



# Georgia's Always on my Mind

Words: Heleri Rande • Photography: © Argot Murelius (unless otherwise stated)

A blend of ancient tradition and modern hospitality is revitalising the F&B offer in the former Soviet republic.



The qvevri is still used to make wine in Georgia



The supra is one of the foundations  
of Georgian hospitality



The guest is the gift from God is a common local folk proverb in Georgia, which explains much of the underlying hospitality that one receives when visiting this former Soviet republic bordering Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey. Nestled in between the Caucasus mountains in the north, deserts in the south and the Black Sea in the west, this tiny country has long been a political hotspot, resulting in a complex history. But despite the many hardships that locals have had to endure down the years, Georgia remains immensely proud of its heritage, fully embracing the influences of the past on its unique F&B culture.

Georgia's winemaking traditions, which go back 8,000 years, are a case in point. Some producers still use an age-old clay vessel known as a qvevri; the grapes are fermented with their mashed skins and stems in underground conditions, giving the more traditional white wines an amber-like hue, whilst the reds have a certain punchiness to them. "In Georgian, the word qvevri means 'that which is buried below'," explains John Wurdeman, co-founder of the Pheasant's Tears winery in the eastern province of Kakheti. Many Georgian winemakers now use the more common method of barrel ageing, it is true, but their unfiltered, organic wines are also making inroads into top restaurants around the world.

Kakheti, about 90 minutes' drive from the capital Tbilisi, is notable for having more than 500 grape varieties. Many of these are veritable tongue-twisters – try memorising red ones such as saperavi and tavkveri or their white counterparts rkatsiteli and mtsvane – though it is surely only a matter of time before more western restaurants begin to stock them, especially given the region's notable track record of crafting wines free from chemicals and additives such as sulphites. "The Georgian way of making wine is the closest and most gentle way from vineyard to glass," adds Wurdeman.

In Georgia, winemaking goes hand in hand with the country's food culture. Tbilisi was once a trade stop on the Silk Road so it is no wonder that a typical table here spans an array of world cuisines. There is also an entire custom of feasting, or supra as it is called locally – one of the

foundations of Georgian hospitality. The supra, which lasts for hours and encompasses the best local food and wine, is characterised by an elaborate procedure led by the tamada (toastmaster), complete with injections of polyphonic music and loud political debates. Often the dishes are specific to each historical province, and so are the songs and dances. In Georgia, a night in a local restaurant, or at someone's home, will most likely be a journey through the history of the country.

So what sort of food can you expect on your plate? Well, the country produces a host of ingredients that appear again and again in its most popular meals. Small shops and markets around Georgia have an abundance of walnuts, hazelnuts, garlic, herbs and spices, which are the perfect accompaniment to the numerous cheese and meat dishes. One of the staples of the Georgian dining table is the open cheese bread known as khachapuri; many cheese varieties can be used, but the most common is a lightly salted fresh cow's milk. The best-known variety of the bread, the Adjara kind, has a whole egg yolk and a slice of butter dropped in the middle, making the dish heavy yet delicious. By adding seasonal bean stuffing and aromatic herbs to the bread, the dish becomes known as lobiani.

Another Georgian favourite that nods to the east is the khinkali dumpling. Filled with spiced meat that flavours the juices inside, there is a particular way to eat this mouth-watering dough ball: slurping up the broth, before going for the filling. Sweet dishes are also on the menu here; a well-known dessert that makes for a colourful backdrop on market photos is churchkhela, a dried string of walnuts repeatedly dipped into a hot grape mix.

Whilst the food and drink traditions of the country are deeply rooted in the past, moves are afoot to bring more contemporary touches to the kitchens of Tbilisi. One of the pioneers of modern Georgian cuisine is leading chef Tekuna Gachechiladze, who runs a restaurant, Café Littera, and a cooking school, Culinarium, in the capital. Trying to break down the culinary walls so tenaciously built up by the country's long Soviet occupation, Gachechiladze is quick to admit that her early days were not the easiest, especially as a female chef. Nowadays, however, the huge tourism



Stamba Hotel won The New Concept of the Year award at AHEAD Europe  
Photography: © Adjara Group

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influx and growing expatriate population have combined to help Gachechiladze's cooking gain both a national and international following.

On the topic of tourism arrivals, Georgia has most definitely put itself on the map in the last couple of years. Tourism spend rose by 30% in the second quarter of 2018 compared to a year earlier, and there is growing awareness of the need to provide foreign visitors with suitable accommodation, eating venues and infrastructure. With many hotel projects in the pipeline, and major brands jostling to establish a foothold in the Caucasus, today's market looks more appetising than ever before for those working in hospitality.

One of the biggest visionaries in the country's hotel sector is Valeri Chekheria, CEO of Adjara Group, who, after spending many years in New York, moved back to his homeland looking to make a big impact on the domestic market. His hard work

and dedication quickly paid off and as a result gained him widespread international acclaim from across the industry. At the AHEAD Europe ceremony held in London in November 2018, the group's latest innovative opening in Tbilisi, Stamba Hotel, won New Concept of the Year award. This conversion of an old publishing house into a modern hotel received lavish praise from the judges for “complementing the Brutalist nature of the original architecture, whilst bringing a new lease of life to the locale”. Besides Stamba, the group's varied portfolio also includes Rooms Hotel Tbilisi, Rooms Hotel Kazbegi, Fabrika Hostel Tbilisi and Holiday Inn Tbilisi, with many more noteworthy projects currently under development.

It is clear that Georgia will continue to attract curious travellers, especially experience-seeking millennials who are keen to explore and live adventurously. Whilst the capital city of Tbilisi and the adjacent Kakheti wine region are the easiest to visit, especially for a long weekend, the magnificent remote mountains of Tusheti, the resort town of Batumi on the Black Sea, the snowy peaks of Gudauri and the Caucasian uplands of Kazbegi also stand to benefit. Rising from the ashes of the Soviet era, modern-day Georgia is a phoenix flying high – and hungry to share its distinctive take on F&B with the wider world. ●