

Georgia: A Culinary Crossroads

Darra Goldstein

Williams College

Williamstown, Massachusetts (USA)

A Brief History

For centuries, the tiny nation of Georgia has stood at the confluence of East and West. Geographically part of Asia, yet a Christian nation, Georgia has historically looked more often to the West — so much so, that the capital city of Tiflis (Tbilisi) was once known as the Paris of the Caucasus. Lying athwart the major trade routes between East and West, Tiflis maintained a grand caravanserai where merchants could stable their animals, store their wares, and themselves find shelter [Fig. 1, facing page].

Thanks to its agricultural riches and long tradition of hospitality, Georgia was an object of desire for many outsiders, not all of whom were good guests.

The Georgians date the beginnings of their culture to the sixth century BCE. The ancient Greeks established colonies along the Black Sea coast in a region they called Colchis. In 66 BCE, when the Roman general Pompey invaded and brought the area under Roman rule, Greek control came to an end, but the outposts in Colchis remained important links in the trade route to Persia.

From the Black Sea, ships could sail up the Phasis River (today's Rioni). Goods were then portaged over the Likhi Range to the Kura River Valley and on to Persia. By the early Middle Ages Tiflis had become a major stopover on the medieval trade routes, a midpoint between Moslem East and Christian West [Fig. 2].

Tbilisi itself was founded in the fifth century when, according to legend, King Vakhtang Gorgasani, on a hunt near the Kura River, killed a pheasant, which he retrieved fully cooked from the hot springs where it had fallen. Toasting his good fortune, Gorgasani vowed to create a city on this auspicious site. He called it "Tbilis-kalaki" or "Warm City" (hence the name "Tbilisi"; outside

Fig. 2. Map of Georgia. Copyright © by Paul J. Pugliese. Used by permission.



The early tenth century saw the rise of an independent feudal monarchy, and during the reign of David the Builder (1089-1125) Tiflis was finally freed from foreign control. Under the rule of the great queen Tamara (1184-1212), Georgia experienced a renaissance, a good two hundred years before Italy. During this time, the Gelati Academy in the western province of Imereti housed an important school of philosophy and offered advanced teachings in astronomy, medicine, and music. In eastern Georgia, near Telavi, the arts and sciences were assiduously pursued in the famous academy at Ikalto, which included the world's first school devoted to the serious study of wine.

century, the country was effectively split in two, with western Georgia falling under the Turkish sphere of influence, and eastern Georgia politically part of northwest Iran. Repeated attacks from the Persians, the Turks, and Moslem tribesmen in Dagestan to the north finally caused the Georgians to turn to Russia for help. In 1783, King Irakli II, the beleaguered successor to the ancient Bagrationi dynasty, signed the Treaty of Georgievsk, which acknowledged Russia's sovereignty, and in 1801 Russia incorporated Georgia into its empire. The Russian presence in Georgia lasted until 1918 when, following the October Revolution, Georgia declared its independence. Although the two countries had signed a non-interference treaty, in 1921 Bolshevik troops invaded, and once again Georgia was incorporated into its more powerful neighbor to the north, this time the Soviet Union.

country, with its economy dependent upon the Soviet system. Georgia's citrus fruits, fresh vegetables, herbs, tea, and wines found a ready market in Russia and the other Soviet republics, and the Georgian economy flourished. When the Soviet system fell apart, the country suddenly experienced severe economic distress, exacerbated by political conflicts in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both of which the Russians supported. These conflicts led to civil unrest in the early 1990s. By 1998, things had quieted down, but in 2005, just as the Georgian economy was beginning to recover, Russia embargoed all Georgian agricultural products, including the Borzhomi mineral water that provided an important source of export revenue. In 2006 Russia extended the embargo to Georgian wines, claiming that they had been adulterated. This move was, in fact, political, in retaliation for Georgia's desire to ally itself with the West by seeking membership in NATO and the European Union. The Russians



After Kuznetsov 1983

were further displeased by the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil project and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline, both of which bypass Russian territory. Nevertheless, Russia's attempts to control Georgia must be seen in historical perspective, as the Russians are only the latest in a series of outsiders to covet this rich land.



Fig. 4. The Caucasus Range, bordering Georgia on the north, seen from Mt. Elbrus.

The Flavors of Georgia

Remarkably, through all the invasions, sieges, and subjugations, Georgia has maintained a strong national identity, a societal pride greater than patriotism, akin to a religious belief in the sacredness of the earth and its ability to sustain. This devout relationship to their surroundings existed long before the Georgians accepted Christianity. Two creation myths often retold at the feast table capture the mix of reverence and irreverence that characterizes the Georgian attitude toward life [Fig. 3, facing page]. As one myth goes, the first Georgians were seated under a pergola at a table laden with wine and food. So engrossed were they in feasting on grilled lamb with plum sauce and garlicky roasted eggplant that they missed God's deadline for choosing a country, so the world was divided up without them. His task complete, God set off for home, only to find the Georgians still merrily toasting and singing. God stopped to reproach them for their negligence, but the *tamada*, the toastmaster, remained unconcerned. They had spent their time well, he explained, thanking God in lavish toasts for having created such a magnificent world. Pleased that the Georgians had not forgotten Him, God rewarded them with the very last spot on earth, the one He had been saving for Himself. And so it was that the Georgians came to live in paradise.

The second myth tells that while God was creating the world, He wisely took a break for supper. But He happened to trip over the high peaks of the Caucasus range [Fig. 4], spilling a little of everything from His plate onto the land below. And so it was that Georgia came to be blessed with such riches, table scraps from Heaven. In fact, the agricultural bounty of this small country is exceptional, and even today 50 percent of the population is engaged in some sort of farming. It is not surprising that the early Greeks called the Georgians *georgos*, "those who work the land," whence our English term derives.

The presence of so many outside rulers and visitors inevitably introduced foreign ways into Georgia, including certain influences on the cuisine. Georgian food is reminiscent of both Mediterranean and Middle Eastern tastes, the result of a rich interplay of culinary ideas carried along the trade routes by merchants and travelers alike. Yet the Georgians did not adopt all the culinary practices that came their way, and today Georgian cuisine remains distinct, particularly in its extensive use of walnuts [Fig. 5]. Some borrowed practices are easily recognizable, of course. The pilafs of southeastern Georgia echo those of neighboring Iran, and the meats simmered with fruit are similar to variations of Persian *khoresh* (stew), though to yield

the tart taste they prefer the Georgians more often stew meat with sour plums or pomegranates than with sweeter fruits like quince or prunes. The prized Georgian *khinkali*—the overstuffed boiled dumplings of the mountainous zones—reveal the culinary influence of Central Asian Turks. Along the Black Sea coast in western Georgia, the stuffed vegetable *tolmas* resemble Turkey's various dolmas. But the Georgians never developed a taste for the elaborate oriental sweets from Turkish, Persian, or Armenian kitchens; instead, they limit dessert mainly to fresh fruits and nut preparations.

Not yet fully documented is the kinship of Georgian food with that of northern India. The correspondences in culinary terminology between contemporary Georgian and Hindi are especially notable in a language like Georgian, which is not even Indo-European but South Caucasian, an entirely separate linguistic group. The Georgian word for bread, like the Hindi, is *puri*; and the



Fig. 5. A woman making churchkhela by stringing walnuts and dipping them repeatedly into concentrated fresh grape juice to form a confection.

Georgians use a clay oven, the *toné*, for baking bread and roasting, much as Indians of the Punjab use the tandoor. The Georgian *tapha*, a special pan for making the succulent Chicken Tabaka that is so emblematic of Georgian cuisine, is related to the cast-iron skillet or *tava* of northern India. And curry blends find their counterpart in *khmeli-suneli*, Georgia's aromatic seasoning mixture, though a typical blend of *khmeli-suneli* is based more on herbs than on spices. It includes ground coriander, basil, dill, summer savory, parsley, mint, fenugreek, bay leaf, and marigold, which turns foods a deep yellow, as does curry's turmeric.

But differences often reveal more than similarities. What most distinguishes Georgian cuisine from that of its neighbors is the use of walnuts, not merely as garnish, but as an integral component in a wide variety of dishes. To offset what might otherwise be a cloying richness from the nuts, many recipes call for a souring agent. Yogurt (*matsoni*), pungent cheese, and immature wine (*machari*) often serve as counterpoints to ground walnuts; vinegar or fruit juices and fruit leathers similarly lend balance. The ground and dried petals of marigold, known as Imeretian saffron, lend an earthy depth to Georgian dishes and set them apart from those of other culinary cultures. For instance, cinnamon and vinegar regularly flavor meat in the Georgian diet, just as they do in Middle Eastern cuisines, but marigold rather than true saffron adds the distinctive touch.

Other differences are visible in the staple foods. Where Persian cooks turn to rice and Armenians use bulgur, Georgians rely on wheat and corn. And instead of the legumes typically found in the Middle East and the Mediterranean — lentils, chickpeas, and favas — Georgians favor kidney beans, like corn a New World crop. Walnuts

predominate over pine nuts and almonds. So well loved are walnuts that many standard dishes prepared without nuts, such as the spicy beef soup *kharcho* or the chicken stew *chakhokhbili*, often include walnuts in their western Georgian renditions. Freshly pressed walnut oil provides a necessary supplement of fat (including a healthy dose of Omega-3s), as do the rich *suluguni* and *imeruli* cow's milk cheeses used in place of butter with cornbread.

Regional Variations

Stretching as it does from the Black Sea nearly all the way to the Caspian, the Republic of Georgia is remarkably diverse, with numerous climatic zones, from the mountainous to the subtropical. The Likhi Range running north to south effectively divides the country in half. Western Georgia, bordering on the Black Sea, endures high precipitation and steamy temperatures. Here tea and citrus fruits thrive. Eastward the climate grows progressively drier, until sere Central Asian winds buffet the plateaus to the east of the Likhi chain. This hot, dry atmosphere produces the lush stone fruits and grapes of the Kartli and Kakheti provinces. The boundary between East and West is also visible in the relative degree of spiciness to the food. Eastern Georgians prefer a cool, fresh taste, thanks in part to their hot, arid summers, while western Georgians add generous amounts of fresh and dried hot pepper to their food. A second difference lies in the western Georgian preference for corn over wheat. Here *mchadi* or corncakes are prepared instead of *puri*. As is evident from their reliance on such ingredients as corn, peppers, and beans, western Georgian cooks put New World crops to good use. Another New World transplant, the tomato, is highly appreciated by eastern and western Georgians alike.

Kartli, the eastern province in which the capital city of Tbilisi is located, is known for its orchard fruits, especially apples and peaches, the best of which come from the environs of Gori, where Stalin was born. The local markets abound with seasonal golden lady apples, pink gooseberries, red and black currants, many varieties of plums — sweet and sour; purple, yellow, green, and red — apricots, pears, berries, sweet cherries, and sour *shindi* or cornelian cherries, the juice of which Georgian warriors once drank before battle to fortify their blood. Mounds of dried fruits and locally grown walnuts, almonds, and hazelnuts are available year round.

Georgian dishes evolved naturally from the produce available, and traditional methods of preparation have hardly changed over the years; high tech does not yet have a solid place in the Georgian kitchen. To an extraordinary degree, Georgians still integrate the outdoors into their lives when they cook and eat. Whether gathered on a city balcony for a formal meal or by the roadside for an impromptu picnic, Georgians consider al fresco dining the best way to eat, a chance to appreciate nature while consuming its gifts. Although the ancients considered grilling the most primitive of cooking methods, and boiling the most refined, grilling remains a preferred way to cook meats in Georgia — a legacy, perhaps, of the Promethean legend (Prometheus is said to have given fire to mankind when he was chained to a rock on Mount Elbrus in the Caucasus). A second standard method of preparing food is by slow cooking, and Georgian cuisine has an extensive repertoire of soups and stews. The heat remaining in the *toné* after bread baking is used for dishes like *purnis mtsvadi*, lamb braised slowly in a clay pot.

Perhaps the single most important implement in the

Georgian kitchen is a mortar and pestle for grinding nuts and spices. Although many affluent families now have food processors, the best Georgian cooks swear by labor-intensive hand grinding, since it yields the finest texture. In western Georgia, *chkmeruli* (fried chicken) and corncakes are baked in special red clay dishes called *ketsi*, which range in diameter from six to twelve inches. The use of *ketsi* is another way in which the Georgians continue to practice time-honored cooking methods. This technique can be traced back to the ancient Egyptians, who stacked earthenware pots filled with food atop one another to seal in moisture — creating an oven, in effect — before baking the food over an open fire.

The pull of tradition is visible not only in the culinary arts but also in paintings by some of Georgia's most celebrated artists. Niko Pirosmashvili (Pirosmani), a

railroad worker who painted signboards in exchange for food and drink, was known as the "Georgian Rousseau" for his fanciful animals and naïve depictions of everyday moments in city and country life.

Pirosmani's scenes of feasting and carousals capture both the exuberance and solemnity of these occasions. Other artists of the early twentieth-century Georgian avant-garde, such as Lado Gudiashvili, display a less sunny sensibility. His paintings of men awaiting a bowl of tripe soup (*khashi*) or eyeing some freshly caught fish (*tso-tsikhali*) offer a glimpse into a dark, mysterious world [Fig. 6]. During the Soviet era, artists like Elena Akhvlediani painted nostalgic portraits of a leisurely way of life that was fast disappearing [Fig. 7].

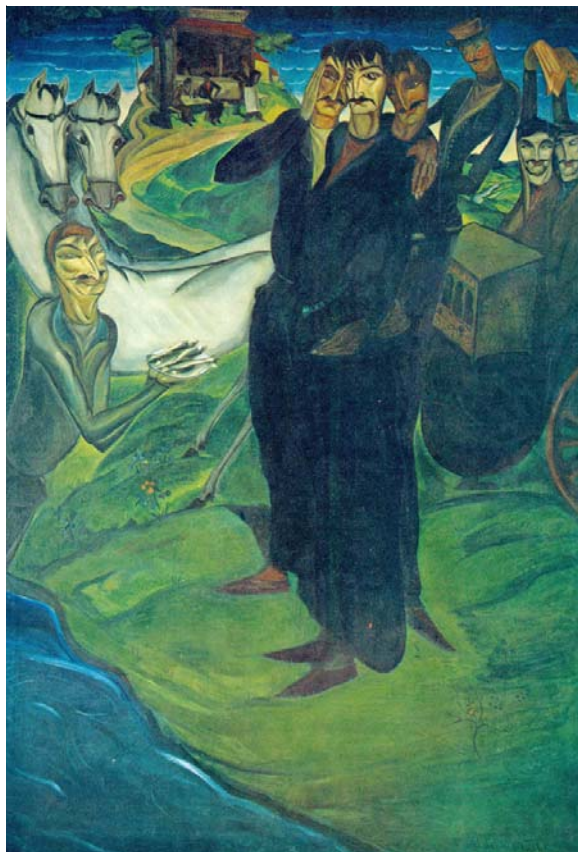
After Khromchenko 1987



Fig. 7. Elena Akhvlediani, Tbilisi Dukhan, 1970s.

tables both cultivated and wild. Over one hundred varieties of such wild greens as sarsaparilla, nettles, mallow, ramp, and purslane are still gathered in season and prepared in a surprising number of ways — cooked, marinated, dried for seasoning, or steeped in water for a nutritious drink. But above all, the Georgians enjoy their greens fresh, and no Georgian table is complete without a large platter of leafy cilantro, dill, tarragon, parsley, basil, summer savory, and peppery *tsitsmati* or falseflax (*Camelina sativa*, similar to arugula). Often there is also *dzhondzholi* (Colchis bladdernut, *Staphylea colchica*), an edible ornamental plant with long stems of tightly furled, beadlike tendrils redolent of garlic. The greens, which are rich in nutrients, provide a refreshing counterpoint to the heavier foods in the meal.

These foods are washed down with wine and local mineral waters like Borzhomi and Nabeghlavi, which have long been touted for their health benefits. To diners used to the mild taste of Perrier or Pellegrino, these waters seem heavy and salty (so much so, that Borzhomi is now bottling a "Borzhomi Light"), but Georgians and Russians have traditionally put them to therapeutic use in addition to serving them at table. Certain foods are also considered



After Gudiashvili 1984

Fig. 6. Lado Gudiashvili, Tsotskhali (Fresh Fish), 1924.



Fig. 8. Lado Gudiashvili, *Khashi*, 1919.

The rules for commensal celebration are strict. Most important, a *tamada* or toastmaster is chosen to orchestrate all but the most informal meals. (This practice may have evolved from the ancient Greek custom of choosing a symposiarch to guide the progression of the feast.) The role of the *tamada* is taken very seriously, and he is accorded great respect, for it requires skill to keep all the guests entertained, ensure that the meal is

especially nutritious. *Khashi*, a much-loved tripe soup (and favored hangover remedy), is frequently prescribed for digestive problems [Fig. 8]. *Nadugi*, the delicious whey derived from cow's milk and often served mixed with fresh herbs, is virtually fat-free and is considered a sclerosis preventative.

proceeding apace, and see to it that no one drinks or eats to excess, as drunken guests bring shame on the host. The best *tamadas* are renowned for their wit and eloquence, including an ability to improvise. The *tamada* guides the company through a series of toasts, which can be brief or complex. Each calls for downing

a glass of wine. Georgians do not sip, and drinking out of order or at random is not allowed. A *merikipe* is appointed to make sure that diners' glasses are filled at all times [Fig. 9].

The rules of the Georgian table call for uplifting toasts, so that each occasion, even a sad one, becomes an affirmation of life. Traditionally, toasting begins with glasses raised heavenward in acknowledgment of God's presence. Then the host family is toasted, particularly the lady of the house responsible for the meal. The *tamada's* ability to pace the evening is crucial. Each time a toast is pronounced, whether by the *tamada* or someone else, wine is drunk as a mark of honor. But if inebriation seems likely, the *tamada* must slow down the succession of toasts. The traditional meal is punctuated by breaks for entertainment, often a capella singing, a holdover from medieval patterns of feasting when entremets were actual diversions.

Given such ritualized drinking, the apparent chaos of the food service may seem surprising. Courses are not always presented in the fixed order of the service à la russe that western Europeans,

Food is only one component of the Georgian feast, however. A formal Georgian meal, or *supra*, is a ritual affair that calls for the skillful exercise of moderation in the face of excess — no small feat, considering the meal's courtesies and extravagances. The shared table is meant, above all, to promote a feeling of kinship and national unity. Centuries of gathering around the table to affirm longstanding traditions have helped the Georgians preserve their culture even under foreign subjugation. The *supra* represents the collective public face the Georgians proudly present to the world even as it reflects the honor of an individual household.



Fig. 9. Niko Pirosmiani, *Carousal*. The loaves on the table are shoti, baked in the toné. A traditional wineskin is visible in the foreground.

and later Americans, adopted in the nineteenth century, and which still prevails in Europe and America today. By contrast, the Georgian style of service is intended to dazzle the eye and pique the palate through contrasting colors, textures, and flavors. When diners sit down to eat, the table is already laid with a wide variety of dishes. As the meal progresses, the hostess does not remove serving plates that still contain food but rather continues to pile new dishes on the table, balancing some on the edges of others, so that by the end of the evening the table is laden with a pyramid of plates, ensuring plenty at every stage.

Georgian Wine

If food is the heart of the Georgian feast, then its spirit resides in wine. For a Georgian, wine evokes both culture and community. Based on evidence of grape pips unearthed from archeological sites, viticulture is an ancient art in Georgia, practiced as early as the fourth millennium BCE. Scientists believe that the species *Vitis vinifera*, the original wine grape, is native to the Caucasus region, and many linguists consider the Georgian word for wine, *ghvino*, the prototype for such Indo-European variations as *vino*, *vin*, *wine*, *Wein*. The grape vine symbolizes life and faith, a belief that Saint Nino of Cappadocia adapted to Christian doctrine when she introduced it to

Fig. 11. Niko Pirosmani, *Two Georgians with a kvevri*.

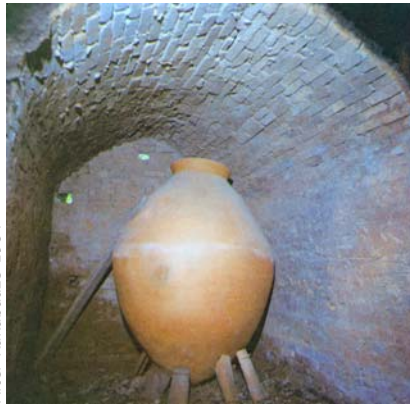


Fig. 10. A newly fired kvevri in the kiln.

Georgia in the fourth century. Bearing a cross plaited of dried vines and tied with her own hair, Saint Nino seemed to represent divine approval for the wine-making that had been practiced for centuries. The vine and the cross became inextricably entwined, each an object of devotion.

The center of wine growing in Georgia is Kakheti, in the eastern half of the country. The region is known for its traditional method of winemaking, which differs considerably from standard European practices (because it is so labor intensive, it is dying out as a commercial process). After the grapes are crushed, the juice is fermented together with the skins, stems, and seeds to

yield distinctive wines of a lovely, deep amber hue and a raisiny taste with a hint of Madeira.

Traditionally, wine was made in large, red clay amphorae known as *kvevri* [Figs. 10, 11]. Nearly every Georgian country household has a *marani*, a place where the temperature remains cool and steady. Here the *kvevris* are buried up to their necks in the earth. If the house lacks an earthen cellar, the *kvevri* are buried directly in the ground outdoors. To make wine by the Kakhetian method, the freshly crushed juice, along with the skins, stems, and seeds, is poured into the buried amphorae and stirred four or six times a day for three to five months. The resulting



Fig. 12. A wine vessel from Bombori. Bronze, 2nd c. BCE.

new wine is called *machari*. When the wine has achieved the desired degree of fermentation, it is drawn off from the lees. If produced commercially, the wine is transferred to oak barrels to age for at least a year, but homemade wine is usually ladled by means of a special long-handled gourd from the first *kvevri* into smaller ones for aging. These *kvevris* are topped with a wooden lid, then sealed with mud. Dirt is mounded all around the lid to keep air out, lest it spoil the wine. Whenever wine is taken off from a *kvevri* in any quantity, the remainder is transferred to progressively smaller vessels.

Some Georgian families still use special vessels to bring wine to table, such as the *chapi*, a two-handled jug with a squat neck and bulbous body tapering to a narrow base. From this transitional vessel the wine is poured into a variety of other containers intended either for pouring or drinking [Fig. 12]. Quite common are a single-handled pitcher and the more

elaborate "mother jug" (*deda-khelada*) composed of a central pitcher with several smaller pitchers affixed to the sides, like a mother with numerous breasts.

The most widespread red wine grape of Georgia is Saperavi, which, depending on its treatment, can yield wines ranging from the dry to the semi-sweet. For white wines, the indigenous Rkatsiteli grape makes nicely acidic wines with a fresh, green taste. Both varieties predominate in Kakheti's Alazani River Valley, which lies between the high peaks of the Greater Caucasus to the northeast and the foothills of the Tsinandali Range to the southeast. They are made into wines bearing such controlled appellations as Mukuzani, Kindzmarauli, and Tsinandali. Today, artisanal producers like Mildiani make some extraordinary wines that blend ancient traditions with modern technology.

Georgian Food Today

Throughout the Soviet era, the population of Georgia remained stable at around 5 million people. Even Georgians who traveled abroad for work or study generally chose to return to their homeland, so strong was the pull of tradition. All of this has changed over the past fifteen years, as Georgia experienced civil unrest and economic pressure. As a result, the current population of Georgia is now closer to only 4 million. One outcome of this unprecedented diaspora is that many émigrés have opened restaurants in cities throughout Europe, the United States, and the Middle East, and Georgian cuisine is slowly becoming more well known. Within Georgia itself, a new generation is working to overcome the problems that still plague the country after so many years of dependence on Russia. Following decades of Soviet-style industrial farming, activists are working to establish sustainable agricultural practices and are reviving the legendary wines that had either

disappeared or been restyled for the notoriously sweet Russian palate.

That a small country with a shattered infrastructure should place its hopes on fairly traditional, organic agriculture in the twenty-first century is noteworthy, and in the wake of the Russian embargoes, the US government has stepped in to help. In particular, the AgVANTAGE program, funded by USAID, is helping producers find new markets in Europe and the United States to make up for the loss of exports to Russia. The government consultants are focusing primarily on Georgian wines, for which they believe significant demand can be created abroad. Hazelnuts are also being promoted for export, as the best Georgian varieties are deeper in flavor than those grown in the Italian Piedmont. The challenge will be for the Georgians to find ways to compete successfully in the global marketplace while still keeping their rich traditions intact.

About the Author

Darra Goldstein is Francis Christopher Oakley Third Century Professor of Russian at Williams College and Founding Editor of *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*. A Ph.D. from Stanford University, she has published numerous books and articles on Russian literature, culture, art, and cuisine, and has organized several exhibitions, including *Graphic Design in the Mechanical Age* and *Feeding Desire: Design and the Tools of the Table, 1500-2005*, at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum. She is also the author of four cookbooks: *A Taste of Russia* (nominated for a Tastemaker Award), *The Georgian Feast* (winner of the 1994 IACP Julia Child Award for Cookbook of the Year), *The Winter Vegetarian*, and *Baking Boot Camp at the CIA*. She has consulted for the Council of Europe as part of an international group

exploring ways in which food can be used to promote tolerance and diversity, and under her editorship the volume *Culinary Cultures of Europe: Identity, Diversity and Dialogue* was published in 2005 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the signing of the European Cultural Convention. Goldstein has also consulted for the Russian Tea Room and Firebird restaurants in New York and is currently Food Editor of *Russian Life* magazine. She serves on the Board of Directors of the International Association of Culinary Professionals and is General Editor of *California Studies in Food and Culture* (University of California Press), a book series that seeks to broaden the audience for serious scholarship in food studies and to celebrate food as a means of understanding the world. She may be contacted at <Darra.Goldstein@williams.edu>.

A Glossary of Georgian Foods

Adzhapsandali: a vegetable medley, like a spicy ratatouille. *Adzhapsandali* contains eggplant, potato, onion, tomatoes, green pepper, cloves, and copious amounts of fresh herbs.

Adzhika: the favorite Georgian condiment made from fresh hot chile peppers, ranging in consistency from a thick paste to a liquid relish like salsa. It is a classic accompaniment to grilled meats.

Buglama: a Kakhetian specialty made from beef, veal, or fish layered with tomatoes, onions, and fresh herbs, then steamed and served with rice.

Chacha: a very strong grappa-like liquor made from grape pomace.

Chakapuli: a liquidy, slow-cooked stew usually made with lamb or kid. The meat is stewed with dry white wine, tkemali sauce, and bunches of tarragon, parsley, mint, dill, and cilantro.

Chakhokhbili: chicken simmered with vegetables and herbs until

tender, with no extra liquid added. Georgian girls were once deemed marriageable according to their ability to cut up chicken for this dish. The most traditional recipes call for seventeen precise pieces.

Chanakhi: an aromatic stew of meat and vegetables braised slowly in a clay pot to deepen and meld the flavors.

Churchkhela: a long string of nuts that have been repeatedly dipped in concentrated fresh grape juice to form a confection. *Churchkhela* is made with walnuts or hazelnuts, either from whole nuts or halves.

Kartuli puri: An elongated oval loaf of bread baked in the *toné*. *Kartuli puri* is thicker in the center than at the edges, so that lovers of both crust and chewy interior can enjoy their favorite textures.

Khachapuri: a cheese bread found throughout Georgia in many guises — round, rectangular, and boat-shaped. The dough can be yeasty with a thick crust, many-layered and flaky, or tender and cakelike. The bread is usually filled with a fresh, slightly sour cheese like *imeruli* (Imeretian) or *suluguni*, but salted cheeses like bryndza may also be used, as long as they are soaked first. The cheese is grated and mixed with eggs to bind, with butter added if it is not creamy enough. The filling is then either completely enclosed in dough or baked in an open-faced pie. *Khachapuri* is sometimes topped with a barely baked egg. Aficionados seek out the boat-shaped *adzharuli khachapuri* or Adzharian cheese bread from Batumi on the Black Sea coast.

Kharcho: a thick soup made from beef, lamb, chicken, or sometimes vegetable stock. All versions contain a special mixture of the spice blend *khmeli-suneli*, a liberal dose of herbs, and a souring agent such as fruit leather, *tkemali* sauce, or vinegar.

Khashi: Georgia's best-loved soup, made from tripe. It is traditionally eaten early in the

morning, preferably between six and eight a.m. following a night of heavy drinking.

Khinkali: Large dumplings made with a variety of fillings. In the mountainous regions the choice is usually ground lamb, but elsewhere the filling is more often a mixture of beef and pork. The dumplings may also be stuffed with cheese or greens. *Khinkali* are served hot, with no garnish other than coarsely ground black pepper. The doughy topknot is never consumed but used as a handle for holding the hot dumplings.

Khmeli-suneli: an herb and spice mixture typically containing ground dried coriander seed, ground celery seed, dried basil, dill parsley, fenugreek summer savory, bay leaf, and mint. Ground dried marigold petals are often added as well.

Lobio: The Georgian word for beans, either fresh or dried. *Lobio* also refers to an aromatic salad, usually made from dried kidney beans, that is prepared in dozens of ways: moistened with herb vinaigrette, seasoned simply with butter and eggs, or mixed with lettuce and celery. The classic recipe calls for mixing the beans with *tkemali*, the tangy plum sauce.

Masharabi: a sour pomegranate syrup for flavoring stews. Fresh pomegranate juice is cooked with cinnamon, cloves, and a little sugar until thick.

Matsoni: Yogurt. Georgian yogurt is some of the best in the world, whether made from cow's milk or the even richer water buffalo milk. *Matsoni* is never gelatinous and is pleasantly tart.

Mchadi: Western Georgian corncakes, traditionally baked in a *ketsi* or clay pot over an open fire. Because *mchadi* are bland and dry, they are perfect for sopping up sauce from flavorful stews.

Mkhali (or **pkhali**): a vegetable puree to which herbs and ground

walnuts are added. *Mkhali* is made from any number of different vegetables; spinach and beets are the most popular.

Mtsvadi: skewers of plain, freshly slaughtered lamb, beef, or pork, what we know as shish kebab. If the meat is not tender, it can be marinated overnight before grilling, in which case it is known as *basturma*.

Pelamushi: a dessert made by mixing concentrated grape juice with cornmeal. The thickened cornmeal is cut into brilliant purple diamonds.

Satsivi: the renowned Georgian nut sauce, served with poultry, fish, or vegetables. Ground walnuts are mixed with garlic, cinnamon, cloves, coriander seed, marigold, pepper, cayenne, and vinegar, and stock. After the sauce has cooked, the prepared poultry, fish, or meat is immersed in it, then allowed to cool to room temperature, which thickens the sauce and gives the dish its name (the root *-tsiv* means "cold").

Suluguni: the most widely used Georgian cheese, made from cow's milk. *Suluguni* is usually sold in large rounds up to a foot in diameter, but for special occasions it is prepared in flat, individual disks that can be thinly rolled.

Tabaka: partially boned young chicken that is flattened, then fried under a heavy weight. The name comes from the traditional heavy skillet or *tapha* that is used. *Tabaka* is usually served with *tkemali* sauce.

Tkemali (*Prunus divaricata*): a sour plum that grows throughout Georgia. The word also refers to the sauce made from this plum, which is used as a seasoning in soups, stews, and vegetable dishes and also as a condiment for grilled meats. *Tkemali* sauce is piquant yet slightly sweet. It is served fresh or preserved for winter keeping.

Tklapi: dried fruit leather, made by boiling *tkemali* or sour plums,

then pureeing them and spreading the puree into a sheet to dry. *Tklapi* is an excellent souring agent for soups and stews — less astringent than vinegar, more flavorful than tomatoes. Fruit leather is also made from sweeter fruits like apricots and peaches, in which case it is intended for eating out of hand rather than cooking.

References

Allen 1971

W.E.D. Allen. *A History of the Georgian People*, 2nd ed. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971.

Burney and Lang 1972

Charles Burney and David Marshall Lang. *The Peoples of the Hills: Ancient Ararat and Caucasus*. New York: Praeger, 1972.

Dzhikia 1978

N. P. Dzhikia. *Kul'tura pitaniia gruzinskikh gortsev* (The food culture of Georgian hill peoples). Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1978.

Chardin 1689

Chardin, Sir John. *The Travels of Sir John Chardin into Persia and the East-Indies, Through the Black Sea and the Country of Colchis*. London, 1689.

Chelebi 1834

Chelebi, Evliya. *Narrative of Travels in Europe, Asia, and Africa in the Seventeenth Century*. Trans. The Ritter Joseph von Hammer. London, 1834.

Chiaureli 1984

V. Chiaureli. *Gruzinskoe vino* (Georgian wine). Tbilisi: Merani, 1984.

Dumas 1859

Dumas, Alexandre. *Le Caucase; depuis Prométhée jusqu'à Chamyl*. Paris, 1859.

Gudiashvili 1984

Lado Gudiashvili. Edited by Moisei Kagan. Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1984.

Holisky 1989

Dee Ann Holisky. "The Rules of the *Supra* or How to Drink in

Georgian." *Annual of the Society for the Study of Caucasia* 1(1989): 22-40.

Kakabadze 1984

Alde Kakabadze. *Sovremennaiia gruzinskaia keramika* (Contemporary Georgian ceramics). Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1984.

Khromchenko 1987

S. M. Khromchenko. *E. Akhvlediani: Izbrannye proizvedeniia*. Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1987.

Kikvidze 1988

Kikvidze, Ia.A. *Zemledelie i zemledel'cheskii kul't v drevnei Gruzii: po arkheologicheskim materialam* (Agriculture and the agricultural cult in ancient Georgia according to archaeological materials). Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1988.

Kuznetsov 1987

Erast Kuznetsov. *Niko Pirosmiani*. Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1983.

Mars and Altman 1987

Gerald Mars and Yochanan Altman, "Alternative mechanism of distribution in a Soviet economy." In: *Constructive Drinking: Perspectives on Drink from Anthropology*, ed. Mary Douglas. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987: 270-279.

Pokhlebin 1978

Pokhlebin, V.V. *Natsional'nye kukhni nashikh narodov* (National cuisines of our peoples). Moscow: Pishchevaia promyshlennost', 1978.

Sulakvelidze 1959

Tamara Sulakvelidze. *Gruzinskie bliuda* (Georgian dishes). Tbilisi: Gruzinskoe ministerstvo torgovli, 1959.

Suny 1988

Ronald Grigor Suny. *The Making of Modern Georgia*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988.

Volkova and Dzhhavakhishvili 1982

N. G. Volkova and G.N. Dzhhavakhishvili. *Bytovaia kul'tura Gruzii XIX-XX vekov: traditsii i innovatsii* (The culture of everyday life of Georgia in the 19th and 20th centuries: traditions and innovations). Moscow: Nauka, 1982.

Recipes

Khachapuri

2 cups unbleached white flour
1/2 teaspoon salt
12 tablespoons (1 1/2 sticks) cold butter, cut in pieces
2 eggs
1/4 cup plain yogurt
1 1/4 pounds mixed Muenster and Havarti cheeses
1 egg yolk, beaten

Put the flour and salt in a medium bowl and cut in the butter until the mixture resembles coarse cornmeal. Beat 1 egg and stir in the yogurt, then add to the flour mixture. Form into a ball and chill for 1 hour.

Grate the cheeses coarsely, beat the other egg, and stir it into the cheese. Set aside.

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Grease a large baking sheet. On a floured board roll the dough to a rectangle about 12 x 17 inches. Trim the edges. Spread the cheese mixture on half the dough and then fold the other half over to enclose it, sealing and crimping the edges.

Transfer the bread to the baking sheet and brush with beaten egg yolk. Bake for 50 minutes, or until browned. The bread is best served slightly warm, cut into small squares.

Serves 12 to 15.

Beet Puree (Charkhlis mkhali)

1 pound beets
1/2 cup shelled walnuts
3 garlic cloves, peeled
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 cup chopped cilantro
1/2 cup chopped parsley
Freshly ground black pepper

1/4 teaspoon dried summer savory
1/4 teaspoon ground coriander seed
1 or 2 teaspoons red wine vinegar (to taste)

Bake the unpeeled beets at 375°F. for 1 to 1 1/2 hours, until tender. (If you are short of time, the beets may be boiled, but their flavor will not be as good.) While the beets are roasting, in a food processor grind together the walnuts, garlic, and salt. Add the cilantro and parsley and continue grinding to make a fine paste. Transfer to a bowl.

When the beets are soft, peel them and finely grate them in the food processor. In a medium bowl mix together the grated beets and the ground walnut mixture, then stir in the remaining ingredients. Keep tasting, as the amount of vinegar needed will depend on the sweetness of the beets. The *mkhali* should be slightly tart.

Chill in the refrigerator for at least 2 hours, but bring to room temperature before serving, mounded on a plate and cross-hatched on top with a knife.

Serves 6.

Basturma

2 cups pomegranate juice
1/4 cup olive oil
1 teaspoon salt
Freshly ground black pepper
1 bay leaf, crushed
2 garlic cloves, peeled and crushed
2 pounds boneless shoulder or leg of lamb, cut into 2-inch cubes
One 1-pound eggplant, salted, drained, and parboiled (optional)

Mix together the pomegranate juice, olive oil, salt, pepper to taste, bay leaf, and garlic. Marinate the lamb overnight in this mixture. The following day, place the meat on skewers, alternating with eggplant cubes, if desired.

Grill over hot coals for about 10 minutes. Serve with *tkemali* or cilantro sauce.

Serves 4 to 6.

Tkemali

1 1/2 pounds plums (not too sweet or ripe)
1/4 cup water
3/4 teaspoon whole coriander seed
1 teaspoon fennel seed
2 large garlic cloves, peeled and roughly chopped
1 teaspoon cayenne
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon finely minced fresh mint
1/3 cup finely minced cilantro

Cut the plums in half and remove the pits. Place in a saucepan with the water and bring to a boil. Simmer, covered, for 15 minutes, or until soft.

In a mortar with a pestle, pound together the coriander seed, fennel seed, garlic, cayenne, and salt to make a fine paste.

When the plums are soft, put them through a food mill and return to a clean pan. Bring to a boil and cook over medium heat, stirring, for 3 minutes. Stir in the ground spices and continue cooking until the mixture thickens slightly, another 5 minutes or so. Stir in the minced mint and cilantro and remove from the heat. Pour into a jar while still hot. Either cool to room temperature and keep in the refrigerator, or seal the jar for longer storage.

Makes 1 pint.

Cilantro Sauce (Kindzis satsebeli)

2 ounces apricot fruit leather
1/4 cup boiling water

1/2 cup shelled walnuts
4 garlic cloves, peeled
1 1/2 cups finely chopped cilantro
1 1/2 cups finely chopped mixed parsley, dill, basil, tarragon
1/2 cup finely chopped scallions (including green part)
1/4 cup freshly squeezed lemon juice
1 1/2 teaspoons salt
Freshly ground black pepper
Dash cayenne
1 cup walnut oil

Soak the apricot leather in the boiling water until soft; stir until a puree is formed.

Grind the walnuts and the garlic together in a food processor, being careful not to grind them to a sticky paste. Next, add the apricot puree, the herbs, scallions, lemon juice, salt, pepper, and cayenne, and blend together. In a slow, steady stream, while the motor is running, add the walnut oil to form a thick sauce.

Allow to rest at room temperature for a couple of hours before serving. This sauce will keep, tightly covered and refrigerated, for several days. Bring to room temperature before using.

Makes 2 cups.

Article and recipes adapted from Darra Goldstein, *The Georgian Feast: The Vibrant Culture and Savory Food of the Republic of Georgia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). Used by permission.

Photo © 1969 Daniel C. Waugh



Ananuri, on the Georgian Military Highway north of Tbilisi