

# City OF A HUNDRED SPIRES

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Good morning  
Prague. The dome of  
St. Nicholas church  
occupies the foreground.

**EXPLORING WINE AND FOOD IN WHAT HAS  
PREDOMINANTLY BEEN A BEER CULTURE, ELSIE PELLIS  
EXPLORES ALL THE REASONS TO VISIT THIS FASCINATING  
CITY; A JEWEL WITHIN THE HEART OF CENTRAL EUROPE.**

In the late afternoon sun the city of Prague has a golden glow as if timelessly caught in amber. The Czech Republic truly lies in the heart of Europe and people here feel quite strongly about their central European identity with little attachment to Eastern Europe. Historically it has been a centre of culture, wealth and learning in Central Europe and now has 10-million people with around 1.2-million living in Prague. The very position in the middle of Europe often placed it quite innocently in the path of conquering soldiers and warlords on their quest for lands and riches. The beauty and culture of the city has attracted royalty, artists, musicians and writers throughout its often difficult history, creating fascinating layers that would take a lifetime to uncover.

The city hugs the banks of the Vltava river and its beautifully preserved historical core – dating back to the 14th century – is on the Unesco World Heritage list. It is often called the ‘golden city or the city of a hundred spires’ and architectural styles range from the Renaissance and Baroque right up to the art nouveau and cubist styles of the 20th century. Some famous spires are those of the 10th century Vyšehrad, the Gothic towers of Týn Church, the monumental Baroque dome of St. Nicholas Church and the imposing Prague Castle enclosing St Vitus Cathedral. Wandering down cobblestone pavements and twisting narrow lanes, is like stepping into a fairy tale, complete with castles, turrets, ghosts and dungeons. Within easy reach of Prague also lies many breathtaking castles such as the 14th century Karlštejn and Konopiště, which was the last residence of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria before his assassination in Sarajevo, triggering World War I.

### **A culture of art and history**

Music and poetry flows easily from the Czech soul with superb live music around every corner. The revered Czech composer Bedřich Smetana’s beautiful tone poem, called *Má Vlast* (My Country), celebrates the Vltava river with the second work in the cycle; called *The Moldau* (German for Vltava). This beautiful music is as much part of Czech consciousness as the mighty river itself, which gives an amazing energy to the city, along with many graceful bridges spanning its width. The historic Charles Bridge, started in 1357, connects the Old Town and Malá Strana. It is almost never free of tourists, buskers and street artists. The best time for a spectacular walk across is early morning or late at night, when there is not a soul around except the spirits of knights of yore clattering by on their white horses and the statues keeping vigil.



The historical clock in Prague's Old Town Square, lovingly restored.

Petr Parléř was the architect and some of his other works include St. Vitus Cathedral at the vast Prague Castle. Towering above the city, it is said to be the largest castle area in the world with many magnificent buildings covering more than seven hectares. It takes time to absorb its rich history, going back to around the 9th century. Within the castle precinct also lies the Lobkowitz Palace which was restored to the family in 2002, with its beautiful art and precious collection of original musical instruments and scores by Beethoven, Mozart and others.

The Old Town Square feels suspended in time, surrounded by many medieval buildings. The beautifully restored 15<sup>th</sup> century Astronomical Clock brings out a display of the 12 Apostles as it chimes the hour.

### Dining and wining in Prague...

There are more than 3 000 restaurants and pubs in Prague and the locals love making an evening of it. Many of the restaurants serve traditional Czech country cuisine that reflects some German and Austrian influence. It can be tasty but rich and heavy, with pork dishes adorned with dumplings helping to fend off winter temperatures of -20 degrees Celsius. Thick soups, creative potato dishes, wild mushrooms, duck, pork and game abound with *Svíčková*, a slow roasted beef sirloin in a vegetable and sour cream sauce, surely the one dish worth coming home for from anywhere in the world! Cabbage in many forms is often the accompaniment. Potatoes are superb and flavourful, making dishes such as *bramborová polévka*

(potato soup) and at Christmas time it is made into a colourful potato salad served with carp or crumbed schnitzel of pork or chicken. The traditional carp (*kapr*), eaten on Christmas Eve is sold, swimming in large porta- pools on pavements, a few days before.

Bread and sweet baking is a joy to behold and their jewel-like cakes and biscuits, legendary – these are often brimming with walnuts. An abundance of fresh walnuts and the most delicious walnut oil is one of the delights of eating and cooking in Prague. Crepes, called *palačinky*, served with jam or the scrumptious *Medovník*, which is a honey cake as well as the fragrant apple strudel (*jablečný závin*) are some of the traditional deserts. As everywhere in the world international cuisine with a local slant is served in the fine dining / gourmet restaurants.

The quality of restaurant wine lists vary vastly with some gourmand destinations such as *La Degustation Bohême Bourgeoise* employing a sommelier able to explain their excellent international offering, while some pubs will only have a few wines of dubious origin making one of their delicious beers a safer choice. Wines at the top end of the market are expensive and at the cheaper end quality can be very low. Wines are often delivered in 50 litre kegs and sold on tap. The younger generation of Czechs are keen to experiment and try new wines while most of the older generation remain loyal to local wines. Mid-priced premium imports are growing in popularity. Seventy percent of wines consumed is imported and several South African brands are represented such as *Delheim*, *Spier*, *Kaapzicht*, *Klein Constantia* and others. *Phant* (for elephant), is a South African

brand made by the House of Wine exclusively for Prague, and is represented in more than 600 restaurants and pubs spreading a positive message widely. Excellent quality, price, ripe fruit, integrated acidity and balance are some of the reasons why these wines are gaining popularity.

## Klein Constantia

In 2011 the Czech billionaire, Zdeněk Bakala acquired a 50% share of the historic Klein Constantia with the UK banker, Charles Harman. This brought renewed awareness of South African wines in some Czech circles. The partners are not absentee landlords but visit regularly, keeping a finger on the pulse of exciting developments at this iconic property.

The country has a long history of vine growing and wine-making. The thirsty Romans brought vines and planted vineyards as far back as 276 AD with the revered Emperor Charles IV encouraging good vineyard practice as far back as 1358 (the following is quoted from a fascinating historical document: 'We, of our own free will and in our unending kindness and with the help of God, in order to improve the present state of our kingdom and all its citizens, decree: The planting of vineyards on all lands facing noon in a distance of three miles from Prague. Whosoever is the owner of such a slope or site is ordered to commence vineyard planting within 14 days of the publication of this privilege. Whosoever does not wish or is unable to plant vineyards is obliged to pass the property on to a person designated by the burgomaster. Those persons who plant vineyards are, from the day the planting commences, to be exempt from all taxes, dues and tithes for a period of twelve years. Beginning with the 13th year it will be incumbent upon the vineyard holder to surrender to the landlord a tithe payment and to the king from each vineyard a half-tub (30.5 litres) annually. All vineyards have to be of an equal size of 16 rows, (i.e. 75.6 metres) in length and 8 rows (i.e. 37.8 metres) wide (one vineyard total surface area is equivalent to 2,865 square metres). All vineyards planted in the year 1358 will be declared forever free of 'ungelt' (customs duties) and all other land taxes. It is forbidden to all persons, whether high-born or low, to damage the vineyards. Any person found causing damage to the vineyards or their vines, whether on horse or on foot or making a way through the vineyards, will have his right hand cut off unless he pays a ransom of 20 'stacks' of Bohemian Groschen. Whomsoever is seized during the night

## CATEGORIES FOR STILL WINES IN CZECH REPUBLIC

The abbreviation '°NM' refers to the degree of the Czecho-Slovak Normalised Must-Weight Scale. One degree NM stands for one kilogram of natural sugar in 100 litres of grape must.

**TABLE WINE** - the lowest wine category.

**COUNTRY WINE** - May only be produced from grapes grown within the country. Must-weight levels has to be 14 °NM.

**QUALITY WINE** - Must-weight levels at minimum 15 °NM. Wine must fulfil quality requirements.

**QUALITY WINE WITH SPECIAL ATTRIBUTES** -The grapes must come from a single wine sub-region. Chaptalisation not permitted. Individual sub-categories are:

**KABINET WINES** - Must-weight levels have to reach 19-21 ° NM. Usually light, dry, easy-drinking wines.

**LATE HARVEST** - Must-weight levels at 21-24 °NM. Full-bodied wines with high extract, dry or semi-dry.

**SPECIAL SELECTION OF GRAPES/BUNCHES** - Must-weight levels of 24-27 °NM at harvest. Wines are full-bodied with higher extract and alcohol, sometimes with higher residual sugar levels.

**SPECIAL SELECTION OF BERRIES** – Wines from selected berries, ripened very long on the vine, with must-weight levels of at least 27 °NM. Wines are very full-bodied with high extract, semi-sweet or sweet.

**SPECIAL SELECTION OF BOTRYTIS-AFFECTED BERRIES** – Minimum 32 °NM must-weight. Full-bodied & sweet.

**ICE WINE** - Opulent, rich, very sweet and rare.

**STRAW WINE** - Grapes dried on straw or reed beds. Lusciously sweet and expensive.

will forfeit his head and his property will be declared confiscate by the Burgomaster. Should the thief be killed during his intrusion, then his killer will forfeit no greater sum than two hellers which he shall place upon the body of the dead man. Any disputes arising will be judged by the Old Town Council of Prague.'

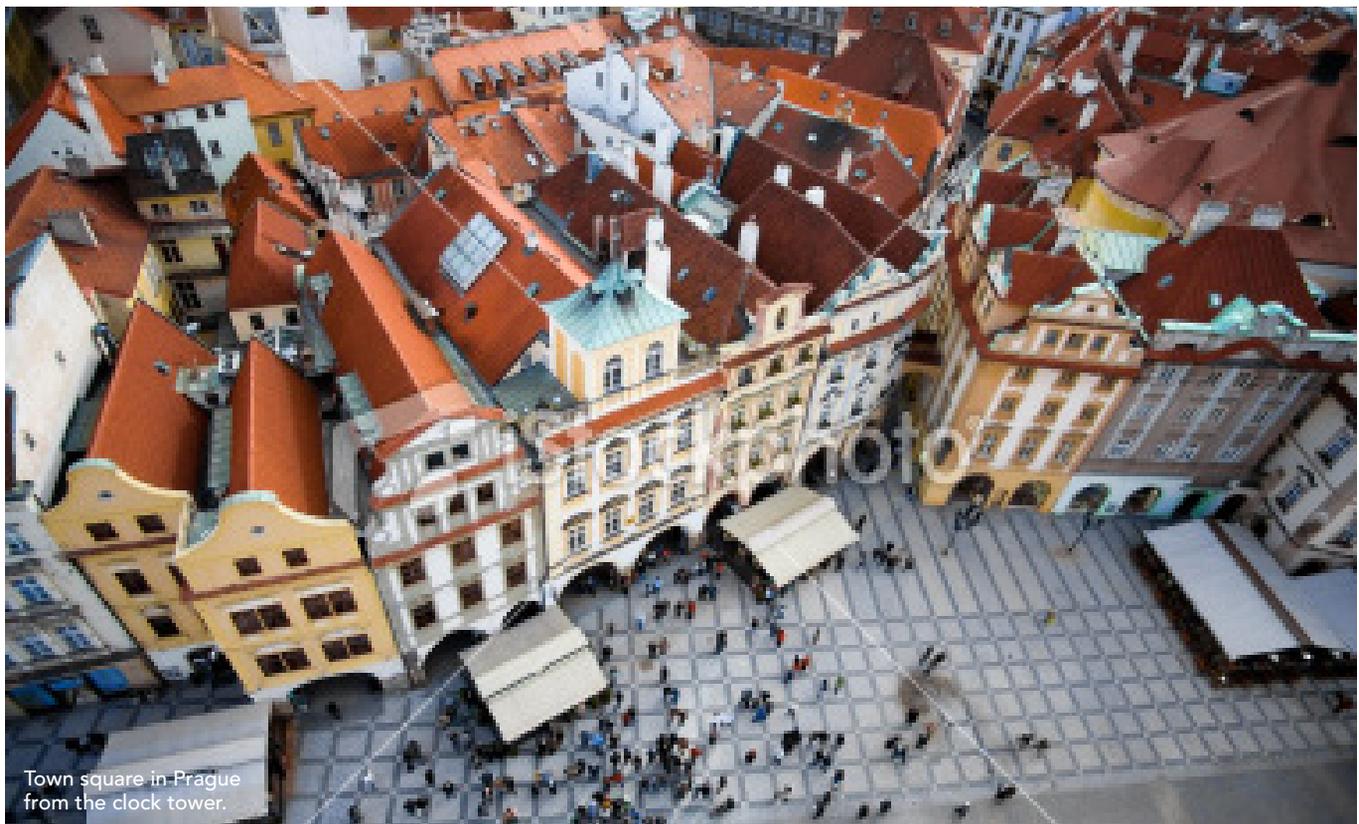
## The vineyards

There are still remnants of vineyards left in the city of Prague and many street names refer to vineyards now long gone. Although the Czech nation continues to be the world's largest consumers of beer (160 litres per capita) wine consumption is steadily on the increase (about 20 litres per capita presently) with quality awareness and confidence slowly gaining ground. The general preference is for light, aromatic whites and medium bodied reds with little – if any – wood influence detectable.

Prague lies on latitude 50 degrees north with the two winegrowing regions, namely Bohemia lying north of Prague and Moravia to the south. The latter region grows about 96% of the area under vine in the Czech Republic. The average annual temperature is less than 10 degrees Celsius therefore vineyards consist of small well-situated patches rather than big continuous plantings. In Bohemia the vineyards are mainly located on the banks of the Elbe and its two tributaries Vltava (Moldau) and Berounka. This helps to equalize the far northerly temperatures but the ripening window remains short and fairly hazardous with more than 20% vintages being considered poor.

A vineyard overlooking Prague.





Town square in Prague from the clock tower.

Müller-Thurgau 11,2%, Grüner Veltliner 11%, Welschriesling 8,5%, Riesling 7% and about 5% each of Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Blanc, 4% Chardonnay and a sprinkling of Gewürztraminer, Pinot Gris and Moravian Muscat make up the bulk of the white plantings. St Laurent 9%, Frankovka 5,6%, Zweigeltrebe 4,7%, Pinot Noir 4%, Blauer Portugieser 3,9% and about 1% of Cabernet Sauvignon are the most significant red varieties. Despite the unsuitability of the climate for some of the popular French varieties winemakers keep taking on the challenge with dubious success.

Due to the vagaries of phylloxera, wars and economic decline vineyards reached a low of 3780 hectares in 1930. During reconstruction vineyards were replanted with single varieties instead of the traditional varietal mix which differed from commune to commune according to ecological conditions. Total vineyard plantings are very fragmented with around 20 000 hectares planted.

Most owners hold five hectares or less and have tiny production, but might still bottle four or five different wines. The style of a particular bottling could differ from year to year making it very difficult to consistently find a wine similar to one enjoyed previously – even if the producer is familiar to you. White wines are aromatic and tend to have high to searingly high acidity with a sweet and sour quality. There are small quantities of excellent reds made by some of the top producers, but due to lack of sunshine many lack body and flavour. Riesling, Pinot Blanc and Pinot Gris make some good wines while Pinot Noir is the most successful red according to my experience. St. Laurent produce some interesting wines with the best examples ageing well. Lovely silky textured dessert wines complete the wine offering with ice wines often possible.

Laws regulating quality are based on German and Austrian wine law and Quality Wines with Special Attributes (Prädikat wines) are well regulated with no

chaptalisation allowed. In 2004 with the accession of the Czech Republic into the European Union, adapted Wine Laws to comply with those of the EU came into use. At table wine level anything goes with the predictable result. A limit was placed on vineyard plantings.

Twenty years after the end of communist rule the industry still struggles with remnants of the legacy. Some forward thinking winemakers are making quality a quest and are looking at world trends and compete with success in international competitions, although these wines are often produced in miniscule quantities and seldom leaves the cellar door, reaching only a few select clients. Much still needs to be done to make the industry competitive in a turbulent 21st century wine market .

The adventurous food and wine tourist will find much to discover and enjoy in this fascinating country. Amid the European banquet of experiences, this is one that will be held in the heart of memory.

*Na zdravi* (meaning 'Good health') ♦

**'WANDERING DOWN COBBLESTONE PAVEMENTS AND TWISTING NARROW LANES, IS LIKE STEPPING INTO A FAIRY TALE, COMPLETE WITH CASTLES, TURRETS, GHOSTS AND DUNGEONS.'**



In the gardens of the Wallenstein Palace, presently the seat of the Senate of the Czech Republic.