



HUM, THE TOWN OF “BISKA”

In Istria's interior, an herbalist-priest invents
medicinal *rakija* (brandy)

Welcome to Hum, a town that based on its size (100m X 30m) and population (17), lays claim to being the world's smallest. It is a picturesque town that, once a year, on the second Sunday in June, elects its *župan* (mayor). This is truly Croatia or, to put it better, the heartland of Istria. In antiquity called "Castrum," Hum was by the Middle Ages promoted to the status of a town (with its own walls, entrance gate, castle, cathedral, belfry, loggia, textile shop and hospital), set on a promontory that still dominates the Mirna River valley, also known as the Valley of Truffles due to the abundance of that grey gold, known scientifically as *Tuber Magnatum Pico*.

The first documents that mention Hum date to the 11th Century, a period in which *Glagoljica* (the Glagolitic alphabet) was used. The missionaries Cyril and Methodius invented this archaic Slavic alphabet for the purpose of translating the Holy Bible and other sacred texts into the local tongue. In 1102, the Patriarchy of Aquileia ceded Hum to Ulrich the Second, and the appellation *Castrum Cholm* was used in that document for the first time. This marked the official start of the history of this Hum which, surrounded by walls, has endured for an entire millennium, despite raids and attacks, especially during the war with the Uskoks, who destroyed the castle during the 17th Century, but which was afterwards rebuilt.

Today the town can be reached from Buzet, passing by the *Allee of the Glagolitics*, a pathway alongside which a series of stone sculptures is arranged evoking the ancient, mysterious Glagolitic alphabet, which gave this miniature town its claim to fame.



But besides being the cradle of the Glagolitic alphabet, Hum has gained international recognition in recent years thanks to the *Festival of Rakija* (brandy), publicized by the Istrian writer and poet Drago Orlić to help revive crafts associated with distillation of spirits. For example, Hum is the birthplace of *Biska*, an elixir made from mistletoe, wine-marc and aromatic herbs. Mistletoe was a cult plant of the ancient Celtic tribes living in this area. And that custom came to us thanks to an herbalist-priest named Josip Vidov, who preserved its recipe and transmitted it to his descendants.

Today we can taste it in its original form at the *Humska Konoba* (typical Istrian tavern) in Hum, together with other aromatic brandies such as *ruta*, a brandy made from nettle, juniper, sage, lemon balm, spruce, lime, spices, liquorice, various herbs and fruit. Among 162 submitted entries, the international jury of the *Festival of Rakija* (brandy), subtitled *Domaća Rakija je Naša Medižija - Homemade Brandy is Our Medicine*, this year honored the *Biska* produced by Elvis Visintin from Pazin, who also beat his opponents in the category of single-variety brandies, with his *lozovača* (grape brandy) made from Muscat grapes.





The winners in the other categories were: Felice Berljafa (for his *ruta* brandy), the Perčić family (for a distilled spirit made from spruce), Franko Vranić (plum brandy), Darko Koren (a brandy made from forest fruits), Igor Starić (a distilled spirit made from sour-cherries) and Marčelo Melon (for his *medenica* – a honey-based brandy).

With regard to international distillates, the following brandies won prizes: *Teroldego* produced by Stefano Fedrizzi from Toss di Ton in the Italian region of Trentino-Alto Adige; a vintage brandy *Koralis* from the distillery Bertagnolli (from Mezzolombardo); and, the brandy *Uva d'autunno* (*Autumn grape*) produced by Casimiro Poli (from Santa Massenza), which took the prize for best label design. Last but not least, Arrigo Pisoni, the “granddaddy” of distillers in Trentino-Alto Adige, was declared a *Knight of Istrian Brandy*.



A special section of this festival is dedicated to poetry that deals with brandy and rural folkways. There is a likable (and funny) poem dedicated to home-made brandy written by Drago Orlić, which goes like this: “*Brandy is the medicine whose drops warm our hearts. But I still don’t know what warms more -- brandy or the skirt of Lady Maria.*” Previously we mentioned *Humska Konoba* (tel. +385 (0) 52 660005), a typical Istrian tavern in Hum.

Besides Biska brandy, gourmets can sample at the Humska Konoba typical specialities from the interior of Istria: the legendary Istrian *supa* made from flavoured wine, *maneštra* made of *bobići* (young corn), *fuži* (typical Istrian pasta) with a sauce made of meat, home made sausages with sauerkraut, Istrian prosciutto, sheep cheese with home made bread, and *nedeва* – a local speciality made from bread crumbs, parmesan cheese, parsley, butter and eggs; this dish is usually served with boiled meat and seasonal vegetables.

But take note: the Humska Konoba is closed in January and February, closed on Mondays during Spring, but is open every day in the summer. Also worth a visit is the nearby village of Kotle, which has its own Istrian konoba. Kotle is also widely known for its water mill and waterfalls that are the source of the river Mirna.

