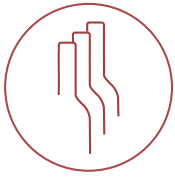
Granik's Guide to Georgian Wines



Granik's Guide to Georgian Wines
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Contents

Editor's Note

For several years, as great numbers of Georgian wines slowly began to appear in shops and restaurants, individual members of the team behind Granik's Guide to Georgian Wines had recognized the need for a buyer's aid. There was no correlation between price and quality: there were superb wines with value pricing and mediocre wines at absurdly high prices. Unlike other major winegrowing regions and countries, Georgia lacked a tool to help potential customers – be they importers, local tourists, or consumers worldwide – select among the many Georgian wines available. Not until 2019 did the idea fully coalesce to engage a tasting panel, launch the tasting, and produce a guide designed to identify the best of Georgian wine production, to stimulate interest and demand for Georgian wines, and to help Georgian producers identify the appropriate price points for their wines to be competitive on the world market.

Barely weeks after the tasting for this Guide, the COVID-19 pandemic swept the globe, creating challenges not just in the Guide's production, but to economies globally, and especially within the winegrowing and hospitality industries. Nevertheless, we believe that "this too shall pass." It is our collective hope that Granik's Guide will entice wine lovers to explore more Georgian wines, will give them confidence that their purchases will bring great pleasure. As of this writing, poised to publish this first edition and begin planning our next, we are optimistic that Georgian wine will survive now – as it always has – moving from strength to strength.

Acknowledgments

Thanks are due first and foremost, to the producers, who provided their wines and kindly answered our questionnaire regarding their wineries. The National Wine Agency of Georgia helped with logistics. Zaira Razgoev provided invaluable administrative and organizational support, developing the database and ensuring that the tastings flowed without a hitch. Georgie Apkhazava did the yeoman's labor throughout, collecting, collating, and schlepping the wines, glasses, decanters and everything else one could think necessary. Irakli Chkhaidze of 8000 Vintages also provided valuable assistance.

An Introduction to Granik's Guide to Georgian Wines

A newcomer to Georgian wines can be confounded by the many labels and styles. Many people feel lost when confronted with unfamiliar grape names, regions, and wine terms. This guide was designed to help the curious wine drinker make intelligent choices among the many wines available to ensure the greater likelihood of pleasure when opening a bottle of Georgian wine. Further, by highlighting the best Georgia has to offer, our aim is to applaud all producers, big and small, who are making enjoyable wines. Additionally, we aim to encourage all Georgian wine producers to focus on quality, to make the best wines possible expressing their unique grape varieties and distinctive terroirs.

This book also offers a "short course" in Georgian wine, providing a background into Georgian wine history and its rapid development over the past two decades. It serves as a resource, offering definitions of key wine styles and terms; descriptions of significant wine regions and indigenous varieties; industry statistics; and a brief dive into Georgian wine culture, especially into the qvevri (the traditional Georgian vessel for fermenting and storing wine), and traditional Georgian winemaking techniques[1]. Brief winery descriptions and contact information are provided for all award-winning wines. A selection of wine-focused wine bars, restaurants, and hotels in wine country (which is almost the whole country!) concludes the volume.

[1] For a more comprehensive study of these topics, see Granik, L. *The Wines of Georgia* (2020)

The Modern Revival of Georgian Wine

Georgia's uninterrupted tradition of winemaking stretches back at least 8000 years. Physical evidence of this tradition throughout the country abounds; excavation and archeological study of many ancient sites continues in Georgia with great pride and fervor. Ancient qvevri, the egg-shaped clay vessels in which wine was traditionally fermented and stored, and marani (wine cellars) are scattered throughout Georgia, including its capital, Tbilisi. In our common era, Saint Nino brought Christianity to Georgia in the fourth century, when she fashioned the Georgian Cross from grapevines. Fast-forward to Aleksandre Chavchavadze and Prince Ivane Mukhranbatoni (both of whom introduced French varieties and winemaking practices to Georgia in the 1800s) and through to today, Georgian winemaking has evolved and become tightly woven within Georgian culture and identity. There also is a long-standing tradition of home winemaking, even in city apartments; wine grapes can be purchased at city markets.

Since the re-establishment of Georgian independence in 1991, and especially since the beginning of the 21st century, the Georgian wine industry has been in a mad rush to rebuild and to reinvent itself. It is not simply that wine is central to Georgian identity – which it is – but also that wine constitutes a significant percentage of the country's exports, and, along with tourism, a central component of the country's economy.

The modern wine industry, however, follows several different tracks. First to develop after independence were the larger companies that arose, phoenix-like, out of the ashes of the hulking cooperatives from the Soviet era. Producing consistent and unadorned wines from native Georgian grape varieties became the order of the day. Produced by trained enologists, these wines largely were of two types: first, the dry red and white wines from Saperavi, Rkatsiteli, and Mtsvane; and the semi-sweet wines long (and still) favored by the Russian market, which commanded roughly 90% of the export market until Russia imposed its import embargo on Georgian wines in 2006.

With the embargo, Georgia hustled to diversify its export market. Georgian producers suddenly had to make wines that appealed to consumers unfamiliar with the old Soviet brand names to which the Russians were accustomed and attached. More important, they had to up their game, as suddenly they were competing in the international market, proving their accessibility, attractiveness, and uniqueness to international consumers who already had a panoply of excellent choices. Georgian producers had to focus seriously on

quality to develop Georgia's reputation as a world-class wine producer.

This period also gave rise to another extreme in the market: small-scale, family producers aiming to sell what was their home wine, made for family and friends, on the commercial market. One consequence of the Soviet collapse and the privatization of formerly large state farms and cooperatives was the extreme parcellation of properties. Those who worked at these farms were allocated lots ranging from 0.5 to a single hectare. Today, many of these tiny landholders sell their grapes. But others recently have decided to bring to market what was their homemade wine. Instead of selling thousands of cases, they produce a few hundred or a few thousand bottles. Most have no formal winemaking education having simply observed or helped their forebears make wine.

These wines, whether produced in small, stainless steel tanks or in qvevri, often ferment with indigenous yeasts and are bottled with little to no sulfur dioxide. Recent government support has enabled the proliferation of these family cellars and they have captured the imagination of a world longing for a simpler method of winemaking as an antidote, or at least in contrast to modern, mass-produced, corporate wine. The style of these wines can be quite varied: Some are delicious expressions of an old tradition. Others are rustic and tannic ("grandpa's style," as it is remembered). Many are simple quaffers. And then there are others that are wild, febrile, with high levels of volatile acidity that may be enjoyable while visiting Georgia, but are unlikely to hold up when shipped abroad or stored for more than a few months. And some, sadly, are riddled with flaws stemming from anything from unripe or overripe or damaged fruit, excessive oxidation, moldy qvevri, or other hygiene issues. (Wines from this last category are not recommended and do not appear in this Guide.)

Numerous tastings over the past years have illuminated a further challenge primarily affecting new producers: frequently, the novice's first qvevri vintage is healthy, whether it is rustic or moderately refined, the wine is clean and enjoyable. But, in subsequent vintages, the consequences of inexperience and lax hygiene are brought to bear, resulting in flawed wines. Professional winemaking skill is not a genetically inheritable trait. The true test of any winery is its track record over several vintages – consistently good, bad, or erratic.

In this modern period, wines produced in qvevri became associated with the tiny producer. The growing international interest in qvevri wine (or any wine made in clay vessel), however, has led to larger wineries also producing wines in these clay vessels. The past decade has seen an increase in qvevri wines both by tiny and large producers, though these wines comprise at most 3% of all Georgian wines produced.

Regardless of the producer, the consumer should be aware that there often is considerable variability among qvevri wines, bottle to bottle. Each qvevri is distinct and the same grapes fermented in two different, seemingly identical qvevri often produce remarkably different wines. The vintage will be the same, but most producers will not specify on the labels that the wines came from different qvevri.

Since 2014, the export market is slowly diversifying. Even if Russia and the former Soviet nations remain the biggest customers, sales to China, Japan, the EU, UK, and the USA are on an upward trajectory. As of early 2020, Georgia was exporting wine to 53 countries. Georgian wine is on the upswing, not just in volume, but in value as well.