

Georgian grape varieties find fans among consumers and vintners in the Eastern United States

# (The Republic of) • Georgia on Their Minds

By Laurent Guinand, Ph.D.

Varieties from the Republic of Georgia are gaining interest in the United States.

As anyone who has tasted a good saperavi can attest, the wines of the Republic of Georgia, in the Caucasus mountains of Eurasia, are diamonds in the rough. Two aspects are particularly interesting to those in the West: the potential and diversity of Georgia's indigenous grape varieties, and the natural fermentation process in clay pots called kvevris (KWEV-reez). Both represent market niches that could someday become valuable in the United States; in fact, several wineries in the Eastern U.S. have already begun planting Georgian varieties in their own vineyards.

The Republic of Georgia claims the title of "the cradle of wine for humanity," after the discovery of wine-related artifacts dating to 7,000 B.C. Wine has long been incorporated into the culture of Georgia and is expressed through

many different aspects, ranging from the "Supra" (a feast that Georgians practice on a regular basis, involving heavy consumption of wine) to the "tamada" (the toastmaster who officiates during the Supra and toasts numerous times with a glass of wine) to Deda (the statue of the mother of Georgia, holding a cup of wine in her hand, similar in symbolism to the Statue of Liberty for America).

After it was swallowed by the Soviet Union, Georgia sold most of its wine to Russia and the East Bloc. Even after becoming an independent state in 1991, Georgia continued to be the primary supplier of wine to Russia and other states of the former Soviet Union. Most of it was considered plonk – justly or unjustly – although the potential for world-class wine was there all along. Since the ban of Georgian wines in Russia in 2006

and the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, a lot of attention has been focused on wine quality and defining/promoting a Georgian style to meet international – i.e. more sophisticated – markets.

## AT A GLANCE

- Wine has been produced in the Republic of Georgia since as far back as 7,000 B.C.
- Georgia is home to more than 450 grape varieties, with about 15 accounting for most wine production.
- Vintners in the Eastern United States are having some success with Georgian varieties.
- Saperavi and rkatsiteli seem to have adapted well to the upstate New York climate.

Georgia has mostly a Mediterranean-style climate, although Kakheti, its largest wine region, is located at the foot of the Caucasus chain of mountains and presents more of a continental climate.

### DIVERSITY OF VARIETIES

Georgia is home to an estimated 450 different wine grape varieties. While most are no longer grown commercially (they still exist in a few nurseries and personal lots), there are 15 or so varieties that now comprise the bulk of production.

Among the grapes that have the greatest potential worldwide are a red variety, saperavi (sah-peh-RAH-vee), and two whites, rkatsiteli (ruh-KAHT-si-tell-ee) and mtsvane (mits-VAH-nee). They can be bottled separately or blended together, and are best consumed when they're young, when they are fresh

and citrusy (not unlike sauvignon blanc). Saperavi is full-bodied, with flavors of plum, prune and pepper – similar to a blend of cabernet sauvignon and syrah.

Up-and-coming grapes in Georgia include two red varieties, alexandrouli (a-lex-an-DROO-lee) and ojaleshi (oh-jah-LEH-shee), which are typically used to produce semi-sweet red wines. Three white grapes also show promise: tsolikouri (soh-lee-kah-OO-ree), which is very light and fresh, similar to muscadet, and kisi (KEE-see) and chinuri (chee-NOO-ree), which develop more complexity and are heavier in body than rkatsiteli, mtsvane and tsolikouri.

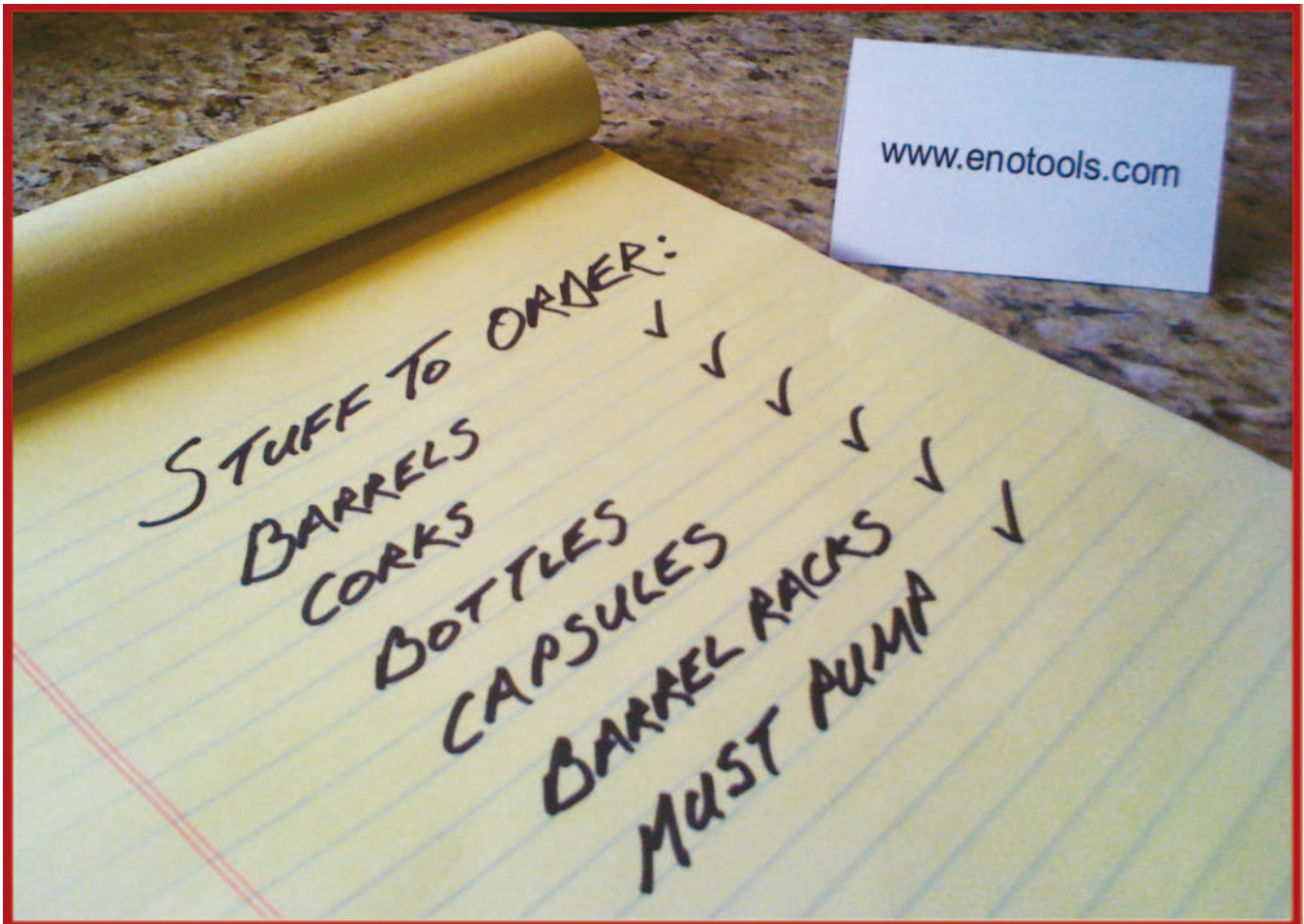


### GEORGIAN GRAPES IN AMERICA

In addition to being planted in Bulgaria, Moldova, China and Ukraine, Georgian varieties are finding their way into U.S. vineyards. It all started half a century ago at Dr. Konstantin Frank Vinifera Wine Cellars in Hammondsport, N.Y., in the Finger Lakes region. Dr. Frank, a German who relocated to Ukraine, was exposed to Georgian varieties and brought them with him to America in the early 1950s.

After testing several Georgian and non-Georgian

**Dr. Konstantin Frank Vinifera Wine Cellars in New York has been making wine from Georgian varieties for decades.**



grapes, he settled on saperavi and rkatsiteli. His grandson, Frederick Frank, now in charge of the winery, explained that Dr. Frank was “particularly satisfied by the results he obtained for both saperavi and rkatsiteli and thought they would have great potential in the United States.” Today the winery has 9 acres planted of rkatsiteli and 1.4 acres of saperavi.

Saperavi and rkatsiteli adapted well to the upstate New York climate, particularly with Dr. Frank’s grafting expertise and practice of covering the foot of each vine with dirt to protect it from winter temperatures. The winery remains the main nursery for Georgian varieties in the United States, and Dr. Frank’s chosen grapes are still the two most important Georgian varieties in the country.

Saperavi and rkatsiteli are known to be hardy and resistant to a wide variation of temperatures. A handful of other wineries on the East Coast have planted them, including Westport Rivers Vineyard & Winery in Westport, Mass.; McGregor Vineyard in Dundee, N.Y.; Tomasello Winery in Hammonton, N.J., and Horton Vineyards in Gordonsville, Va.

Neil Glaser, Horton’s marketing director, said rkatsiteli is usually well-received by winery visitors. “It is one of our customers’ favorite wines,” he said. “Once they’ve tried it and liked it, they come back to order more.” Horton has 6 acres of rkatsiteli planted.

Craig Cesar of Westport Rivers, which has 3.5 acres of rkatsiteli, confirms that “both saperavi and rkatsiteli are very resilient grapes that are well adapted to the East Coast. Rkatsiteli has loose clusters and creates fewer issues with mildew than other varieties that have more compact clusters.”

Rkatsiteli is usually sold as a single-variety wine. It’s typically made in stainless steel tanks, without oak influence, and produces dry, light wines. The U.S. versions sell for \$18 (Dr. Frank), \$19 (Westport Rivers) and \$20 (Horton). Westport also blends rkatsiteli with riesling for a sparkling wine. The current

release of McGregor’s Black Russian Red, a saperavi blend, sells for \$55 at the winery.

Typically, these wineries produce a few hundred to a few thousand cases of these wines each year. They like to experiment with different grapes to find what works best in the Northeast, given the growing conditions. Clearly, Georgian varieties have adapted well and have become a viable niche product for some wineries.

## NATURAL FERMENTATION

In addition to Georgia’s diverse grape varieties, the other notable aspect about its wine industry is the natural fermentation that takes place in the kvevris, the clay vessels. Right after harvest, the grapes and stems are lightly crushed/stomped and the entire output – grapes, juices, seeds and stems – are placed in the kvevris.

There are different sizes of kvevris for various types of grapes,



**In Georgia, wines are made in clay vessels called kvevris, which are buried in the ground.**



**Pheasant's Tears winery in Georgia, co-owned by an American transplant, makes its wines in the traditional kveri vessels.**

yet the process is the same for white and red grapes. The kvevri is buried in the cellar, so that the temperature of the wine remains constant. In order to keep unwanted bacteria from developing, beeswax is applied inside the kvevri, and remains there during fermentation, without affecting wine character.

For 10 days to two weeks, natural fermentation occurs inside the vessel. The winemaker performs a type of batonnage during the fermentation process, using a long wooden spoon to stir the wine. This takes place 10-30 times per day. Both alcoholic and malolactic fermentations are fully realized within this time period, without any addition of commercial yeast, bacteria, enzymes, chemicals or other additives.

Once fermentation is complete, the neck of the kvevri is sealed and the winemaker covers the amphora with dirt. It is then left alone, for the wine to age on the lees for a few months. Traditionally, vessels containing white wines are opened around Christmas time following harvest, and red vessels are opened around Easter the following year.

Naturally, this approach requires high-quality grapes and winemaking expertise. Typically, the grapes used are organic, if not biodynamic.

Jonathan Wurdeman, an American transplant in Georgia and co-owner of Pheasant's Tears winery, takes the traditional approach of making wines in the kvevri. Others shorten the aging process in kvevri and transfer the wine to oak barrels to bring a more "international flavor." In particular, tannins become softer more quickly and the influence of oak brings flavors and aromas that are more familiar to wine enthusiasts who have not been exposed to Georgian varieties. The Vinoterra line at Schuchmann wines and the Satrapezo wines from Telavi Wine Cellars are produced that way. All of these wines, including those of Pheasant's Tears, are available in the United States.

Interestingly, the amphora fermentation process is expanding beyond Georgia. Italy is probably its biggest champion, followed by France. However, wineries in these regions typically use their local varieties rather than Georgian ones.

None of the American wineries mentioned in this article are

using the traditional method, due to lack of availability of kvevris in the States. Perhaps that will change in years to come, as more U.S. wine producers and consumers are exposed to Georgia's unique grape varieties and winemaking techniques. ■

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## THE NEXT MALBEC?

The Georgian variety with perhaps the biggest potential is saperavi. With a name that translates to "dye" or "paint," saperavi is a teinturier grape, which means that it has red anthocyanin within its pulp as well as the skin. While most teinturier grapes are not usually considered to make good wines on their own (think alicante bouchet, for example), this is an exception to the rule.

Wines made from saperavi show great complexity, dark color and aromas of blackberries, prunes and attractive black pepper. The wine shows well at lower levels of alcohol (around 13.5%), which could make it an appealing alternative to heavy, jammy reds from California and Argentina. A prolonged time in oak can elevate these wines to world-class status, and if marketed correctly, they may be able to follow malbec's lead in creating a new category with its own following in America – L. G.