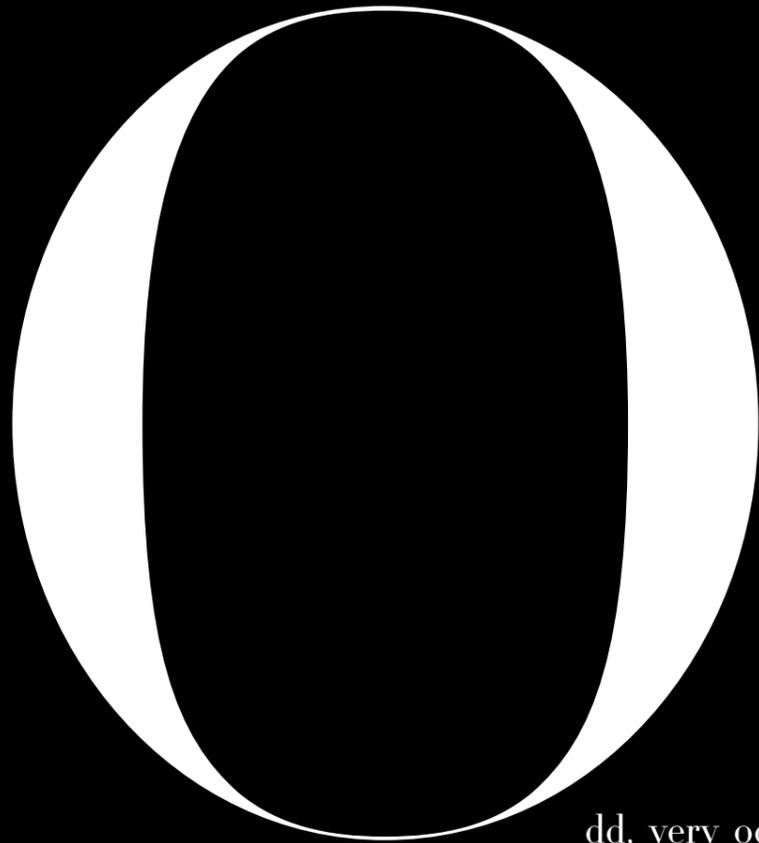


QVEVRI CULTURE

by Paul White



dd, very odd indeed, is how it felt to be sniffing a glass of wine pulled from clay pots designed in antiquity, knowing that Russian artillery guns on the opposite hills were zeroed in on the little village of Chardakhi, Kartli. Winemaker Iago Bitarishvili had said nothing about the menace beyond... but it must have been in the back of his mind constantly. A year later, it was possible to see where the Russians had recently moved down from the Ossetian hills. They were much closer now, the infantry within half a mile of cutting off the country's only artery uniting the eastern and western sides of this young republic.



A map shows it all. Russia's invasion of South Ossetia in 2008 had split the country in half, like a boil waiting to burst. Now, three newly formed salients looked more like soured teats dangling off Mother Russia's unwelcome udder. It must be horrible to wake up one morning and find your house surrounded by soldiers and told to go—now! Your family beaten, your ancestor's vineyards confiscated, everything left behind... The Georgians have been here before, far too often. They've either fought off, or been occupied by, the Mongols, the Persians, the Ottomans, the Russians, the Soviets, and now the Russians again. Over the past several hundred years, they have been free only for a short three years after World War I and, more recently, following the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Against all odds, they have remained Georgians, their culture kept alive by the uniqueness of their language, their religion, and their wine. Christianity, distinct from surrounding orthodoxies, arrived in the 4th century via St Nino, who bore a cross made from two grapevines tied together with her own hair. That cross continues as Georgia's most sacred symbol. Similarly, their ancient Proto-Kartvelian language is uniquely their own, its *yvino* the origin of what most of us call wine. And their wine is also like no other, driven by 526 autochthonous grape varieties and mother-vines that went forth to populate many parts of central Europe. It is impossible to drink wine in Georgia without long toasts asking God to watch over your future. Language, religion, and wine... Georgia's holy trinity.

And then there are their large terra-cotta pots, called *qvevri*. The first domesticated grapes were placed in these, giving birth to civilization's earliest winemaking culture.

New wine from old pots

The earliest Georgian civilizations (straddling parts of modern Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey) were the first to bring together grape domestication, enduring high-fired clay-pot-making, and the magic of winemaking. By so doing, they greatly advanced the progress of agriculture, religion, social stratification, and urbanization. That was between 7,000 and 8,000 years ago. Since then, clay-pot winemaking evolved through Phoenician, Greek, and Roman civilizations, finally reaching southern Portugal's Alentejo 2,000 years ago. Over the course of time, clay pots have disappeared from virtually everywhere except Georgia and Alentejo, where two distinct traditions have survived: one ancient, *qvevri* (pronounced *kvev-ri*); the other, a less ancient refinement of that technology, *talha* (pronounced *tall-hia*).

The current fashion for making wine in terra-cotta pots (often mistakenly referred to as amphorae, which are used for storage or transport) began just under two decades ago with a few early adopters based mainly in Northern Italy. These pioneers tended to piece together testimony from Ancient Greek and Roman texts, clarifying these theoretical road maps with practical information that was just beginning to filter out of Georgia, where clay-pot (*qvevri*) winemaking has continued unchanged to this day.

What was slightly out of kilter in this approach was that unlike the older Georgian tradition, which buried pots underground, the Roman/Mediterranean tradition made wine above ground in free-standing pots—different technologies and different techniques. And until last year, none of the new-wave winemakers knew that the Ancient Roman tradition of

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above-ground pots had continued to survive in a few small villages in southern Portugal (see "Alentejo's *Talha* Wine Traditions," *WFW* 49, pp.98–104). Compounding the tenuous nature of these connections and misconnections, neither the latter-day Georgians nor the Alentejians were aware of each other's clay-pot winemaking tradition.

The situation today has changed. Like long-lost cousins, the Georgians and Alentejians are meeting up again and sharing their insights with one another. And for the first time, practitioners of clay-pot winemaking will share their knowledge and wines this November in Tuscany at Terra Cotta Wine 2016. (Email info.artenova@gmail.com for further details.)

Qvevri v talha

Although *qvevri* and *talha* traditions differ in significant ways, they are clearly and closely related to one another. What is amazing is that after at least 2,000 years of separate evolution, both cultures use pots that are strikingly similar in shape and size, while also sharing several winemaking techniques. This suggests that a degree of evolutionary perfection had already been reached far back in ancient times. One can easily argue that this technology and its associated wine styles are perfectly suited to chemical-free winemaking in warm or hot climates where refrigeration is not available.

The major difference between these ancient technologies is that the Georgians continue to bury their *qvevri* up to their mouths underground, whereas the Alentejians continue to stand their *talhas* above ground. They both fill their pots from the top, following similar fermentation regimes. Georgians differ in bucketing their wine out from the bottom up, whereas the Alentejians let gravity drain theirs from the top down. Other differences have to do with temperature control, cleaning, preparation, maturation, skin contact, and, most important, when they drink the newest vintage and how long it lasts.

Acknowledging that there will always have been many exceptions and variations to general practice, let's first examine the similarities between the two systems. Both traditions

Top: A sculpture of St Nino's cross. Middle and bottom: Old *qvevri* testify to their former prevalence in Georgia, but growing global demand offers hope of a revival.



Photography: previous spread, courtesy of National Wine Agency, Georgia; this spread, courtesy of (top) Paul White, (middle) National Wine Agency, Georgia, (bottom) Giorgi Barikashvili

ferment mainly white grapes using extensive skin, stem, and seed contact throughout fermentation and maturation. Traditional *talha* and *qvevri* wines have no added sulfur dioxide, leaving acidity and skin tannins to take on vital antioxidant roles. The result is often a darker-hued, more visceral style of white wine—essentially, white behaving like it wants to be red.

Grapes are foot-trodden, ensuring berries are properly crushed in order to avoid explosive carbonic maceration buildup during fermentation. Alentejians use stone basins, whereas Georgians tread their grapes in impressively long, hollowed-out logs or high-walled troughs that are easily shifted from one pot hole to the next. During fermentation, the caps must be punched down five or more times a day to relieve explosive pressure and avoid spoilage. In both cases, pot openings are covered in cloth to keep insects out, leaving natural CO₂ to blanket the wines and help stave off oxidation. Contrary to normal white-winemaking practices, directly after fermentation red wines are usually transferred off their skins and seeds to a different pot for longer maturation.

From this point on, both systems and techniques differ. Traditional Alentejian *talha* wines are covered with a thin layer of olive oil that protects the wine from oxidation, with minimal tainting from the oil surface. *Talhas* are first tapped on St Martin's Day, November 11, via a hole at the bottom. Thereafter they are continuously drained from below via gravity, with skins and sediment creating a natural filter that allows glasses and pitchers to be filled until the *talha* is empty, usually by late summer. The refined design of this less ancient form of super-sized bag-in-box is that it is set up for one-pot cooking: Drop in grapes, drink until drained, clean once, and begin again.

After fermentation, Georgian *qvevri* are commonly topped off and sealed with a wooden plug interfaced with wet clay against the pot's lips. The plug is weighted down and then covered in clean sand, which is watered daily to keep the clay seal moist and airtight.

Most white wines are left on their skins and solids for six months, whereupon they are opened to be drunk or bottled or shifted into another *qvevri* for further maturation. Any left-over wine is shifted into progressively smaller storage jars. Wines are carefully bucketed out of *qvevri* without disturbing their sediment. In previous times, a clever array of gourds and baskets were used for this, but now most wine is pumped out electronically. This new approach is faster and gentler, and it also reduces oxidation.

Most reds and some whites are left in *qvevri* to mature for a year or two—or sometimes considerably longer. Last year, for example, I tasted newly bottled reds and whites at Shavnabada St George Monastery from its 2007 vintage. Both were excellent, strikingly fresh, and vibrantly fruited, with no hint of oxidation.

One age-old Georgian tradition is to seal a *qvevri* on a child's birth for his or her wedding day. Legend has it that one father was frustrated at not tasting a great vintage specially set aside for his son. After delaying marriage for more than 40 years, the son did at last marry... and the *qvevri* opened on his wedding day was universally acknowledged as being the best wine anyone had ever drunk.

Other testimony has reds drinking well at up to 20 years old. Generally, however, Georgians tend to drink their *qvevri* wine while they are still young and fresh, three or four years old being the upper limit. I asked dozens of winemakers if they had

any older wines stored away, and almost always the answer was, “What you see here is it.”

Buried up to their necks

The first question that usually pops into anyone’s mind concerning *qvevri* is, Why bury pots in the first place? But there are solid practical reasons for this. The first is temperature control. Ground temperature is more consistent and much lower than air temperature. Studies have shown that the temperature of *qvevri* wines varies by only a couple of degrees over the course of a year. Second, soil reinforces *qvevri* walls, reducing the risk of an explosion during fermentation. Third, they can’t be easily carted off by invading armies, which has clearly come in handy from time to time.

But perhaps the most compelling reason why *qvevri* were originally buried was magic—magic that evolved into religion. One of the most striking aspects of Georgia’s magnificent collection of ancient *qvevri* is that they are beautifully decorated on their exterior walls with grape bunches, pagan symbols, and markings associated with fertility cults. Because these designs never saw the light of day after the *qvevri* were buried, it’s most likely that they weren’t meant for human eyes.

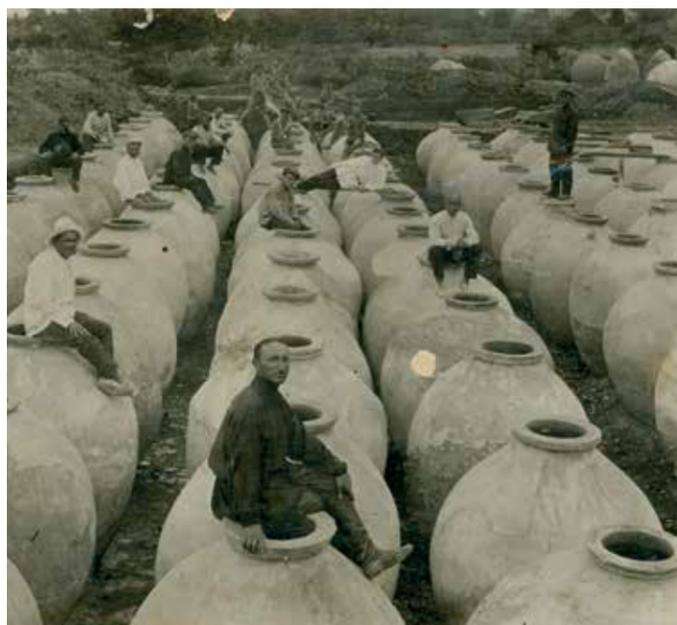
It takes little imagination to see the potent symbolism of a womb-shaped vessel, buried up to its neck, receiving an annual offering of grapes that Mother Earth magically transforms into a sacred libation—a beverage that would go on to celebrate the best moments in life long into the future. And from that arose the need for a priestly class to watch over the whole process—from the making of the *qvevri*, to the distribution of the wine. Alongside that grew rudimentary scientific knowledge about growing grapes and making ever-better wine. And when Christians came on the scene, they built their churches on top of pagan temples that were built above *qvevri*, maintaining wine’s central association with religion. Religion and wine have been inextricably intertwined in Georgia longer than anywhere else on earth.

Cleanliness is next to godliness

A second reasonable question to ask concerning *qvevri* burial is, How do they stay clean, given direct contact with soil? I posed this question to Iago Bitarishvili. He readily admitted he had a fungal problem with the first *qvevri* he buried. His mistake was to plant it directly into the earth, rather than following the traditional method of surrounding the *qvevri* in clean river sand, which inhibits fungal growth and increases aeration. The only solution was to dig it out and start over—which is why *qvevri* winemakers are ruthlessly obsessed with cleanliness.

Another important solution toward keeping wines pure and uncorrupted is to coat the interior with beeswax. This is done directly after firing, ensuring that the wax penetrates deeply into the ceramic pores. Not only does this waterproof the pot from seepage in both directions, it also creates an almost airtight barrier for better maturation. And the beeswax itself has antiseptic qualities.

Lime is often applied to the *qvevri*’s exterior before burial and is mixed with powder to scrub the interior of the pot before filling. Scrubbing was traditionally done with a layer of cherry bark attached to a long pole. Both cherry bark and St John’s wort brushes were employed for their antiseptic qualities. Nowadays, unheated power-washers are also used to



While the egg shape of these pots is pleasing, it’s the formal union of sphere atop cone that does the work. The complex thermal and fluid dynamics that flow out of this form are some of many complex reasons why both *qvevri* and *talha* ended up the shape they are (and why the biodynamic egg may have got things upside down)

ensure residual wax stays in place. All in all, the cleaning regime for *qvevri* is both exhaustive and exhausting.

I was pleasantly surprised by how little dirty or oxidized wine I tasted after touring a couple of dozen *qvevri* producers. After tasting 100 wines or so, I encountered only three that had fungal issues and a couple that were oxidized. Given that few of these wines had any added sulfur dioxide, it was impressive testimony to the quality of wine that the *qvevri* system can deliver.

Shape and size matter

Dr Giorgi Dakishvili, one of Georgia’s leading winemakers, tells me, “The shape of *qvevri* is very important.” Believing “the cap must be as thin as possible” at fermentation, Dr Dakishvili fills “only to 80 percent of capacity, allowing the cap to float at the *qvevri*’s widest part.” This, in turn, facilitates an optimal sequence of sedimentation, where bitter seeds and leaves settle, first falling to the bottom where they are covered deeply in sediment, allowing the layered stems and skins above them to exchange more positively with the wine. In a broader-based vessel, seeds and leaves would impart more bitterness to the wine.

Dakishvili explains that size is important, too. Smaller 500-liter *qvevri* ferment at 18–22°C (64–72°F), resulting in wine with “more fruit and less tannin structure. Temperatures in 1,000-liter jars are 22–24°C [72–75°F], with 2,000-liter *qvevri* producing more structure and less fruitiness at 24–28°C [75–82°F].” He sees 3,000-liter *qvevri* as the “upper limit,” with temperatures around 30°C (86°F) risking “stuck” fermentations and overcooked fruit characters. Given that *qvevri* wines employ high skin and stem contact, higher fermentation temperatures are important for tannin polymerization.

“Green tannins from unripe stems are very dangerous,” he stresses. One of the universal challenges with *qvevri* winemaking is “to follow a formula with six months’ skin contact, regardless of whether it is in a cool or hot climate.” Producers should “adjust the time on skins according to the

Top: Giorgi Barisashvili, who shares his extensive knowledge of *qvevri* in his book. Middle and bottom: Photographic and physical reminders of a glorious past.

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vintage conditions.” Just as important, skin contact needs to be adapted to suit individual grape varieties.

Returning to shape, this is critical. From an aesthetic point of view, while the plump, egg shape of these pots is clearly pleasing, it’s the formal union of sphere atop cone that does the work. The complex thermal and fluid dynamics that flow out of this form are some of many complex reasons why both *qvevri* and *talha* ended up the shape they are (and why the biodynamic egg may have got things upside down). There is much more going on here than meets the eye.

Look whose smoking that pot now

As much art as science is involved in *qvevri*-making. Although it isn’t easily articulated, you can see it in the hands and eyes of the men who still work the clay as it has been done for thousands of years. The art and the science are both completely internalized, as if magically absorbed into the DNA of their ancestors and passed on now through instinct.

Among the five noble pottery professions, *qvevri*-makers were always the elite. Where once there were hundreds of them throughout Georgia, that number has dwindled to a handful of noted professionals scattered around half a dozen villages. And while the tradition had always been passed from father to son, now it hangs on through extended families, uncles or cousins carrying on the business, if at all. Zaza Khilashvili, a sixth-generation *qvevri*-maker from Vardisubani (Kakheti), says making *qvevri* “is in his blood.” With a quick wink, he adds, “Wine made in *qvevri* radiates a warmth from the maker’s heart into the drinker.” You just have to love these people.

Forming a 300-liter *qvevri* takes about a week, with the more common 600–1,200-liter sizes needing proportionately more time and 2,000–3,000-liter pots taking a month or more. Walls are hand-built, rising each day in 1–2-inch (2.5–5cm) layers and finally capped with the neck and rim. After drying, several pots are fired together in a barrel-vaulted brick kiln the size of a car garage. Three truckloads of hard wood are consumed over six days of firing. The key to success is in a gradual, even firing, tended 24/7, until the final stages, where, as Zaza says, “the pots glow like lava.” All this is done by eye and sensation: no measurements, no thermometers.

Qvevri-making is stunning to behold, as much about hand and eye coordination as it is about rhythm, movement, touch, and an inner dialogue between intellect and sense. Apart from their base, the pots are too large for turning or simple, layer-upon-layer hand-building methods. They require a unique methodology.

I watched over the shoulder of master builder Zaliko Bojadze from Makatubani (Imereti) as he extended the height of the pots as if by magic. Grabbing a 2 x 8-inch (5 x 20-cm) cylinder of clay, he proceeded to smash this into the inner wall at a perpendicular angle. Reinforcing the outer wall with his other hand, the clay was simultaneously pressed and twisted in a fluid motion that made it seem as if the pot was inhaling the clay before my eyes. A half-hour later, the pot stood taller, and Zaliko had moved on to the next in line.

After almost 60 years of experience, Zaliko insists that this method ensures better integration and structural stability than simple layering and smoothed-out walls. What was most striking was the symmetry that flowed from the process. Little, if any, adjustment to shape or size was needed afterward.

A few simple scrapes with a clay palette to smooth out a bump or too, and that was it. The pot, 5ft (1.5m) wide, looked as if it had been turned on a wheel. Confident in the results, Zaliko says, “If it cracks horizontally, then the error is in my building; if vertically, then the fault is in the firing.”

Two kinds of clay need to be mixed together to achieve the perfect ratio of elasticity and strength. The finer, more plastic clay feels like Play-Doh; the other is grainier and heavier, adding strength. Zaliko and his helpers mine these from the steep banks of a fast-flowing mountain river in the adjacent village. The exact source changes over time, so care must be taken to dig out each vein by shovel and work them together on-site, adjusting as they go to ensure the right ratio of elasticity. Clay selection is clearly an art unto itself.

The following day I felt humbled after an hour-long trek in a 4x4 up a windy, potholed gravel road that narrowed into a muddy trail, filled with cattle, pigs, and chickens, that wound through a tiny village called Tkemlovani (Imereti). Life looked very hard, barely subsistent, with few of modern life’s most basic comforts: indoor plumbing, electricity, heat... There, brothers Lado and Temur Kapanadze are among the last to make beautiful *qvevri* in a village where many families once lived well off this craft.

Winemakers say that *qvevri* deliver different qualities to wine, suggesting that the clay sources, regional styles, and craftsmanship are strong factors in the final product. The pots become a terroir unto themselves. This was reinforced during interviews with expert Giorgi Barisashvili, who can identify at least six major regional styles by their outward appearance, fired surfaces, and construction quality. His excellent little bible, *Making Wine in Qvevri* (Elkana, Tbilisi; 2016; Barisashvili@gmail.com), identifies past masters and the many villages once famous for their *qvevri*-makers. Few now produce pots, and the industry is a ghost of its former self.

But there is hope. A decade ago, a 1,000-liter *qvevri* could be had for €200. Today, global demand has driven prices anything from five to ten times higher. This is offering new opportunities for young people to take up the trade, with a state school about to open to help meet the increased demand.

More important still, it offers the promise that the skills the Kapanadze brothers and others have kept alive through a life of very hard work and long hours may finally give them their just rewards.

Dashing expectations

Touring Georgia helped clear up a few misconceptions. Previously I had assumed that being made in *qvevri* shaded all white wines in the direction of “orange wine.” It turns out that I had mostly been sampling warmer Khaketi-region whites, where long skin contact is normal. In wetter, cooler parts of western and southern Georgia, whites are more often fermented off their skins or with minimal skin contact, because of the greener tannins and so on. Surprisingly, many of those wines are as light in color, floral, and fresh as wine made in stainless steel. The same factors play into the wide range of red and white grape varieties found inside Georgia. Each needs special adaptation to *qvevri* techniques. It’s clear that there is a far greater appreciation of this inside Georgian circles now than a few years ago. Science is re-infusing traditional methodology.

Another of my misconceptions was the extent of *qvevri* winemaking today. I had assumed it was much more universal than it is. From hundreds of thousands in the past, it has shrunk to just a few thousand families who continue to make their own wine at home. Apart from three medium-sized wineries—Marani, Tbilvino, and Schuchmann—most of the 30 producers who bottle *qvevri* wine for sale source their fruit from vineyards ranging from 0.5ha to 4ha (1.2–10 acres). The total production of *qvevri* wine is just a drop in the bucket, at 1 percent of Georgia’s annual 100 million liters. Its real value, however, is far more significant than this suggests.

Georgian Wine’s Irakli Cholobargia comments, “*Qvevri* wine has been instrumental in drawing attention to Georgian wine and opening up new markets to exports.” For those of us who fumble over the difficult pronunciations and complex spelling of Georgia’s grapes and regions, this is no small accomplishment. While the first wave of *qvevri* wine began flowing out of Georgia as a tangent of the natural-wine movement, it is now working its way into the broader global market, bringing all of Georgian wine in its wake.

Qvevri wine is no longer a “first adopter’s wine.” Cholobargia again: “Consumers are always keen to open something new and different, which Georgian wine delivers perfectly at the moment.” He appreciates that “*qvevri* winemaking’s story creates a mystique and a talking point.” In the longer term, Georgia always has “an abundance of indigenous grape varieties” for consumers to continue to explore further. Georgian wine is in a good place now, and it owes a lot to *qvevri* wine’s increasing popularity.

What goes around comes around

I finished my tour following Tbilisi’s River Mtkvari high up into the mountains near its source in Turkey. Some believe that this area may have been the cradle of Georgia’s earliest grape varieties. High above the valley floor is Vardzia, a troglodyte city carved into cliffs by monks more than 1,200 years ago. Their caves were probably carved into others that had been inhabited for tens of thousands of years before that. Original *qvevri* from that period are still intact. Nearby is a room-sized, two-story gravity-fed wine press carved into another cliff at Chachkari. And close to this, a 400-year-old vine winds its way up a tall cherry tree.

A couple of kilometers down the road I meet Giorgi Natenadze. Giorgi has long dreamed of two things: restoring the Meskhur Valley’s ancient grape population and resurrecting abandoned terraces, both decimated by the Ottomans in the 16th century. Ironically, before proceeding to destroy them, the Ottomans inventoried what was grown, listing more than 300 grape varieties. Over the past 14 years, Giorgi has resurrected 24 of the lost “named” varieties and another 40 that are distinct but have still to be identified. He collected these from fallow vineyards, growing up trees and along streams.

The good news is that the current government has helped bring Giorgi’s dream closer to realization, and the terraces are being replanted with two dozen of the nearly extinct grape varieties. It is hoped that these vines will eventually go on to repopulate the entire valley. The other good news is that the *qvevri* wine that Giorgi made from the 550lb (250kg) of grapes he picked from the 400-year-old vine at Chachkari is ready for bottling. More—much more—is still to come. ■

Photography courtesy of Giorgi Barisashvili

NOTES

All of the following wines are natural, unfiltered, and unfinned, with no added sulfur dioxide. Because some of the grape varieties may be unfamiliar, these are italicized. The wine regions, from warmer to cooler, are Kakheti, Kartli, Imereti, Guria, Samtskhe-Javakheti, Samegrelo.

WHITE OR ORANGISH WINES

Orgo Rkatsiteli 2012 Shalauri, Kakheti (12.5% ABV)

From 50-year-old vines. Deep amber color. Honeyed mineral aromas initially, then honey subsides, developing into more dried orange-peel, hay, and almond notes. Ultra-clean in the mouth and full-bodied, cut through with very fine tannins. Long, fade-away finish. | 90

Orgo Kisi 2013 Shalauri, Kakheti (12.5% ABV)

Similar amber color, fruitier, more freshly fruited than the Rkatsiteli above. Dried apricot, spice, and exotic marzipan aromas. Ultra-smooth, with spice, dried apricot, and cider-like flavors on the finish. Shows more acidic punch than the Rkatsiteli. | 92

Nika Dato Noah Rkatsiteli 2013 Ananga, Kakheti

Old bush vines yield intensely concentrated aromas of orange and green tea. Thick and densely textured, with succulent, tart orange-peel flavors, firm acidity and tannins. Great length. | 94

Our Wine Rkatsiteli 2012 Kardanakhi, Kakheti

From biodynamically farmed old vines, no skin contact. Shows very clean, pure minerality on the nose; spicity, with the faintest hints of orange peel and dried apricots. Surprisingly succulent and freshly fruited in the mouth. Soft, fleshy, and very pure. Great wine. | 90

Pheasant’s Tears Mtsvane 2013 Signaghi, Kakheti (12% ABV)

From 70-year-old vines, kept on skins for three months. Interesting Muscat-like spiciness. Medium-bodied, grippy, and persistent. With air, the tannins fine out into a long, tapered finish. | 88

Lagvinari Krakhuna 2013 Upper Bakurtsikhe, Kakheti

Dark colors and savory aromas. Extraordinary mouthfeel: full-bodied, rich, and densely textured, all underscored by fine, long, firm tannins. Elegant for its considerable size. | 90

Iagos Wine Chinuri 2013 Kartli (13% ABV)

Mineral aromas with spicy aniseed high tones. Full-bodied, slick, and long, with fine tannins and acidity. | 89

David Kobidze’s Wine Cellar Chkaveri 2015 Chokhatauri, Guria (11.8% ABV)

Free-run juice, blanc de noir style plays out in mineral aromatics, very pure, freshly fruited, pear flavors, and citrus-like acidity. Slick and seamless textures end in a perfectly balanced finish. | 90

Simon Chkheidze’s Cellar Obchuri Krakhuna 2015 Obcha, Imereti (11.5% ABV)

Mineral-based aromatics with just a hint of caramelized sesame/sunflower seeds in the background. With air, these take on lemon, marmalade, and orange-zest notes. Clean, seamless, linear style, with fine acidity and great length. | 90

Simon Chkheidze’s Cellar Obchuri Tsolikouri 2015 Obcha, Imereti (11.7% ABV)

No skin-contact. Fresh green-stem, artichoke, and mineral aromas, eventually developing more dried-herb, white-blossom florals. Finely viscous, balanced by firm acidity and fine tannins. Fuller and fruitier than the Krakhuna above. Textures flesh out considerably over 24 hours, growing and evolving positively. | 90

RED OR REDDISH WINES

Orgo Saperavi 2013 Shalauri, Kakheti (13.5% ABV)

Packed with savory salami meatiness and red-fruit notes. Plush, velvety mouthfeel is balanced out with very fine, very ripe tannins. Quite expansive mid-palate, followed with a very long, tapered finish. Afterward, a lovely lip-smacking juiciness merges with fine tannins that coat the mouth. | 96

Temí Saperavi 2012 Gremi, Kakheti (14% ABV)

A certified organic, nonprofit cooperative supporting children with special needs. Broadly floral on opening, with pronounced fresh mulberry/blackberry aromas. Very fresh and lively, mouth-filling and sappy, with a chewy, black-/red-cherry juiciness. Great fruit extract on the finish. The 2014 had similar characters and the 2013 Rkatsiteli is stunningly good. | 89

Nika Amore Saperavi 2013 Ananga, Kakheti

Forty days’ skin-contact, two years in *qvevri*. Quite floral, mineral, red-fruit aromas, with sappy, juicy, dried red-cherry flavors and sour-cherry bitterness carried through a long, fine finish. A bit Nebbiolo-like. | 90

Pheasant’s Tears Polyphony 2013 Signaghi, Kakheti (12% ABV)

A field blend of 417 white, red, and pink grape varieties, co-fermented over three weeks. Opening softly with a melange of mineral, red- and black-fruited aromas and flavors. Ripe, sweet-tart fruits

integrate beautifully into textures pierced by high-toned acidity and fine, multilayered tannins. A wine with many small, modest voices creating a harmonic whole, far greater than its parts. Wow, what a crescendo this wine has! | 94

Pheasant’s Tears Saperavi 2008 Signaghi, Kakheti

Kept three years in *qvevri*. Broad dried-herb and red-fruit florals. Soft, silky, with finely polymerized tannins wedded into a long, tapered finish. Flavors hang on the tip of the tongue for minutes. | 96

Lagvinari Chkaveri 2013 Upper Bakurtsikhe, Kakheti (12% ABV; organic)

Opens with fresh, floral, red-fruit aromas. Impressive focus and minerality throughout. Enters with a glacine texture and ends with a long, ethereal finish. Well-balanced, with beautifully integrated, fine tannins. | 96

Amiran Vepkhvadze’s Wine Cellar Otskhanuri Sapere 2015 Zestaponi, Imereti (12.5% ABV)

A red-pulp grape variety reminiscent of Portuguese Alicante Bouschet, hence reduced, 10-day skin contact. Savory, aromatic mix of licorice and black fruits flows into similar flavors. Smooth entry, full-bodied, slick, and persistent, ending in a mouthful of firm tannins. | 89

Archil Guniava’s Wine Celler’s Kvaliti Otskhanuri Sapere and Tsolikari 2015 Zestaponi, Imereti (12% ABV)

Fermentation starts with 50% Tsolikari, then 50% red Otskhanuri is added one week later. Lovely, lifted, spicy, fresh strawberry and cherry aromas. Silky smooth and finely viscous, with fine light tannins and fruit through the finish. A pretty little star of wine and refreshingly Dolcetto-like. | 89

Vino Martville Ojaleshi 2015 Martvili, Samegrelo

One month, full skin ferment. Savory, minerally driven red-fruit aromatics. Very even, very gentle and fine in the mouth, with condensed textures, great back-palate length, and fine tannins. Finishes with a lovely cherry/berry juiciness. | 90

Simon Chkheidze’s Cellar Otskhanuri Saphere 2013 (12% ABV)

Offers up white-pepper, pomegranate, and mineral aromatics. Smooth and continuous, taut and linear and well fruited throughout. A piercing wine style, with fine, firm, Tannat-like lip tannins and red fruits pinpointing on the tip of the tongue for minutes. | 92

Giorgi Natenadze’s Cellar 2010 (Akhalsikhe, Samtskhe-Javakheti)

A dry red blend of co-fermented local white *Tskhenis Dzudzu Tetri* (Horse Breast) and red *Kharistvala* and *Meskhuri Sapere*. Ultra-juicy—a mix of black- and red-cherry-like aromas and flavors. Soft, rounded, and pleasant. | 87