

WHO'S WHO IN GEORGIA

The Caucasian country of Georgia has been making something of a splash on the international wine scene of late. Miquel Hudin discusses how its wine trade works.



Caucasus Mountains, Kakheti, Georgia

Despite being in the top 25 producers in the world, according to OIV statistics, with around 100m L of production a year, Georgia is not one of the world's largest winemaking countries. What makes it unique is the length of time that wine has been produced in Georgia (as well as the greater Caucasus region) which, due to an archaeological dig in the Kvemo Kartli region, places wine production as having been ongoing for at least the last 8,000 years.

Two Georgias?

There are essentially two unrelated worlds when it comes to the wines of the country. The first sector is the biggest and claims somewhere around 98% to 99% of the total production. These are the larger producers, who range from former USSR collectives to modern, purpose-built cellars like Badagoni just outside the town of Telavi.

While these producers primarily use the native Georgian grapes, with an emphasis on Rkatsiteli and Saperavi, they produce a huge assortment of wines ranging from still to sparkling. The semi-dry and semi-sweet wines that are a carryover from Soviet days form a large percentage of production as well, and quite unsurprisingly are exported almost exclusively to former Soviet Bloc countries. What they make very little of are the qvevri wines - wines made from crushed grapes that are placed (along with skins, stalks and pips) in traditional earthenware amphora,

that are buried in the ground - opting instead for what the locals call 'European technology'.

When it comes to producers of qvevri wines - which can often be amber coloured and tannic - very few produce more than 50,000 bottles, and most produce much less. Unlike the large producers, they export to a vast and varied rainbow of countries around the world. While often sold under the 'natural wine' umbrella, they can vary a great deal in style, and offer a very different taste profile than wines made in the 'European' style.

The Organisations

The primary organisation for wine in Georgia is the National Wine Agency of Georgia (NWAG) which oversees almost every aspect of wine production, from certification of cellars through to promotion. There is also the Georgian Wine Association (GWA) and the Georgian Wine Tourism Association (GWTA). As there are a lot of Gs, Ws and As in these acronyms, it can get confusing as to who does what.

Essentially the NWAG is fully state run. The GWA and GWTA are a mix of private and public, where the members pay into the organisation. This means, however, that not every winery is included; the GWA currently has just 22 members out of the 100 or so cellars that exist in Georgia.

Is there overlap in the agencies? Indeed, as the NWAG will often fund the initiatives of the other two, with plans to do more of this and work towards a defined set of common goals. The future of the NWAG looks bright, however, as Levan Davitashvili, the recently promoted Minister of Agriculture, was originally the director of the NWAG and is one of the politicians that winemakers trust.

The Qvevri

If you think of the NWAG as 'the establishment', then the qvevri producers are countercultural hippies doing their own thing. They're also responsible for much of the attention that Georgian wine is receiving at the moment.

This ancient winemaking technique using large terracotta amphorae has rapidly caught on in the last decade, leading to the forming of the Qvevri Association and the New Wine Festival in May, where the opening of the qvevri is celebrated. One of the people behind this includes Malkhaz Kharbedia, who is one of the very few people based in Georgia writing about the wines and events. His work can be found at vinoge.com.

Winemakers

Winemakers in Georgia aren't just people producing wine. They are bridges, ambassadors, and at times, men of the faith. A significant figure is Gogi Dakishvili. Few Georgians have formal winemaking training, and they'll often say, "any Georgian man is a winemaker"; yet as Georgians (women included) have embraced professional careers in winemaking, they have realised that they need more information. Dakishvili has become something of a godfather to young winemakers, while balancing his time between his role as chief winemaker at Schuchmann Wines, and as winemaker in Teleda and Orgo, his family wineries that produce qvevri wine.

A discussion of winemakers and champions of Georgian wine also can't be had without mentioning John Wurdeman. An American by birth, he and co-founder Gela Patalishvili



Father Gerasim of the Alaverdi Monastery

have made Pheasant's Tears one of the most well-known qvevri cellars in the country. Wurdeman has been instrumental in attracting attention from importers like Les Caves de Pyrene in the UK, which has then gone on to be a huge champion of Georgian wines.

Bishop David and Father Gerasim of the Alaverdi Monastery, which can trace its founding back to the sixth century, are also important figures. Not only have they repaired this significant building, but they have also carried on the tradition of making wine in the monastery, making elegant qvevri wines that serve as standard bearers for the genre.

The Georgian Somm

Given that "a home in Georgia without a cellar isn't a home", most Georgians have grown up with homemade wines, so the idea of ordering it in bottled format is quite recent. As such, the craft of the sommelier is also up-and-coming in the country. There is, however, a Georgia Sommelier Association headed up by Shalva Khetsuriani. An active association, they have been responsible for bringing the first WSET Level 2 Certification classes to the country, in order to improve the local knowledge of the world of wine while also improving the level of service.

Notable restaurants

Wine with food is as inseparable in Georgia as in Italy. Despite this, fine wine lists at restaurants are still a work in progress, thanks to the common practice of offering only a simple, unnamed house wine, or having a single, large winery 'buy out' the wine list by paying the restaurant to stock only their wines.

There are a handful of restaurants in Tbilisi, the capital, working to buck this trend. One of the most well known, Azarphesha, is co-owned by John Wurdeman of Pheasant's Tears, and in addition to having excellent local dishes, it has a large wine list. Another location fighting the good fight in this regard is g.Vino, which also has an excellent list of Georgian wines, including a large by-the-glass selection.

Lastly, there's the wine bar/restaurant/hotel Vinotel on the other side of the Mtkvari River. Housed in a lovely building, they have a great wine list but also work to mix in more



John Wurdeman, co-founder of Pheasant's Tears, plays a major role in Georgia's wine industry.

of the non-qvevri producers to showcase more wine styles produced in Georgia.

Wine Bars

Wine bars aren't plentiful, but the few that exist in Georgia are passionate about what they offer. The most famous is Vino Underground, co-owned by John Wurdeman and situated just off Tbilisi's Freedom Square. Wurdeman has partnered with several other small qvevri producers, and the winemaking partners are usually to be found there, enjoying a glass or two.

While a third of the total country's population lives in Tbilisi, the second-largest city of Batumi, a port on the Black Sea, also has an active wine culture. Wine Room Batumi is a notable wine bar featuring wines on rotation from different winemakers.

Wine Shops

Wine shops have been growing at a steady pace alongside the wine bar scene, and wine store Vinotheca has been one of the main references for some time now, offering more than 600 different wine choices. Another notable shop is 8000 Vintages, which, despite being some way outside of Tbilisi's centre, has a large selection of wines, and hosts various tastings regularly.

Communication

Of course everything happening in Georgia would amount to a tree falling in the woods if there were no one to spread the word internationally. While John Wurdeman has worked at this tirelessly for a decade, another notable name belongs to New York wine consultant Lisa Granik MW, who has both visited and lived in Georgia at various times since 1990. In 2011, she returned as part of a development project by USAID, and subsequently showcased Georgian wines to

influential people in the international wine trade. The success of this as well as other initiatives has been palpable given that the profile of the wines has risen greatly in recent years.

No conversation about Georgian wines would be complete without a mention of wine writer Alice Feiring. A staunch natural wine supporter, she has taken a shine to the wines of Georgia. In 2016, she released a narrative non-fiction book about Georgian wines, called *For the Love of Wine*.

Most Influential

Given the current state of the Georgian wine scene, which is dominated by the big producers, the most influential person is in fact not a person at all, but the grape subsidies. While currently ranging from 0.45GEL to 2GEL (\$0.18 to \$0.80) per kilo, depending on the overall price, region, and type, they are partly responsible for encouraging overproduction and feeding of grapes in to the larger wineries and stymying the development of more boutique wineries.

Winemakers still have large amounts of wine in tank, some dating back to 2008, partly due to the overproduction encouraged by subsidies, although a good deal of it is also due to the lingering effects of the 2006 Russian embargo. The subsidies have become a political issue and no government is willing to remove them for fear of a backlash. Unfortunately, until they do remove them, grape prices won't adjust to reflect quality and region.

Despite the fact that large amounts of Georgian wines are still exported to former Soviet Bloc countries, export markets elsewhere are opening up, which is encouraging the development of more conventional dry wines rather than the high-residual-sugar wines popular in their old export markets. The Georgians are at a crossroads and in the next years, as the spotlight that is shown upon them potentially shifts to another up-and-coming region in the world, they will have to continue to evolve and strive to make the best wine possible as opposed to aiming mainly for what sells, no matter how cheaply, to unstable markets like Russia, and all while balancing the books with subsidies that could easily dry up any moment. ■