

## Orovela Saperavi 2004 Kakheti, Georgia

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Anyone who watched Hugh Johnson's television series on the history of wine back in the late 1980s will know what a special place Georgia (Black Sea, not the southern American state) occupies. And wine is as important to beleaguered Georgia as the long-lived, wine-swilling Georgians are to wine.

I have never visited Georgia myself (I was rather put off by the fact that a female wine writer friend of mine was half-heartedly kidnapped on arrival in Tbilisi) but I have been monitoring progress in the country's wines with great interest. Pernod Ricard made a big investment in the 1990s and every now and then there is a generic tasting in London, which I try to attend. The Georgians, who have 70,000 hectares (173,000 acres) of vineyard - more than any other ex-Soviet country - desperately need to find new export markets since the Putin regime prohibited imports of Georgian wine into Russia last year (see [The view from Moscow](#)).

I can honestly say that **Orovela Saperavi 2004 Kakheti, Georgia** is the best Georgian wine I have ever tasted. It is the brainchild of Giorgi Sulkhaniashvili, who was involved with the Pernod Ricard Georgian project. He left them last year to start his own wine label Orovela, made by the Georgian/Australian winemaker Lado Uzunashvili, who has been responsible for some of Paul Mas's extremely well-made Languedoc wines. He had acquired the vineyard in 2001 and started to rework and replant it straight away.

The grapes are grown in the Chandrebi vineyard on the right bank of the Alalzani River, near the village of Ikalto in Kakheti, the main wine producing region of Georgia. I am assured that this location on the North Caucasus is very picturesque, with an 11th-century monastery to the north and a sixth-century chapel in the middle of the vineyard - but surely all these primeval centuries are just showing off? We've got the message: Georgia has a heck of a lot of history.

The wine, however, tastes thoroughly modern in its winemaking - but using highly individual raw materials. I can't speak personally for the geography of the place, although I'm told the terraced stony alluvial vineyard with a bit of clay underneath is at 520 m above sea level and the climate here is cooler and drier than in most of Kakheti, thanks to the altitude. Most of the 40 ha vineyard is planted with Georgia's very own red wine grape Saperavi, often made into sweet red wine and piercingly pugnacious in its high tally of phenolics and acidity. Kerpow, it says - or does it do some memorable local dance involving lots of kicking? Five hectares are planted with the white grape Mtsvane.

Much is made of the extent to which the vineyard has been divided into blocks, each monitored and (machine) harvested separately according to its exact ripeness level. In 2004 the grapes were harvested on 25 Sep apparently, with a yield of 45-50 hl/ha. All grapes were de-stalked and the must given a cold soak for 36 hours. Here is the rest of the tech spec (use your online [Oxford Companion to Wine](#) to check the jargon): *Délestage every third day during nine days' fermentation. Pressed at 1% residual sugar. 40% of pressings joined free run. Decanted off lees twice. 50% of the blend barrel matured for 12 months in 50% French and 50% American 300-litre oak barrels. Wine is not suitable for Vegetarians*

or Vegans (fined with egg-whites). Alcohol: 12.5%, Total Acidity: 5.4g/l, Phenolics: 3.55, Residual Sugar: <2g/l.

I think this handsomely packaged wine (in far too heavy a bottle) is worth a whirl by any truly curious wine drinker. Saperavi is undoubtedly a great grape but too often it is vinified to a price, or made so sweet that it is difficult to assess true varietal character. All I can say is that this wine, just 12.5%, drew widespread praises from my household, and it was still good from a re-corked bottle several days after first opening. As far as I can see, it's currently available only in the UK, at either £14.99 from Soho Wine Supply or at £16.99 since yesterday in Waitrose's top six branches. I think this latter price is a little steep but then it is a one-off. Let us hope that Orovela, imported into the UK by Caves de Pyrene near Guildford who also retail it, is just one of a fleet of fine Georgian wines we can add to our ever-expanding international range of wine experiences.

Although you know what they say: A wine hasn't really arrived until Georg Riedel has designed a special glass for it.

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