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Richard Bampfield MW enjoys his first encounter with a wine-centred nation

## ‘Georgia is to winemakers what the Amazon is to botanists’

These are the words of American winemaker Jeff Vejr, a specialist in *qvevri* wines and speaker at the recent International Wine Tourism Conference in Tbilisi. Certainly, 8000 years of winemaking history and 523 indigenous grape varieties confer on Georgia a position of some eminence in the wine world. The conference attracted 150 delegates from around the globe and provided for most, myself included, a first insight into this fascinating country.

I have never before visited a country where wine is so much a part of the nation's life and culture. Vines are planted in most parts of the country apart from the higher mountains – not surprising as the highest peak in the Greater Caucasus range is two feet higher than Mont Blanc. Meals and hospitality seem to revolve around wine and are animated by the *tamada* whose flow of toasts encourage drinking and respect for wine in equal measure. Conversation during meals is occasionally interrupted by highly distinctive, polyphonic singing which reflects Georgia's turbulent past, honours guests and expresses gratitude for the food and wine on the table. Georgians display a disposition to laughter and a positivity of attitude that are in stark and admirable contrast to their often violent history.

Georgian wines lend themselves less easily to generalisations. A multitude of grape varieties, many of which are being excitedly rediscovered since independence from Russia in 1991; a surprising range of climates and soils given the relatively small size of the country; and approaches to winemaking which can be traditional and can be modern, with various stops in between. Although Georgia does grow international grapes and produces some international oak-aged styles, it is the wines fermented and

aged in the traditional *qvevri* that are the big attraction for the wine lover coming to Georgia for the first time. As John Wurdeman, an influential and highly charismatic winemaker in the exciting Kakheti region, puts it, “ageing Saperavi in oak is like putting a tie on a wild highland warrior”.

*Qvevri* are beeswax-lined clay pots traditionally used as fermentation and ageing vessels in Georgia. They can be sited both above and underground and their size is normally large enough to allow a slender man to climb in and clean. Typically they might hold 3500 litres. Their shape is conducive to a more uniform fermentation temperature than some other vessels, especially if underground. They can be used for all grape varieties, white and red, and the length of time the wine spends within will depend on the grape variety, the vintage and the winemaker. Some winemakers will age wine in both *qvevri* and oak, although oak will normally be avoided by the natural winemakers, of whom Georgia has many. Georgian winemakers prefer to use the term *qvevri*, especially if they are underground. Internationally, the term amphora is commonly used to describe the same vessel although, in Georgian tradition, amphorae are used for transporting wine rather than making it.

The signature wine style of Georgia is orange wine – in essence a white wine, typically made from Rkatsiteli, which has been fermented in *qvevri* with the grape skins and, more often than not, a percentage of the stems. The resulting wines are deeply coloured, often amber rather than orange, with distinctive texture and a decidedly tannic finish. They are not necessarily oxidative in style although they may age quickly as the natural winemakers favour using no or minimum sulphur dioxide. Conversely, this is a white wine



*Drawing amber wine from an underground qvevri at Twins Winery. The ash piled up at the side is used to protect the qvevri from infection. Photo by Adriano Leto.*

style which, owing to the high tannins, can certainly age for decades. Sarah Abbott MW, who presented an excellent tasting of Georgian wines at the conference, described the *qvevri* whites as “the quieter sisters of red wines rather than the aggressive cousins of conventional whites”, a delightful and astute observation.

The pre-eminent red grape variety is Saperavi, although there is a host of others in common usage that I can neither pronounce nor spell. Saperavi produces deeply coloured, firmly tannic reds that can be highly perfumed, with noticeable blackcurrant character. This description makes it sound like Cabernet Sauvignon, but the tannins have a more powdery texture and, in my view at least, oak treatment with Saperavi has to be much more sensitive than with Cabernet.

Although I was excited by the wine styles I encountered and probably consumed as much in four days as a medium-sized export market, my abiding memory is of the people and their wonderful, unconditional hospitality. In Georgian culture, a guest is a gift from God and even the poorest families often make a bit of their own wine and will put a jug on the table for a guest. Many so-called civilised wine consuming countries could learn much from Georgia's capacity to combine respect for wine with its enjoyment and its role as a social lubricant.