

Georgian Wine

ALICE FEIRING

AFTER another gulp of an amber-hued wine, all I could think of was bed. I'd endured a 20-hour travel day and was impossibly jet-lagged while life was bursting all around me in the ancient Georgian city of Tbilisi. I was with my friend John Wurdeman, a burly ex-pat and owner of the winery Pheasant's Tears, which had made the wine in my glass. John tried to rouse me out of my stupor and pushed the addictive Georgian cheese bread, *khachapuri*, my way.

Sitting in the outdoor café after a heady meal, I was lost in a blur of the country's exotica, blue fenugreek and marigold flowers – spices that help make the Georgian cuisine justifiably famous. But the natural wine of Georgia was the real reason I was here now and had returned repeatedly to this country. It was spicy, strong, varied stuff. While still in its infancy (many producers were just emerging from making wine for their family and bottling commercially for the first time), the potential for further greatness is all there. And it's not just because of their unusual grapes – about 525 unique varieties and counting – or even that they had an unbroken tradition of vinifying in the clay pots that have become the new thing in the western world, *qvevri*. It was because on top of the fascinating tastes of beeswax and orange blossom water and strawberry tea, because of bitter and savoury and power; it was the emotional thread that sewed together the whole picture for me. It was the depth of culture. I knew that those who made wine naturally with an eye on tradition were at risk. The little guy is always in danger, and championing the little guy has become my life's purpose. Georgian wine and winemakers' approach to its production have survived vicious invasions by people who have banished and pulled out native vines and applied Soviet industrialisation to winemaking; but could it survive the influence and seduction of the international wine market? Could they resist the onslaught of wine consultants intent on modernising their tradition? Could they resist chemical salesmen trying to infiltrate both



Illustration

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