

“Georgia’s winemakers are the guardians of wine’s oldest traditions.”

ANDREW JEFFORD

Wine writer, *Financial Times*

WINE CULTURE

ROOTED IN THE VINE

Wine is so deeply embedded in the Georgian identity that to talk of Georgian wine culture is to talk of Georgia itself. Thanks to their distinctive grape-growing terroirs and 8,000-year history of winemaking, Georgians have cultivated not just vines but a world-class wine culture.



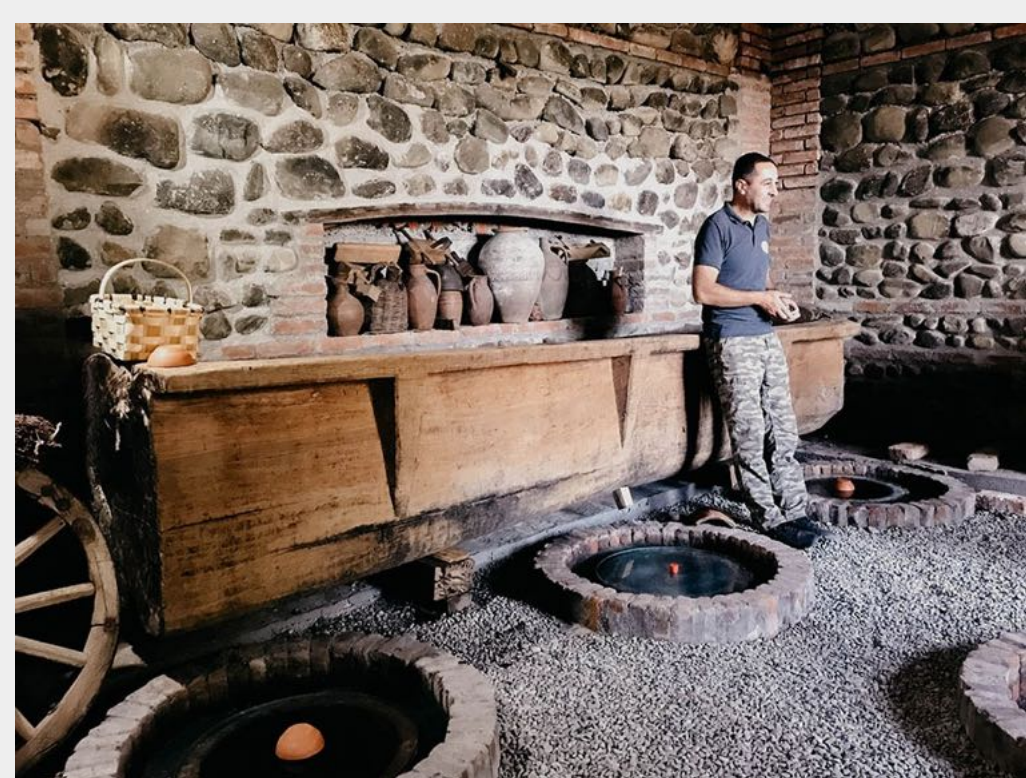
FAMILY WINEMAKING

In the countryside, where most families still grow their own grapes and make their own wines, homes typically have a dedicated wine cellar, called a marani. Even in Georgia’s cities, urbanites who balance progress with tradition cultivate their own vines.

The opening of a family qvevri—a buried clay vessel in which most Georgian households make their wine—is a celebrated event, a reason for feasting. Wine features in every meal, whether simple or elaborate.



A TRADITION OF TOASTING



To many Georgians, the mantra “life without feasting is meaningless” is one they prove at every opportunity. At the heart of communal life’s milestones—both happy and sad—is the supra, a feast punctuated by a succession of toasts.

These ritual feasts draw from Eastern Orthodox monastic tradition, in which an abbot would introduce topics for discussion in the form of a toast. To this day, drinking wine during a meal is a vehicle for examining life’s deep questions. The tamada, or toastmaster, rises and introduces a theme for the night. He toasts to the theme, alludes to the interests and personalities of the guests, and downs his glass—or his traditional drinking horn, called a khantsi. The guests then make their own toast, responding to the tamada’s theme, and down their glass or horn. Toasts can be beautiful, poetic, funny, or irreverent.

And over the course of the evening, the exchange of ideas and the congenial laughter becomes as intoxicating as the wine.

IRREPRESSIBLE SPIRIT

The optimism and diversity of Georgia’s wine industry today reflects the relative political stability of the past two decades. Many of today’s winemakers can remember when their family’s vineyards were seized by the Soviets. They mourn the hundreds of native Georgian grape varieties that were replaced with generic, efficient grape varieties during the Soviet era. During the difficult times of the 1990s, many vineyards were abandoned.

Today, Georgian wine receives support from a government wine agency. Projects to find, identify, and replant native Georgian varieties are thriving.

Georgians’ desire to revive their traditions runs deep. It shows in their use of traditional winemaking methods and in their revival of indigenous grapes of the past. The revitalization effort began with a few winemakers in the early 2000s. Spurred by the international interest in natural and small-grower wines, Georgia now has more than 1,000 registered wineries. Wine tourism is quickly developing too, with several European cities offering direct flights to Tbilisi and travel agencies offering guided tours.

Georgia’s wine—a symbol of her hard-won independence, individuality, and creativity—continues to flow through every facet of Georgian life and culture.

