

Georgia undaunted

18 Mar 2010 by Umay Çeviker

Umay Çeviker, the Turkish architect I met on our [visit to Turkey](#) last May, told me that he made frequent trips to Georgia and had a particular interest in Georgian wine. (He also told me about President George W Bush Street, the name of the main road from the airport into the capital Tbilisi.) He has been assembling this report on the surprisingly vibrant Georgian wine scene over the last few months.

Each day, Tbilisi's sleek international airport flocks with thousands travelling west to visit settler relatives and friends throughout Europe and North America. Indeed, it is believed that around a million Georgians live out of their motherland, which is almost a quarter of the current population. They come back decorated with fresh ideas and dressed up with the latest fashion. Never, though, with a bottle of wine of which they have plenty in Georgia. What is meant are not the oddly lined up bottles in the sunlit shop front of the typical Georgian supermarket. On the contrary, Georgian people are used to despise what they call 'commercial' wine and glorify what is homemade.

Homemade wine is common and exists in quantities varying between 50 and 5,000 litres per family cellar, country cottage or apartment. Understandably, there is no shortage of it in a typical Georgian house where you can expect to see wine in a cask rather than a bottle. Hence the official per capita annual wine consumption figure of under seven litres is surprising in a community where wine is a major part of social life. The actual figure is estimated to be closer to 15-20 litres per head. Still, the consumption of bottled wine is relatively small.

The Russian impact

Georgians have long been proud to be among the oldest winemaking nations. This is one reason for the indolence they used to have about their own wine practices. Besides, why bother to find new markets when the traditional style is already more than perfect for the Russian sweet tooth? For 200 years under the Russian rule, all viticulture and winemaking practice was dictated by the big brother. In 1985 a mass campaign to uproot vineyards throughout the Soviet Union was launched by Mikhail Gorbachev to fight alcohol abuse. The aftermath was tragic: Georgia's total vineyard area of 160,000 ha was reduced to almost a quarter. Today only 60 million litres of commercial wine is produced from over 45,000 ha of land under vine.

Even after independence in 1990, Georgia remained (with Moldova and Ukraine) one of the main suppliers of wine to Russia. In 2005 Georgia's total wine exports surpassed 40 million litres, 85% of which was to Russia. Wine was one of Georgia's top three exports for over a decade.

On 27 Mar 2006, however, the chief sanitary inspector of Russia announced a ban on the import and sale of all Georgian (and Moldovan) wine because of supposed risks to health. Georgia lost the bulk of its export market for wine overnight. It is widely believed, however, that the embargo was politically motivated and aimed at having a severe impact on the country's economy. Many small- to mid-sized wine producers closed down their facilities immediately and others had to fight for survival in a diminished export market formed by ex-Soviet republics and countries where Georgian or Russian immigrants live.

New markets and new players

Make no mistake, Georgian people are survivors. No matter how hard, the ban has made them get engaged in finding alternative and more profitable export markets and turn this setback to their advantage in the long term. Many producers realised that they had to modernise their winemaking techniques while persisting with improved strains of their distinctive local varieties. Recent years also saw the launch of a number of ventures with foreign investors which in most cases resulted in a synergy beneficial for the whole industry. These enthusiastic initiatives are revered for their respect for traditional methods of winemaking and indigenous varieties.

German investor and wine connoisseur Burkhard Schuchmann and ex-Teliani Valley winemaker Giorgi Dakishvili have established Schuchmann Wines under which name they produce European-style wines as well as their Vinoterra label for sustainable wine-growing methods and traditional winemaking. Their Vinoterra Saperavi 2005 was fermented in qvevri, the traditional clay amphora shown above left, to be aged in French barriques for 24 months and finally bottled unfiltered.

The Vinoterra Kisi 2006, a fragrant local white grape popular among avant-garde producers, was fermented and matured for five months in qvevri and another 12 in oak barriques. The resulting so called 'orange wine', that also inspired [Josko Gravner](#) of Friuli more than a decade ago, is definitely an acquired taste but reflects the full potential of this promising variety. [See my tasting notes on Vinoterra and other current Georgian wines [here](#) - JR].

Telavi Wine Cellar, founded in 1915 has set up the Satrapezo line in collaboration with renowned winemaker Davit Maisuradze. Their Saperavi, limited to only 6,000 bottles, is fermented in qvevri with a long, one-month maceration and matured in oak barrels for 24 months, followed by a six-month unfiltered bottle aging. They have also introduced the first ever Georgian icewine from Rkatsiteli vineyards in the Alazani Valley in Kakheti.

In 2007, the accidental yet poetic encounter of young American artist John Wurdeman with local winemaker Gela Patailashvili resulted in the venture called Pheasant's Tears, named after an old Georgian saying that very fine wines make pheasants shed tears of joy when they sip it. Their artisanal wine is made near the picturesque town of Signaghi shown here, in the heart of the wine region of Kakheti in accordance with techniques used in Georgia as long ago as 6000 BC. In 2009 in addition to their Saperavi and Rkatsiteli, Pheasant's Tears produce limited editions of red varietals Shavkapito and Tavkveri and white Chinuri, Mtsvane, and Kisi. All Pheasant's Tears wines are made in qvevri lined with organic beeswax and their Saperavi vineyards will be certified as organic this spring.

Badagoni, founded in 2002, and a collaboration between Donato Lanati and Enosis, aims to produce the finest wine in the region in their modern and technologically advanced factory near Telavi, administrative center of Kakheti. Blessing the ancient traditions, they have initiated the renovation of the historic Alaverdi Monastery (right) in the Alazani valley where recent archeological digs unearthed a massive wine cellar containing 40 qvevris. The local monks have been encouraged to practise their ancient winemaking traditions in the freshly renovated winery of the monastery with grapes from surrounding vineyards. The state-of-the-art stainless-steel equipment against the backdrop of an 11th-century marvel is a contrast worth experiencing.

In Kartli, newcomers Chateau Mukhrani have enlivened the late 19th-century winery established by Prince Ivane Mukhranbatoni, aiming to replicate the success of their predecessors through wines made with modern techniques. They have also been resurrecting the historic palace both to merit their name and to help develop wine tourism in the region.

Another wine-related tourism initiative was led by The Silk Road Group, a multinational transportation and trading company. Investors in Tbilisi's red-hot five-star hotel, they leased the famous Tsinandali Palace, an historic architectural complex located in the heart of Kakheti, for 49 years. The palace is in the nice, quiet village of Tsinandali, home of one of country's finest white wine appellations, a blend of Rkatsiteli and Mtsvane grapes. The complex, which once belonged to the 19th-century aristocratic poet [Alexander Chavchavadze](#) (1786-1846), played host to so many writers and literary artists - including the French novelist Alexandre Dumas, the French historian Marie-Félicité Brosset and the Russian writers Alexandre Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov and Alexander Griboedov - that it was referred to as 'a literary hearth of writers and poets'. It includes Chavchavadze's museum, a botanical garden, a traditional wine factory and hotel-type buildings belonging to the pre-communist period as well as Chavchavadze's own cellar with bottles dating back to early 19th century.

The larger Georgian wine companies are trying to keep pace with all this activity. Teliani Valley, Georgia's number one exporter, is sold in 23 countries. As it has upgraded winemaking equipment and techniques, the company has seen its revenue from exports grow just three years after the ban. Telavi Wine Cellar, Tbilvino, Wine Company Shumi and Georgian Wines and Spirits, owners of veteran brands such as Tamada and Old Tbilisi, a joint venture with the Pernod-Ricard Group since 1993, are other key players among a total of next to 200 registered wine producers.

Laws and regulations

It is true that wine has been an inherent part of Georgian culture for thousands of years. Even so, the Republic of Georgia is a young country building up its institutions. It is not surprising to hear that the Law of Georgia on Vine and Wine was adopted in 1998 followed one year later by the Law on Appellations of Origin and Geographic Indications. The legislation was based on the Soviet system initially and moved towards the EU laws in time, with similar regulations on viticulture and wine making. The law determines six wine-growing regions in Georgia; Kakheti, Kartli, Meskheta, Imereti, Racha-Lechkhumi and the Black Sea Coastal Area.

The Black Sea Coastal Area produces a tiny quantity of wine, mainly crisp white Tsolikauri. Racha-Lechkhumi in the central north is the home of the famous Khvanchkara, once beloved of the Soviet people and Stalin himself. It is a natural

semi-sweet red wine from Alexandreuli and Mujuretuli grapes from Racha, the production of which is losing significance. In Lechkhumi, Tsolikauri and red Ojaleshi reign. Imereti, in mid Georgia, is the second largest region after Kakheti and is mainly white wine country growing Tsolikauri and Tsitska varieties. Once prosperous Kartli, around the capital Tbilisi, has lost its share to various other crops. The region is home to some minor local varieties as well as the essentially Kakhetian grapes Saperavi and Rkatsiteli. In Meskheta, a region with perfect conditions for viticulture, only a small area with similar varieties as in Kartli is home to vineyards.

Kakheti in the east is responsible for two-thirds of the total vineyard area of Georgia and 14 of its 18 defined appellations of origin. Inner Kakheti, one of its two subzones, lies around the Alazani valley by the trail of the Caucasus Mountains. Outer Kakheti, separated from Inner Kakheti by the Gombori Ridge, follows the route of the river Lori. They are narrow parallel strips of land 100-km long and the number of appellations and diversity of styles within them would make even Côte d'Or jealous. Though wine from white grapes Rkatsiteli, Mtsvane and their blends as well as Kisi and Khikvi dominate the overall production, red Saperavi (shown here at veraison) is king here. It accounts for five of the seven red wine appellations of Georgia and is the pride of the country with its revered potential.

The future

Despite these regulations, viticulture and winemaking in Georgia are uncoordinated. Vine and Wine Department Samtresti is the body defined by law for safeguarding the system but with the exception of the certification process, it has little influence on the overall sector. The tendency towards quality is practised individually and is not enforced. Therefore, issues such as excess irrigation and yields as high as eight to 12 tonnes per hectare in most wine growing areas are barely monitored. The underlying reason is that though Georgia may be a part of the Old World, its institutions are far too young. Literally, the agriculture minister, in charge of the institution responsible from all above mentioned regulations and establishments, is just 28 years old. Indeed, at 41, the charismatic president Mikheil Saakashvili is one of the oldest members of his government. 'Not only did he not serve in the Soviet government,' he says of his agriculture minister, 'he doesn't even remember it.' After all, youth is a characteristic of the Georgian way of life. So is the vine. It is a symbol of regeneration, of wealth and plenty. It has an iconic significance. The images of vine leaves and grapes are frequently used as decorations on the walls of churches and frames of icons. Even the Georgian alphabet is believed to imitate the shapes of vine. It is the Georgians' heart, their soul. It is there when they sing and toast, it is there when they mourn.

Georgia has managed to swim against the current time and time again. They protected their national treasures; the vines, songs and language. Yet again the proud people of Georgia have a challenge. They want their wine to be valued and respected again. They want to cover the upper shelves in the supermarkets of the wine consuming world. They have the tenacity, creativity, and ambition to make it happen.

Will that happen soon or will they have to await the EU membership they so fiercely desire, to judge from the number of EU flags that disorientate the visitor in Tbilisi? Time will tell, and the Georgians have the patience to wait and see.

Sources:

Samanishvili, Giorgi / Georgian Wine Sector Overview / World Bank Financed Georgia Agriculture Development Projects' Coordination Centre / Tbilisi, 2007

Cooke, Kieran / [Georgia's Wine Frozen Out by Russia / BBC News](#) / 30 November 2006

Khokhlova, Veronica / [Russia: Ban on Georgian Wine and Water / Global Voices Online](#) / 7 May 2006

Clayton, Nick / [Georgian Wine Sells Widely After Russian Snub / The Washington Times](#) / 23 October 2009

Walker, Shaun / How I Govern, Mikheil Saakashvili, President of Georgia / Monocle / December 2009 - January 2010

Smithsonian Institute / [Prince Alexandre Chavchavadze](#) / National Parliamentary Library of Georgia