



GEORGIAN WINE



The origins of wine making eight millenia ago almost certainly lay somewhere in the mountains and valleys of the Caucasus, between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. The Georgians like to lay claim to the honour of being responsible for these first wines, and this proudly European country has long maintained a culture in which grapes and wine play a very significant part. Traditionally, many Georgian wines were made quite simply by crushing the grapes and then throwing them and the juice into large, egg-shaped earthenware vessels known as Qvevri (or Kvevri), which were often buried in the ground. These were where the must was allowed to ferment and then age, and the prolonged skin contact meant that wines

made from green grapes turned a distinct golden-orange, or amber, colour. This method of winemaking has become particularly fashionable in many other parts of the world in recent years as "orange wine".

Following the incorporation of Georgia into the Soviet Union in 1921, many such traditional methods of wine making were replaced by "modern", industrial scale wine production destined for the Soviet market. Although good wines were also made in Crimea and Moldova, it was Georgian wine that became most popular in Russia at that time, and the area of vineyards more than doubled between 1950 and 1985. The subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to chaos for winegrowers, with Russia imposing an embargo on Georgian wine; wineries and bottling plants often literally falling apart, and much counterfeit wine being produced. When I first visited Georgia in the mid-1990s I was strongly advised only to drink Georgian wine that had been exported in bulk to Belgium or the Netherlands for bottling and then subsequently returned to Georgia!

Over the last 30 years, and especially since 2010, the Georgian wine industry has been reborn, and it now produces some of the most interesting and unusual wine to be found anywhere in the world. Broadly speaking, its six winemaking regions lie across the centre of the country from the dry, sub-tropical Kakheti in the east to the humid sub-tropical Black Sea coastal zone in the west. There are 24 specific appellations of origin, with 18 of them in Kakheti, which is widely seen as producing the best quality wines. There are more than 500 indigenous grape varieties, with about 75% of vineyards planted with white grapes, and the remainder being red.



TIM UNWIN

"8000 VINTAGES" WINE SHOP IN TBILISI

The main white variety is Rkatsiteli, which tends to produce wines with high acidity and rich apple, quince and peach flavours; the dominant red variety is the Saperavi, which unusually has red flesh as well as red skins, with the resulting wines having dark berry almost meaty flavours, deep intense colour, and taking on tobacco and spicy notes especially when oak aged. Among wines made from other varieties, I particularly enjoy those made with the white Khikhvi and Kisi grapes, and the Aleksandreuli and Mujuretuli red grapes, which are also used together to make the traditional semi-sweet wines known as Khvanchkara.

The best way to discover Georgia's wines is to go and visit the country's wineries and vineyards, an increasing number of which now have small restaurants and also provide rooms for guests to stay in. One of my favourite small producers is Giuaani, situated in the old village of Manavi in Kakheti, and they have a small boutique hotel and excellent restaurant, as well as producing a wonderful Kisi Qvevri wine, which is possibly the best orange wine I have recently tasted. At the more luxurious end of the scale, there is the Radisson Collection hotel on the Tsinandali Estate, whose cellars contain numerous 19th century bottles collected by Prince Alexander Chavchavadze and which continues to make fine wines today. Georgian wines are not yet easy to find in the UK, but the examples below provide a good introduction to their complex and fascinating flavours and they go very well with food.

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(please drink responsibly)

Local favourites

Tbilvino Sapatio Mtsvane (Kvareli, Kakheti) 2021, 12.5%. Made from Mtsvane grapes, this refreshing dry white wine produced by Tbilvino, one of Georgia's best known wineries, is pale straw coloured with tropical fruit

and peach aromas, with quite a long finish (Laitwhaites £14.99, **reduced to £13.99 if you present a copy of this magazine in store**).

SLIGHTLY FURTHER AFIELD

Tbilvino Qvevris Rkatsiteli (Kvareli, Kakheti) 2021, 12.5%. An excellent, good value introduction to Qvevri wine, made from Rkatsiteli grapes, giving a medium amber colour, medium body, and complex flavours of apricots and pears (Majestic £11.99 mixed six, **reduced to £10.99 if you present a copy of this magazine in store**).

Tbilvino Saperavi - Majestic Exclusive (Kvareli, Kakheti) 2023, 13%. A modern, soft fruit focused example of the classic Saperavi wines, with floral aromas and forest fruits with balanced acidity creating an elegant finish (Majestic £11.99 mixed six, **reduced to £10.99 if you present a copy of this magazine in store**).

Orovela Saperavi (Khorkheli, Kakheti) 2015, 13.5%. Made in a modern winery in western Kakheti, this oak aged and well structured wine with soft tannins has dark fruit flavours of mulberries, blackberries and a touch of cherry (Waitrose £18).

WORTH GOING FURTHER FOR

Vachnadziani Rkatsiteli (Vachnadziani, Kakheti) 2022, 12.5%. A quite light, refreshing and aromatic white wine with good acidity and complex tropical fruit flavours; excellent value for money (Noble Green Wines, £11.90 for six).

Lagvinari Mtsvane Kakhuri (Kakhuri, Kakheti) 2021, 12%. An amber coloured, full bodied wine made in Qvevri from Mtsvane grapes, resulting in complex flavours of peach, quince and wild herbs (80-20 wines £38).

(Wine prices and availability correct at going to press, but are subject to change at short notice)

Next issue: Rosé-tinted reflections

