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WINED, DINED & BERATED

WHEN IT COMES TO EATING AND DRINKING
IN GEORGIA, THE LOCAL BELIEF IS THAT
'TOO MUCH IS NEVER ENOUGH'

LIKE MANY PEOPLE PLANNING A HOLIDAY, the idea of going to Georgia had never crossed my mind. Spend one of my precious weeks away from work in a former Soviet Bloc state in a region not exactly known for amicable relations between neighbours? I don't think so.

It was when I heard Wild Frontiers adventurer Johnny Bealby mention Georgia's fantastic food and wine that I began to reconsider. After all, the best food I'd eaten in an icy Moscow last year had been Georgian, and the most delicious wine a plummy Georgian Saperavi. The sweet pastries I'd wolfed down for energy were honey-soaked Georgian baklava.

Which is how, 12 months later, I've come to have a substantially increased girth, having just returned from a 10-day eating trip around the country. The wine, as Bealby promised, is fantastic. And the food? Even better.

It is little known in the West, but Georgia has been home to human life for millennia – and humans who clearly liked their food and wine. Visit the history museum in Kutaisi, Georgia's second largest city, and you'll find kitchen implements from two centuries before the birth of Christ. Visit the Sioni Cathedral in



THE ENORMOUS SILVER STATUE OF MOTHER GEORGIA ON THE CITY'S HILLSIDE HOLDS A SWORD AND A WINE GLASS

the capital of Tbilisi, and you'll see a bronze figure holding a *khantsi* (a traditional sheep's-horn vessel still used in wine festivities today). Gaze at the enormous silver statue of Mother Georgia on the city's hillside, and you'll see that, as well as a sword, she's holding a wine glass – Georgians' hospitality to strangers being matched only by their ability to fight off enemies.

Driving out of Tbilisi to Kakheti, a couple of hours to the north-east, it's clear that this is a country whose people are primarily agriculturalists. It's February and icy, and as I and my local guide, Anna Uturgauri, wind along the mountainous Gombori Pass, signs of farming abound. Terraces are lined with fruit trees, pears, peaches, walnuts, apples, persimmons and pomegranates.

Occasionally we see a shepherd wearing a Biblical-looking hooded woollen coat and fur boots, driving his flock through the snow. Beneath the porches of rickety wooden country houses, hay is stockpiled for the cows that provide Georgians with their main sources of protein: yoghurt and cheese. Rafters are hung with sausages. Chickens scratch around in yards.

As we descend into the vast valleys of the Kakheti province – with the breathtakingly beautiful backdrop of hundreds of miles of the vertiginous, snowy Caucasus Mountains rising to the north – we spot the plant that has been grown here for more than 7,000 years: the grape.

In the tiny hamlet of Kisiskhevi, near the town of Telavi, German vintner Burkhard Schuchmann shows



us around the winery he now calls his second home: a charming traditional stone-built, terracotta-roofed cellar-cum-restaurant-cum-guesthouse recently opened by Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili. When Schuchmann arrived in Georgia in 2006, on holiday, he totally fell for the country. Five years and more than six million euros later, he has a winery producing 14 wines, as well as a restaurant and guesthouse.

He is one of the first of a wave of international vintners coming to the country to try and revitalise its ancient industry. When Georgia was a region of the Soviet Union, 10 million bottles were sold to Russia annually. But since Russia declared an embargo on all imports from Georgia in 2006, wine-makers have been forced to find other markets. Today, three-quarters of Georgian wine is drunk within the country or by more friendly neighbours – which is great news for tourists, because prices are about a third of those in Europe (a decent bottle of wine can be had for around €3).

Some of those wines are unlike others produced anywhere in the world. It's not just that Georgia has more than 500 varieties of grapes, but because vintners here make wines in a unique way: in clay ▶



Clockwise from top, vintner Burkhard Schuchmann with his dogs, Jack and Bryan; Zaza Kbilashvili stands among qvevri (amphorae) made by his father; tending the vines at Schuchmann vineyards



amphorae. Showing us round his old-fashioned stone, wood and brick cellars, where a third of his wines are being made using old-fashioned Georgian methods, Schuchmann reveals how wine is matured underground in huge clay vats, called *qvevri*. In these subterranean casks, the liquid is kept at a perfect temperature by the cool, stream-fed soils, while the beeswax-lined clay protects the fermenting juice from oxidation. If the vats are kept perfectly clean and sealed, the slightly pulped grapes can be matured for as long underground as they could be in stainless-steel vats, but without preservatives.

Tasting these Georgian wines alongside the more European-style, stainless-steel-matured liquids that Schuchmann has produced with local wine-maker Giorgi Dakishvili offers an interesting insight into the differences between each method. While the Schuchmann stainless-steel-matured Tsinandali is clean and crisp, similar to a New Zealand white, the cellar's Mtsvane, stored in traditional 3,000-litre amphorae and matured in French oak, is honey-coloured, fruity in aroma and almost herbal in flavour. The two ranges of Western-style and traditional-style reds, too, have totally different flavours and depths, although both are made from the Saperavi grape. Last year at the Mundus Vini international competition, Schuchmann's Saperavi Vinoterra 2005 (which is dark, plummy and utterly delicious) won a gold medal – the first won by a Georgian wine, and the first made in amphorae.

Like many traditional wineries in the valley, which offer guest rooms so visitors can imbibe wine, eat and



collapse, Schuchmann has just opened eight charming vineyard-view suites, priced from €50 to €150. His aim this year – with the help of a talented young Philippine chef – is to open a destination Georgian restaurant with food that he describes as 'like nouvelle cuisine, but Georgian: little local dishes with a twist'.

Having been the victim of Georgians' innate hospitality and enormous appetites, the idea of nouvelle cuisine is appealing. Georgians, I came to understand, are not just passionate about their country, but fanatical about ensuring visitors have enough to eat. Meals tend to last for several hours, with dish after dish arriving, and often a *tostada* (or toast-master) punctuating the proceedings with endless tributes to loved ones, to country, to women, to nationhood, and so on.

Georgian cooks have yet to succumb to 'international cuisine', focusing instead on local dishes, whose flavours mix Turkish, Persian, Indian and Russian influences, with plenty of fresh herbs and spices. Key to the menu is *puri* bread: a flat, pizza-like dough often baked with cheese (*khachapuri*), filled with sliced eggs (*guruli*) or with meat or red-bean stew (*lobio*). Typically, barbecued meat will be served, alongside platters ▶

MANY WINERIES IN THE VALLEY OFFER GUEST ROOMS SO VISITORS CAN IMBIBE WINE, EAT AND COLLAPSE

Clockwise from top left, layered aubergine and crostini starter at Schuchmann's restaurant; waitress Maka Raibuli prepares the tables for dinner; Schuchmann's head chef Anthony Ronald Bergbauer



Left, Schuchmann Wines Château. Below, baker Ida Khutsishvili with some of her fresh bread made for the winery

of greens (bunches of coriander, parsley, tomatoes and cucumber), bowls of pickles, slices of salty cow's or sheep's cheese, carrot and fenugreek salads, and chicken with a creamy *satsivi* sauce. This sauce – made with pounded walnuts, coriander, chilli, fenugreek, garlic, saffron, walnuts, eggs and vinegar – is on almost every table, as is the delicious coriander, dill and garlic-infused wild plum sauce, *tkemali*.

Equally popular is the delicious *khinkali* dumpling – a teacup-sized package of fine dough, filled with a pork, beef and herb meatball and broth – which one eats with one's hands, biting a little hole in the bottom first to sip the broth, before tucking into the steamy meatball. (Georgians will insist about 12 dumplings are needed for two people; I would suggest half that.)

Visiting a family for lunch in the village of Guurjani, half an hour's drive from the Schuchmann winery, the women of the household are keen to show me how they make their local dishes. In the kitchen – modern by rural Georgian standards, with gas stove and fridge beneath shelves groaning with blackened iron pots, ancient samovars and coal-fired irons – Nana Aliashvili and her 70-something neighbours are making lunch.

While one kneads *khachapuri*, spreading a dollop of cottage cheese-like mixture on to dough, which is baked in an oil-free frying pan, another is sticking baguette-sized pieces of dough on to the inside edges of an urn-shaped, wood-fired oven, while a third is dipping long necklaces of walnuts into cornflour-thickened grape juice to make sweetmeats called

churchkhela. I'm urged to give sweet-making a go – and am rewarded with an enormous plateful of caramel to eat with the women, who tuck into tablespoonfuls with gusto.

That is, after I've feasted, for the second time that day, in their dining room, which is laden with delicious dishes – and after I have been berated for not eating more. My splitting waistband is proof that this is not because I don't like their food. But, as I soon learn, ensuring that guests are properly wined and dined is a part of the Georgian psyche; it's almost a national duty. So if you're going to Georgia, take an appetite, and some loose clothing. You'll need both. ♥
Schuchmann Wines Château, Kisiskhevi, Telavi District; +995 593 718858; schuchmann-wines.com; doubles from €65, B&B



TBILISI BITES

For a traditional Georgian feast accompanied by local music, try **In the Shadow of Metekhi** (29 K Tsamebuli Ave; +995 32 303030; shadowofmetekhi.mgroup.ge), with views from the balcony of the crenellated hillside fortress; or **Phaeton** (Beliashvili Street; +995 32 452013; phaeton.info-tbilisi.com), run by chef Tengiz Chigvinadze, who's cooked for British prime ministers and American presidents. For city views (but slow service), go to **Kopala** (8-10 Chekhov Str; +995 32 775520; kopala.ge).

My favourite bakery was **Sioni** in the vaulted cellars of the seminary beside Tbilisi's Sioni Cathedral. It produces the most sublime puffed-pastry cheese pies, *penovani* (about 20p each).

For Georgian dumplings, try the fine-doughed, generously filled versions at **Pasanauri** (27 Griboedov Street; +995 988715; about 20p each).

When you're a little tired of all that Georgian feasting and fancy a coffee and salad, try **Entrée** (20 Rustaveli Street; +99 891 193968; entree.ge) or for European cuisine in relaxed bohemian surrounds, **Pur Pur** (1 Abo Tbileli Street; +995 32 477776).

A nine-day Classic Georgia Tour with Regent Holidays (0845 277 3317; regent-holidays.co.uk) costs from £1,675pp, including return flights from Heathrow with bmi, B&B in local guesthouses, guided sightseeing and transportation.



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