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The clay, the grapes and the politics of Georgian wine

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Following her first trip to Georgia in 2013, Julia Harding, my Master of Wine colleague, explored the country's unique contradictions in a lauded account of her visit. How can a nation maintain non-nationalistic pride, she asked, as well as defend against hostile bordering powers, prioritise radical hospitality and foster creativity in a country saturated in tradition? "Georgia seems to have a quite remarkable ability to hold opposites in tension," Harding wrote.

In my circles anyway, Georgia is most famous for its claim to be the cradle of viticulture. Wine is still intimately threaded through its culture, with Georgian wine distinguished by being made in buried clay vessels called *qvevri*. But today that famous wine culture is increasingly polarised, holding opposites in tension indeed.

The poles were effectively embodied by two people I tasted with recently. The first was Irakli Gilauri, ex-CEO of the Bank of Georgia and a wine nut who has somehow managed to acquire fruit from one of Napa Valley's most sought-after sources, Vine Hill Ranch, for a fine wine project in California. He is now determined to spend some of his fortune on making what he maintains will be his home country's first world-class wine.

Gilauri is building a fancy winery in Georgia's dominant wine region, Kakheti, in the south-east of the country, and has hired Bordeaux's most international

wine consultants, Rolland et Associés, to help him.

Despite its post-Soviet independence in 1991, Georgia remains under threat by an aggressive Russia that maintains an illegal military occupation of 20 per cent of its territory.

Georgian wine has long occupied a special place in Russia, and even today 65 per cent of Georgia's wine exports are semi-sweet, basic wines that are sent north to slake Russian thirst. "Georgia's dependence on Russia today is in wine only," said Gilauri. "By making dry wine, we can wean ourselves off Russia." He says he's on a mission and has chosen Resistance as the brand name of his wines.

Gilauri was thrilled when I said his white wine, a barrel-fermented bone-dry Chardonnay, reminded me of a Chablis. It's certainly unlike any Georgian wine I've tasted in its utter familiarity. His red is at least based on a Georgian grape variety, the main red-wine grape Saperavi.

Much more typically Georgian were the wines shown at a tasting two weeks later at Saperavi Social, a Georgian wine bar in Islington. The main presenter was Douglas Wregg of Les Caves de Pyrène, specialist importer of natural wine and the biggest importer of Georgian wine into the UK. Back in 2005, he'd heard on the grapevine that the country was making seriously distinctive wines in qvevri that depended on extended contact with grape skins, and made his first trip. He fell in love with Georgia and its wine-sodden feasts that are often accompanied by dancing and polyphonic singing. "Wine is endemic to the culture there," he enthused. "Making wine with skins, and often stems, of the grapes — this is the complete wine."

Contact with chewy skins, and sometimes even chewier stems and pips, results in wines that are much more deeply coloured than conventional whites. These are the so-called orange wines that Wregg describes as "a subset of natural wines".

Georgians call them amber, and their colour can vary from palest apricot to a

rich, deep almost-tawny. Perhaps an even more marked characteristic is that skin-contact wines are relatively astringent, especially on the finish. Wregg delights in what he describes as “a sort of bricky earthiness” imparted by the clay of the *quevri*, and is rather dismissive of the pale amber wines to be found in UK supermarkets, which may have had relatively little skin contact. (The term *quevri* is unregulated, by the way, and seems to be used with abandon.)

The timing of the first of Wregg’s annual visits to Georgia could not have been better. Early in 2006, Russia effectively banned imports of Georgian wine until 2013, which was widely condemned as economic retaliation for the country’s pro-EU stance. In the long term, this did a great service to Georgia’s new generation of producers, who had to sharpen up their act and find new markets such as the UK.

We were told that during the Soviet era, about one quarter of households made their own wine — which they regarded as real wine, as opposed to the semi-sweet stuff shipped off to Russia. But since the Russians sought quantity more than quality, only a handful of the most commercial grape varieties were in commercial play. Today, however, a national vine nursery is collecting samples of the country’s incredible diversity of local varieties, hundreds of them, and analysing their DNA.

Georgian wine producers are also having a wonderful time showcasing ever more indigenous grape varieties. To westerners they have unfamiliar names, but Wregg is, perhaps predictably, dismissive of people who complain they can’t pronounce them. “They should just enjoy the experience.”

The City tasting was a presentation of eight Georgian wines by Master of Wine Sarah Abbott, who has been hired by the Georgians to help develop the UK market. Most of the wines she chose had been made in *quevri* but when she admitted that this applied to less than 10 per cent of

all Georgian wine produced, I wondered why her selection was so unrepresentative. “*Qvevri* winemaking is small in output but huge in cultural symbolism for Georgians,” she explained in a subsequent email. “The country has parallel heritage tracks: one as the mythic originators of wine, and one as the brutalised, industrial wine factory of the former Soviet Union. *Qvevri* winemaking is the embodied antithesis of that Soviet heritage and mindset.”

Fair enough. I’ve enjoyed many a *qvevri* wine — indeed have generally preferred Georgia’s hugely distinctive skin-contact whites to standard, rather overblown Saperavi reds — so long as there is enough fruit to support the astringency.

But I can see why Gilauri thinks his country’s wine is a work in progress. Tbilisi-based wine importer Olivier Sauvage (proud of a great-grandfather who was mayor of Chassagne-Montrachet) veers closer to Gilauri than Wregg. He tartly summed up the current Georgian wine scene as “8,000 years of history, 30 years of experience”.

Back to basics: Georgia’s magnificent local grapes

A host of unfamiliar names but some great flavours. Pale-skinned, productive **Rkatsiteli** is by far the most-planted Georgian grape, characteristic of Kakheti in the far south-east of the country, as well as being popular in Kartli around Tbilisi. It works especially well for skin contact wines. Rkatsiteli is also grown in Ukraine, Moldova and Bulgaria, and its ability to withstand seriously cold winters is treasured in both Russia and New York state.

I have long enjoyed aromatic whites made from **Kisi**, also found mainly in Kakheti, but a leafy **Krakhuna** white from Imereti in the far west was a recent revelation, as was a citrus-flavoured **Tsolikouri** from Naberauli in northern Racha, a newish producer specialising in lesser-known Georgian grapes. **Mtsvane Kakhuri** is the Kakheti speciality, while the fresher **Goruli Mtsvane** is associated with Kartli where the even tarter **Chinuri** can shine.

Saperavi dominates Georgian red-wine production and it has been planted in much the same countries as Rkatsiteli, plus Australia. In youth its wines can stain as effectively as vintage port. They can be a bit too hefty for their own good. The versions aged in buried *qvevri* tend to be a bit more interesting than most of the more conventional examples. I loved the much more

transparent **Shavkapito**, recently rediscovered in Kartli. **Aleksandrouli** and **Mujuretuli**, often blended even in the vineyard, are specialties of Racha in the mountainous north of the country immediately east of Lechkhumi.