

A WINE LOVER'S GUIDE TO GEORGIA

After decades of conflict that obscured much of its rich cultural heritage, this country is rediscovering itself. Celebrate its rebirth with a winding adventure from the bars and restaurants of the capital to the family-run wineries of rural villages, says **Carla Capalbo**

Three of my grandparents were born in Italy; they emigrated to America before World War I but never forgot their Italian childhoods. My Piemontese grandmother, Marie, often talked to me about her own grandmother. She lived simply in the country, had a pet pig called Cleopatra, made cheese from her cows' milk, kept silkworms, extracted lanolin from sheep's wool and grew vegetables and grapes for the family's wine.

I was resident in Italy for more than 20 years and spent much of that time living in – and writing about – rural communities in several regions. By then, European Union rules had ended this type of integrated agriculture. Even in areas where monoculture was shunned, it was no longer possible nor desirable to produce a little of everything.

Vineyards are rarely still interspersed with fruit trees; you can no longer keep a few goats or cows for home use: most animals have been grouped indoors with more industrial husbandry. I always regretted not having been able to experience Sicily or Piedmont as it was then. Self-sufficient agriculture appeals to me and seems ever more important.

Maybe that's why I fell in love so quickly with Georgia. Within days of being there for the first time, eight years ago, I felt I'd finally found home. Driving west from Tbilisi with a group of fellow wine lovers who, like me, had attended the second international qvevri symposium, I parsed the landscape from my window. Here were simple, two-storey houses surrounded by vegetable patches, fruit trees and vines that resembled my childhood stories. Fields were small and often flanked >



‘Being there for the first time, I felt I’d finally found home’



by woods or decorative wrought iron. As our coach slowed and wove around cows idling in the road, or passed pigs lazing in muddy ditches, I felt a kind of thrill.

So many animals are free in Georgia, they're a symbol of the country's desire for self-determination. (The animals have owners, but they're let out of their pens each morning to spend the days as they choose.) I might not yet have mastered Georgian, but I understood something of the country's rural lifestyle.

Slow the pace

Georgia is undergoing a period of self-discovery after the fall of the Soviet system, of which it was an unwilling part. If the Soviet times imposed a vision of standardised industrialisation and tried to cancel much of Georgia's cultural heritage, today the focus is on unearthing and celebrating those native customs. From polyphonic song and dances to regional recipes and native grapes, this is an exciting time of rebirth in Georgia.

The best way to experience these things is to visit rural winemakers. Many hospitable families have begun receiving guests in their homes and wineries (often the same thing), offering meals, wine tastings, music and more. Of the dozen or so regions in Georgia, it's primarily the central ones that produce the most wine. (The mountains of Svaneti, Kazbegi and Tusheti in the north are too high for vines to grow.) While eastern Kakheti is still by far the largest producer of grapes, the central and western parts of the country are full of fascinating people working with the ever-expanding range of native Georgian varieties.

My advice for those wanting to travel in Georgia is to do it slowly. Spend a few days in Tbilisi and then take the time to wander through small villages and side roads to really experience the countryside. The easiest way is to hire a driver (usually also the most economical solution) who can get you to what are often obscure villages and wineries. Road signage has recently improved, but navigating is sometimes tricky.

While many producers may not have modern websites, they are all on Facebook; that's the best place to reach them. Always make appointments before heading into the countryside as producers are not always available. Here is a short compendium of places to go in central and western Georgia, by region. There are many more!

Tbilisi

This beautiful city is fun to explore on foot. From the historic old town, built onto the steep Mtkvari river bank, wander up little streets of colourfully painted wooden houses –



Map: Maggie Nelson

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many of which are now hotels – to **Narikala fortress** above. From there take the funicular for a bird's-eye view of the Peace Bridge and the presidential palace. The main street, Rustaveli Avenue, is home to many grand buildings, including the **National Museum**, which houses ancient qvevri from digs, and fine early gold artefacts (www.museum.ge).

For a lunch of home-cooked flavours, try the tiny **Salobie Bia** in Ivane Machabeli Street, if you can get in. Or, in warm weather, go across the street to the **Writer's House** for a more elegant meal in the villa's shady gardens. I love eating at **Vino Underground**, where the cooked-to-order food pairs so well with the wines. This natural wine bar is still the hub for Georgia's family growers, and it's the best place to sample or buy qvevri wines (Galaktion Tabidze Street).

If you like this neighbourhood and are on a tight budget, check out **Black Tomato Hostel** (see Facebook) – it's very cool! Higher up, with great views over the city, **Hotel Gomi 19** is also affordable and incredibly welcoming (hotelgomi19@gmail.com).

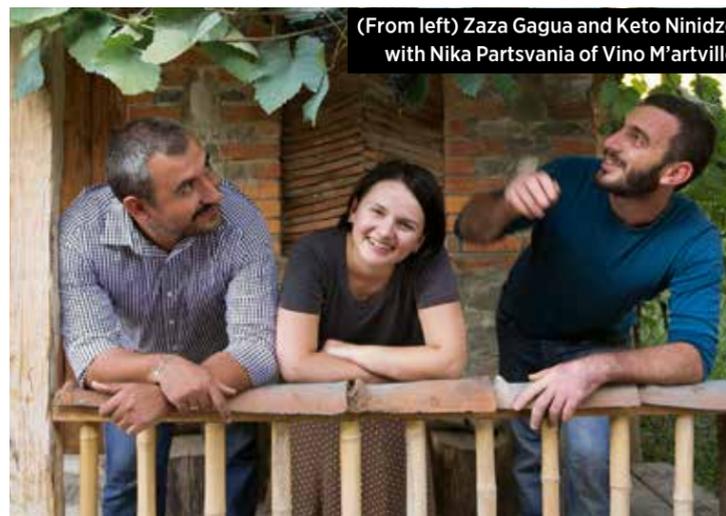
In the last five years, lots of great new places have opened. **Stamba** is a stunningly designed central hotel, brasserie and >



Carla Capalbo is the author and photographer of the award-winning book, *Tasting Georgia: A Food and Wine Journey in the Caucasus* (Pallas Athene, London; Interlink, USA). Its newly revised edition is out now in hardback and paperback



Ancient vine terraces in the Mtkvari river valley



(From left) Zaza Gagua and Keto Ninidze with Nika Partsvania of Vino M'artville



Archil Guniava's qvevri cellar



Lunch at Oda Family Marani



Scientific Research Centre of Agriculture

garden in an ex-printing factory. It's a sister project to the trendsetting **Rooms Hotels** and, between them, they have revitalised the area around Rustaveli Metro (www.stambahotel.com). Alubali is a fun, relaxed place for a drink or bite, in the courtyard garden, and it's open 'til late (Akhvlediani Street).

The **Wine Factory** is another industrial conversion featuring several bars and restaurants, including the latest version of chef Tekuna Gachechiladze's Culinarium cooking school and chef's table (see [Facebook](#)). A few streets away, at **Saidanaa** (@saidanaa_), **Nathan Moss** is producing high-quality charcuterie from Georgian pigs, and is opening a café to feature his products (Sharadhidze Street). They go so well with the qvevri wines.

Kartli & lower Mtskheta Mtianeti

This central part of Georgia is due west and a little north of Tbilisi and can be reached in a day trip from the capital. To see Georgia's 425 or more native grape varieties, book to visit the **Scientific Research Centre of Agriculture** in Saguramo (www.srca.gov.ge), an impressive viticultural institute. The national collection, begun in 2009, extends over 44ha of vines – a row for each variety. You can't taste the wines these grapes make, but it's a fascinating place, especially in season when the grapes are visible.

Not far away is Chardakhi village, where pioneering qvevri winemaker **Iago Bitarishvili** and his wife Marina Kurtanidze (www.iago.ge) have their cellar and home restaurant. The food and wine – of local white Chinuri grapes – are exceptional here (chardakhi@gmail.com).

Don't miss the iconic **Svetitskhoveli cathedral** in Mtskheta, once the country's capital and a Unesco World Heritage Site. And just outside Mtskheta, on the Tbilisi bypass road, **Salobie** is Georgia's favourite fast-food restaurant (see [Facebook](#)), selling delicious stewed beans with cornbread, kebabs and juicy khinkali dumplings.

Imereti

Further west from Tbilisi, Imereti is a region of small hills, farms and woodland, and is home to many fine family wine producers. They work in qvevri as this is a production centre for the clay winemaking pots. At Maqatubani, on the main road from Khashuri to Kutaisi, **Zaliko Bozhadze** (qvevri.maqatubani@yahoo.com) is a master potter whose wares can be seen from the road. His studio and large kiln are a few steps down from it.

Archil Guniava, in the tiny village of Kvaliti, is one of the region's finest winemakers



Ramaz Nikoladze



Iago Bitarishvili's wines



Khachapuri

(archilguniavawinecellar@gmail.com, or see [Facebook](#)). Don't miss his qvevri cellar, with buried vessels of many sizes, it's my favourite! His wines of white Tsolikouri and red Otskhanuri Sapere are fresh and drinkable.

Closer to Kutaisi, at the unpronounceable Nakhshirghele, the enfant terrible of Georgian wines, **Ramaz Nikoladze**, makes some of the purest, most complex of the qvevri wines of white (or amber) Tsolikouri. His wife Nestan is a fabulous cook too (georgianslowfood@yahoo.com). Kutaisi, the Imereti region's capital, has a great covered food market. Before the coronavirus shutdown, airlines flew into its Kutaisi airport direct from European cities. Hopefully they will again.

Samegrelo

In the country's far west, the Samegrelo region borders the Black Sea and has a more temperate, humid climate than eastern Georgia. One of my favourite places to eat and taste wines here is at **Oda Family Marani**, outside Martvili, which is famous for its spectacular river caves. It's run by Keto



Batumi's astronomical clock tower



Svetitskhoveli cathedral

'Many hospitable families have begun receiving guests in their homes and wineries, offering meals, wine tastings and more'

Ninidze and Zaza Gagaa, who each produce characterful wines from rare local varieties including the light red Ojaleshi, Orbeluri and Dzelshavi (Gagua under the banner of Vino M'artville with his friend and partner Nika Partsvania). Keto has built a fascinating outdoor wicker room with a dirt floor and open fire on which she cooks many traditional dishes (oda.wines@gmail.com).

If you're driving to or from the highlands of Svaneti, stop for a meal in Zugdidi, at **Diaroni** (www.diaroni.ge). This large restaurant serves local fare, from cheesy cornbread to spicy ribs.

Guria & Adjara

South of Samegrelo, these regions lead down the Black Sea coast to the picturesque seaport of Batumi. The vegetation of citrus and exotic plants is unique in Georgia. Until recently, tea was cultivated here and exported throughout the Soviet Union. Hazelnuts are now the favoured cash crop, but a few growers are working to re-establish the coast's native grape varieties, especially Chkhaveri. Zurab Topuridze, with his **Ibereli** brand wines (www.ibereli.com), was the first to bottle it, but other small producers now follow his lead.

Chkhaveri produces a super-drinkable, light and refreshing red-rosé that goes well with the seafood from the coast, especially the noble Black Sea turbot. You'll find it at the daily fish market in Batumi, and can get it cooked for lunch next door at the small restaurant **Balagani Fish and Grill** on Gogebashvili Street (www.gobatumi.com). Don't miss the other local speciality: egg-topped, cheesy khachapuri bread shaped like a boat.

Kakheti

For more places to visit in eastern Georgia and Tbilisi, see my Travel feature in *Decanter* June 2016 issue, also available on Decanter.com ('Georgia: Restaurants, hotels and shops').

Photographs: Carla Capalbo; Kostyantyn Manzhura/Alamy Stock Photo; Aaron Geddes/Getty Images; Grethe Ulgiel/Alamy Stock Photo