



Above: rims of terracotta qvevri poke above the floor of the winery where they are buried
Left: the 11th-century Alaverdi monastery and vineyards in Kakheti – still making qvevri wine today



Maps: Maggie Nelson

My perfect day in Georgia

Morning

Drive east from Tbilisi towards Kakheti and make your first stop after about an hour at Niki Antadze's cellar, near Manavi. Antadze is one of Georgia's most respected natural winemakers, and works with old vines of Mtsvane Kakhuri and Rkatsiteli for his delicious skin-macerated wines (nikiantadze@gmail.com). From there it's another hour to Signaghi, a stunning hilltop town surrounded by prime wine country. John Okruashvili's handsome cellar is bang in the centre of town, with qvevris buried below the newly constructed tasting rooms (en-gb.facebook.com/okrojohn).



Niki Antadze

Lunch

John H Wurdeman V, an American who has lived in Georgia for decades, is one of the key figures in Georgian wine, not only as a winemaker at Pheasant's Tears but as its enthusiastic ambassador. He and his wife, Keto, a skilled Georgian polyphonic singer, own a restaurant in Signaghi serving some of Georgia's best food. After lunch drive down to see their new cellar and vineyards in the valley (www.pheasantstears.com).

Afternoon

Drive northwest for 90 minutes to

see the 11th-century Alaverdi monastery that still produces qvevri wines (www.since1011.com). From there it's a short hop to visit Gogi and Temur Dakishvili's lovely family vineyards outside Telavi where you can taste red Saperavi and white Kisi (www.vitavinea.ge).

Evening

Just outside of Telavi, at Shuamta, is one of Georgia's best-loved restaurants, Nikala. Chef Niko Pirosmiani prepares many local favourites in an eatery composed of several rooms and houses (kobishviliilasha@yahoo.com). Marleta B&B in Telavi is one of the most attractive and personal family-run hotels in Georgia, filled with artworks by the owner's family, and serves lovely informal food (cafemarlela@gmail.com).

The Decanter travel guide to

Georgia



FACT FILE

Planted area
45,000ha

Grape varieties
There are hundreds, but the most popular include (red) Saperavi, Tavkveri and Chkhaveri; (white) Rkatsiteli, Chinuri and Mtsvane

Production
1,000,000hl, of which qvevri wines are a fraction

Ancient wine history, unique grapes and qvevri vessels, plus an exciting food culture make this country a must for the adventurous wine traveller, as Carla Capalbo discovers

THERE'S A LOT of buzz at the moment about Georgia, the country in the Caucasus mountains at the crossroads between eastern Europe and Asia, where evidence of grapes and traces of wine residue have been found in archaeological digs from 8,000 years ago.

Ancient too is the Georgian tradition of making wine in very large terracotta pots called qvevri that are buried in the ground. What's remarkable is that this method has been used uninterruptedly for millennia in

Georgia and continues today. In 2013, UNESCO registered the qvevri method on its Intangible Cultural Heritage list. Essentially, the grapes are crushed and placed in the qvevri and the wine ferments and ages there naturally, at ground temperature. Sediment falls by gravity and amasses in the qvevri's pointed bottom.

Having great grapes is key. Today the country boasts more than 400 native varieties, though many others are thought to have been lost. The most popular are the lightly perfumed white – and often amber – Rkatsiteli and inky red Saperavi. Other distinctive whites include aromatic Mtsvane, crisp Chinuri, full-bodied Tsolikouri and the recently revived Kisi, which had all but disappeared in Soviet times.

Similarly, many discontinued red grapes are being replanted to complement the ubiquitous Saperavi. These include Tavkveri, Shavkapito,

'Georgian hospitality is a matter of national pride, as are the supra: elaborate feasts prepared for guests'

Photograph: Cara Capalbo

Chkhaveri and Ojaleshi. The wines these reds produce vary enormously depending on their terroirs: when planted in the rich river valleys they produce more body and colour; on higher slopes their perfumes and acidity increase, as do their distinct aromas.

Qvevri curiosity

Thanks to a few pioneering European winemakers – including Josko Gravner in Italy, who started using Georgian qvevri decades ago – others have become curious about discovering wine's origins and visiting Georgia. And they love what they find. Georgian hospitality is a matter of national pride, as are the supra: elaborate feasts prepared for guests and other celebrations.

'It's been surprising to see how interested international wine enthusiasts are in our qvevri,' says Ramaz Nikoladze, one of the leaders of the new Georgian winemaking movement, who grows his native grapes – like white Tsolikouri – organically near Kutaisi. 'Particularly as we've always used them. People still live off the land here. Almost every household had vine plants trained among their fruit trees, and a qvevri buried in the cellar or yard to make the family's wine in.' (www.facebook.com/rnikoladze).

This growing number of independent wineries – many tiny – produce qvevri wines and are attracting fans and distributors from Australia, to the US and the UK. Nearby at Terjola (+995 551577751), Gogita ➤

Your Georgia address book

Hotels

Hotel Ghomi 19

In the old part of Tbilisi, this hotel has the best views in the city, is unpretentious and incredibly welcoming. hotelghomi19@gmail.com

Rooms Hotel

A stylish, designer hotel in central Tbilisi, with a sister hotel in the breathtaking mountains of Kasbegi. www.roomshotels.com/tbilisi



Restaurant Diaroni

This eatery in Zugdidi, 300km from Tbilisi, has the finest western-Georgian food. diaroni2007@mail.ru

Shops

The Georgian Basket

This well-stocked cheese, wine and food shop in Tbilisi is the perfect place for presents and goods to bring home. **33 Leselidze St.**

Azarpheasha

A relaxed, wine-driven restaurant in Tbilisi; popular with many qvevri winemakers. www.azarpheasha.com

Shavi Lomi

Chef Meriko Gubeladze is one of the country's culinary stars, intent on modernising Georgian food without losing its soul. Her bohemian restaurant in Tbilisi has great atmosphere and delicious food. shavilomi@gmail.com

Tekuna Gachechiladze at Culinarium

Popular TV chef Tekuna Gachechiladze brings Georgian flavours into the modern era with flair and a light hand at her Tbilisi restaurant. www.culinarium.ge

Pilpili

At this elegant, country-style restaurant in the cellar of another more popular eatery, cooks prepare traditional Georgian cuisine, changing region every two months. 114 Aghmashenebeli Ave, Tbilisi. **Tel: +995 322940855**

Prospero's Books

The best English-language bookshop in Tbilisi, complete with a pretty outdoor café – great for meeting friends. www.prosperosbookshop.com

How to get there ✈

Georgian is a unique language and few people outside Tbilisi speak English, so the best way to travel or plan a trip is through a local agency. **Living Roots** specialises in food and wine tours and can help with your transport, itinerary and more. www.travellingroots.com

Several airlines fly to Tbilisi with a stopover or, depending on your departure airport, you may be lucky to get a direct flight. Don't be alarmed if you see your flight arriving in the early hours of the morning – most do, and hotels are used to sending cars to pick passengers up at that time as Georgia has no night-fly restrictions.



Makaridze has created a small co-op, making elegant red Otskhanuri Sapere wines in his qvevri cellar.

A small number of potters still exist who produce the qvevri by hand – think giant coil pots – including Zaliko Bodjadze, whose pottery is easy to spot on the road from Tbilisi to Imereti (qvevri.maqatubani@yahoo.com).

Larger-scale viticulture exists too, much of it aimed at the Russian market. Those wines tend instead to follow European models, using steel tanks and wooden barrels. The Russians also favour sweeter – often sweetened – wines.

Georgia's political history is complex and reflects the country's desirability both for its strategic position between the Black Sea, Asia, Europe and the Middle East, and its natural beauty and almost Mediterranean climate that allows for the success of many crops that can't be grown further north or south. (It's best to go in spring or autumn to avoid the very hot summers). This includes grapes grown on the mountains slopes and in the fertile valleys throughout central and eastern Georgia. But winemaking has not always been allowed to continue peacefully.

Unique wine and food

'Over three centuries of Ottoman rule, the historic vine-terraced valleys of Meskheti, in southwestern Georgia near Turkey, were decimated, and winemaking villages and qvevri razed,' says Giorgi Natenadze (natenadzeg10@gmail.com) a young winemaker who is ambitiously working to revive that area's traditional viticulture.

With advance notice, he'll accompany visitors along the dramatic Mtkvari river valley from Akhaltsikhe to the ancient village of Chachkari which provided wine for the cave city of Vardzia (now a UNESCO World Heritage Site) in the 12th century.

During the Soviet era, independent wineries were merged into huge co-ops where poor-quality wine was made. Many of those giant vineyards are now being broken up and bought by a new generation of winemakers who see traditional qvevri wines as the best way of spreading the word about Georgia's native grapes and wines, as well as its exciting food culture.

'Georgian meals simultaneously offer a

Clockwise from top: an aerial view of Tbilisi; Rkatsiteli is one of the most popular of Georgia's native varieties; Zaliko Bodjadze making qvevri by hand; Georgia's national dish is the cheese-filled bread called khachapuri – an egg tops the Adjarian version



Left: Tsolikouri white wine from Ramaz Nikoladze

range of dishes, from cheesy khachapuri pies and potato dumplings to pickled blossoms, vegetables with walnut pastes, and herbed meat stews. It takes an unusual wine to marry well with each of these sensations, and our so-called orange, skin-macerated white wines do this brilliantly,' says Iago Bitarishvili, whose wife, Marina Kurtanidze – Georgia's first female winemaker at Mandili – cooks for visitors to their winery ([facebook.com/lagos-wine](https://www.facebook.com/lagos-wine)). They are not far from Saguramo, the Georgian national grapevine collection and nursery, where 400 native varieties are grown (saguramoagro@yahoo.com).

Georgia is wedged between the Caucasus

mountain ranges. There it is too high to grow grapes, but the spectacular mountain scenery and ancient villages are worth exploring. The main wine regions, from Kakheti in the east and Imereti, Racha and Samegrelo in the west, are within a few hours' drive from the more central Tbilisi, the handsome capital city.

The country has the same area as Scotland or Ireland, so it's possible to cover a lot of ground in one week. The best way to travel is by car, ideally with a Georgian driver who is accustomed to navigating the roads – and the cows. Animals roam free in Georgia, a symbol of the independence the Georgians so deeply want to maintain. **D**

Carla Capalbo is a food, wine and travel writer. Her book, Tasting Georgia: a food & wine journey in the Caucasus, will be published in 2016