

JOURNEYING BACK TO THE CRADLE OF WINE

CONFERENCES

Giorgi Samanishvili



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Widely recognised as the cradle of wine, Georgia is not only home to a multitude of indigenous grape varieties, it has also developed unique techniques for producing wine. **Giorgi Samanishvili**, chairman of the country's National Wine Agency, provided an overview of the history and current status of wine growing in Georgia.

In many ways, Georgia forms a bridge between Europe and Asia, not least of which through its wine and drinking culture. Historically, it has been more closely associated with European culture but in terms of drinking and hospitality, it has close affinities with Asia. With its mild, sub-tropical climate, it has become home to several distinct wine growing regions and more than 525 unique native grapes, 30 of which are cultivated for commercial use. Each of its ten main wine regions specialises in unique grape varieties and

up to 97% of all wine produced in Georgia comes from local grapes. Some of these, most notably Saperavi and Rkatsiteli, were highlighted in a masterclass conducted by Giorgi Samanishvili. The country's rich viticultural heritage stems from a history of wine making stretching back as far as 8,000 years, making it perhaps the world's oldest region for wine growing. The Georgian word for wine, gvhino, is also believed to be the origin of the term in European languages. Similarly, Georgia invented the use of qvevri or large clay jars, for the fermentation and ageing processes, which are now listed as Unesco heritage and have attracted global attention in recent years. During qvevri fermentation, the lip of the jar is level with the ground whilst the base remains underground. Both juice and skin are fermented for up to six months, producing an amber-coloured wine high in tannins.

A cottage industry

Like many countries with a genuine, long-standing wine culture, per capita consumption is relatively high, at 25 litres a year, and most of Georgia's wine production is undertaken by smaller, family run operations. This makes production figures hard to track though it is estimated that the country produces approximately 120-150 million litres

annually. As you would expect, Russia is the chief importer of Georgian wines, though its share of exports has dropped from 80% prior to the 2008 invasion to roughly 52%. Perhaps more surprisingly, China is the second-largest importer, with Poland and Ukraine also significant customer countries. As in many Asian countries, drinking is traditionally accompanied by a number of customs and rituals. At a traditional Georgian table, or supra, there is always a tamada, or leader, who gives drinking instructions to the rest of the table as to when they must drink. This is always undertaken with a cheerful toast, mirroring the traditional Chinese and Asian toasting ritual.

