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Hvar Wine Competition Spotlights the Island’s Growing Trade Ambitions

The Adriatic island is using its native grapes and heritage landscape to court buyers seeking distinctive premium wines

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HVAR, Croatia — On the Adriatic island of Hvar, a wine competition scheduled for late May is drawing attention for reasons that go beyond tasting rooms and medals. Organizers of the 15th Balkans International Wine Competition say the event will bring producers, buyers and judges to an island long known for tourism, but increasingly viewed as a serious wine destination with commercial potential.

The competition, set for May 27-29, comes as demand for organic and low-intervention wines continues to rise across Europe and other major markets. Industry observers say that shift has helped place regions with strong local identities, limited production and clear links to land and tradition in a stronger position than many larger, more familiar wine regions. Hvar, with its indigenous grapes, coastal climate and centuries of viticulture, has become one of those places.

The island’s appeal rests in part on its history. The Stari Grad Plain, a UNESCO World Heritage site, has been farmed continuously since ancient Greek times and remains one of the clearest examples of long-term agricultural continuity in the Mediterranean. That landscape has become central to how Hvar presents itself to visitors and to the wine trade: not as a mass-market resort alone, but as a place where heritage and production are closely tied.

Local producers have built much of that reputation around native varieties such as Plavac Mali and Bogdanuša. Those grapes are increasingly important in a market where buyers are looking for wines that can be linked to a specific place and story. In Croatia, wine exports remain modest compared with larger European producers, but premium segments have shown steady growth, especially in EU markets where sommeliers and specialty importers are seeking bottles that stand apart from widely planted international varieties.

Tourism data also helps explain why Hvar is attracting more trade attention. The island receives more than 500,000 visitors a year, according to local estimates, and a growing share of those travelers are coming for food and wine rather than only beaches and nightlife. That change has encouraged hotels, restaurants and wineries to position Hvar as a destination for higher-spending visitors who want tastings, vineyard visits and direct contact with producers.

The Balkans International Wine Competition is expected to reinforce that trend by bringing industry professionals into the island’s vineyards rather than into a conventional conference hall. Organizers say the setting is part of the message: that wine quality should be judged alongside the land where it is grown. For producers from Croatia and neighboring Balkan countries, the event offers a chance to present wines in

a setting that highlights regional identity at a time when provenance carries more weight in pricing and marketing.

The timing matters as well. Global wine consumption has been under pressure in many markets, while interest in premium bottles tied to authenticity has remained stronger. That has created room for smaller regions to compete on value rather than volume. On Hvar, where vineyard parcels are limited and production is relatively small, that model fits the landscape.

For local businesses, the competition could bring more than short-term traffic. It may help strengthen Hvar’s position in the Mediterranean wine trade at a moment when buyers are looking beyond established names. The island’s wineries are betting that history, geography and native grapes can do what scale cannot: give them an edge in a crowded market.