

# Roy's events take wine, travel, even chocolate to new audience

By **Bonny C. Millard**

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Maja Djorcev Roy, a native of Slovenia, organizes group travel and conducts workshops on wine and food.  
-- Bonny C. Millard | The Ledger

Entrepreneur Maja Djorcev Roy knows the value of connecting people, sharing stories and developing an appreciation for artisan quality goods

Roy, a native of Slovenia, follows her passion and shares her knowledge of wine and the stories of the vineyards through her business, Wine Forté.

She creates opportunities for people to participate in wine events such as food or chocolate pairings, sets up corporate events, and offers tours through the vineyards of her homeland, where travelers get close to the process of winemaking as well as learning about the culture and people of Slovenia.

Roy came to Tennessee several years ago to visit friends and met her husband, Tyler Roy, now an attorney in Knoxville. Later, she was accepted into a graduate program at the University of Tennessee and earned a master's in wine geography.

In late January, Roy collaborated with Linn Slocum, a co-owner of Blue Slip Winery, to hold a chocolate making class and to pair wines with the chocolate. Roy enlisted Janice Fillmore, owner of The Chocolate B'ar of Townsend, to teach the class. The custom-made chocolates included ingredients like lavender and salted caramel.

Roy appreciates Slocum's vision of designing classes or wine events that use local ingredients such as regional cheeses for wine pairings.

“She really believes in supporting local farmers,” Roy says. “That’s why she also makes wine only from grapes from Tennessee, which is unique. I think we can be very proud that we have something like this in Knoxville.”

These events and workshops provide participants a better understanding of how a product like cheese is made and the work that goes into it. Many of the cheeses come from farms in Sweetwater, Franklin and Memphis.

“These cheeses are artisanal that really reflect the farmer’s work. They’re just outstandingly good, and when we pair these cheeses with the wines made in this winery, it’s just an experience. We don’t learn only about how to pair wine and cheese or wine and chocolate but also about how the cheese was produced. It’s really an appreciation of artisan. Like Linn as well as other farmers.”

Roy is enthusiastic as she talks about sharing an appreciation of the process artisans go through to create cheese, wine, chocolate and other specialty items.

“More and more people understand and are open to this thing. They see a value, and they’re also prepared to pay for that. It’s paying for an experience. You don’t buy yourself another gadget. You buy yourself an experience....That is what makes people richer.”

Roy has been involved with an organization called Slow Food while in Slovenia for several years and joined the local chapter, Slow Food Tennessee Valley, last fall. She says the organization helps connect farmers and restaurants and tries to educate people about healthy eating through workshops such as the Pesto Festo. The international grassroots organization advocates eating local, healthy foods that are created with positive environmental practices.

“Our mission is just to spread the word about local producers and encourage and educate customers about this produce,” explains Roy, who is the local chapter’s vice president.

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Through her own business, Roy teaches workshops about wines and does food and wine pairings for individuals in their homes with catering that pairs well with the wines she is showcasing. She also works with corporations doing wine classes when they have special fun events for their employees.

Another facet of her business is promoting artisanal wines, from all over the world – ones that are made in smaller quantities and are of high quality. Her goal is to represent the winemaker and to show how the wine is different from conventionally or mass-produced wines.

“We’re talking about very small quantities. This is like 10,000 bottles a year they are producing on average. It’s so small that you need an importer and later a distributor that really knows how to sell it, knows how to tell the story. It’s a lot about story making, story sharing.”

Roy wants to educate people about wines from beyond the typical regions of France, Italy and California and showcase what Slovenia has to offer.

“Internationally, I’m doing two other things. I’m connecting people from the United States with my home country, Slovenia,” Roy says. “I take people on tours there. So I go every summer usually, June, July, August.”

The wine tours allow participants to have a glimpse of life in Slovenia and interact with the people who live there. Roy says her excursions don’t have scheduled, time-committed itineraries, and if that is what a person wants, these trips are probably not for him or her.

“Tour has kind of a weird connotation. It’s really more like a trip or adventure,” she says. “First, it’s very small scale. I would say five to 10 maximum on a tour, and then we go on a very intimate personal tour because we go and we stay with winemakers, farmers. We stay even with my grandmother. It’s like very personal. We get to learn how people live there. We get to learn how to cook, how to harvest all kind of things, not just grapes.”

Roy wants to share stories about Slovenia wines and the winemakers.

“That’s why I decided to do wine tours because I was promoting my Slovenia wines here around the United States. From Tennessee, I went to California. I went to New York. I was doing all kinds of events everywhere. But I realized that when I take people to Slovenia, that’s when they actually start to appreciate and understand. It’s so much about understanding where these wines are coming from.

“For people, when I take them, it’s not just a trip. It’s really an experience because they get to meet so many locals, and they get to hear their stories. They see how people live differently.”

Slovenia, part of Yugoslavia until 1991, is a diverse country with the Alps in one region and the Mediterranean only an hour away. This creates a diversity of climate, food and architecture.

“We are small but surrounded by these big, big cultures like Italy and Austria and Hungary and Croatia, and so all this influences Slovenia. It’s kind of like a mixing pot. What I’m trying to do is introduce people to this small but unique country in Europe through wines and culinary.”

During the trip, people learn about the wine production practices there as well as about the country and local cuisine.

“We learn how to pick herbs, and then we make food out of stuff we pick in the garden,” she says.

“That’s what makes the difference. People come there, and they have time. They have time to actually go to a garden and appreciate things. People who just want to go to a restaurant – they can go to a restaurant everywhere.”

Roy’s passion for wine making and connecting people continues to guide her.

“I work all the time because it’s not really work. It’s what I do because I love [it]. Of course, it’s hard, I’m not going to say it’s easy, but it’s what I love and what I believe in and what I’m passionate about. I just can’t see myself working for somebody else. The freedom that the nature of this job gives me – that’s what I want, and I’m prepared to do anything to keep that.”