn themselves. Every master who prepared yarn at their home had to take it to a craftsman himself, ordering canvas of specific width and thread count. Linen woven on domestic looms produced a yellowish hard linen. Woven linen had to be bleached and softened before it could be used to make clothing, bedding, sheets, canvas, tablecloths, curtains and cloths.

Woven linen was bleached by washing and drying it in the sun, which changed the dark, yellowish colour of linen to white after repeated washing.

Flax was also used for making ropes, which were made by ropers.

At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, there were still several ropers in Ptuj. Ropes were an important part of equipment on every farm.

Rope-making devices varied, but their basic functions were the same, specifically braiding flax (hemp) fibres into yarns, yarns into strands, and strands into ropes. To make ropes with a hand-powered wooden device, a roper needed some additional rope-making tools, such as a mobile rope-making cart, hooks and a finishing machine, which was used to stop the rope from unravelling or to make a loop at the end of the rope.

PROGRAM RAZVOJA PODEŽELJA

Evropski kmetijski sklad za razvoj podeželja: Evropa investira v podeželje

The publication is issued as part of the project
Nadstrešnica za prešo

Text:
Marija Hernja Masten

Photo:
Rado Škrjanec, arhiv občine Destrnik

Design and print:
Vejica, Rado Škrjanec, s. p.
500 kosov