

To those who never give up.



*“There is no country where they  
drink more or better wine.”*

Jean-Baptiste Chardin,  
*Voyages de M. le Chevalier Chardin en Perse et autres lieux de l’Orient,*  
1740



Anna Saldadze

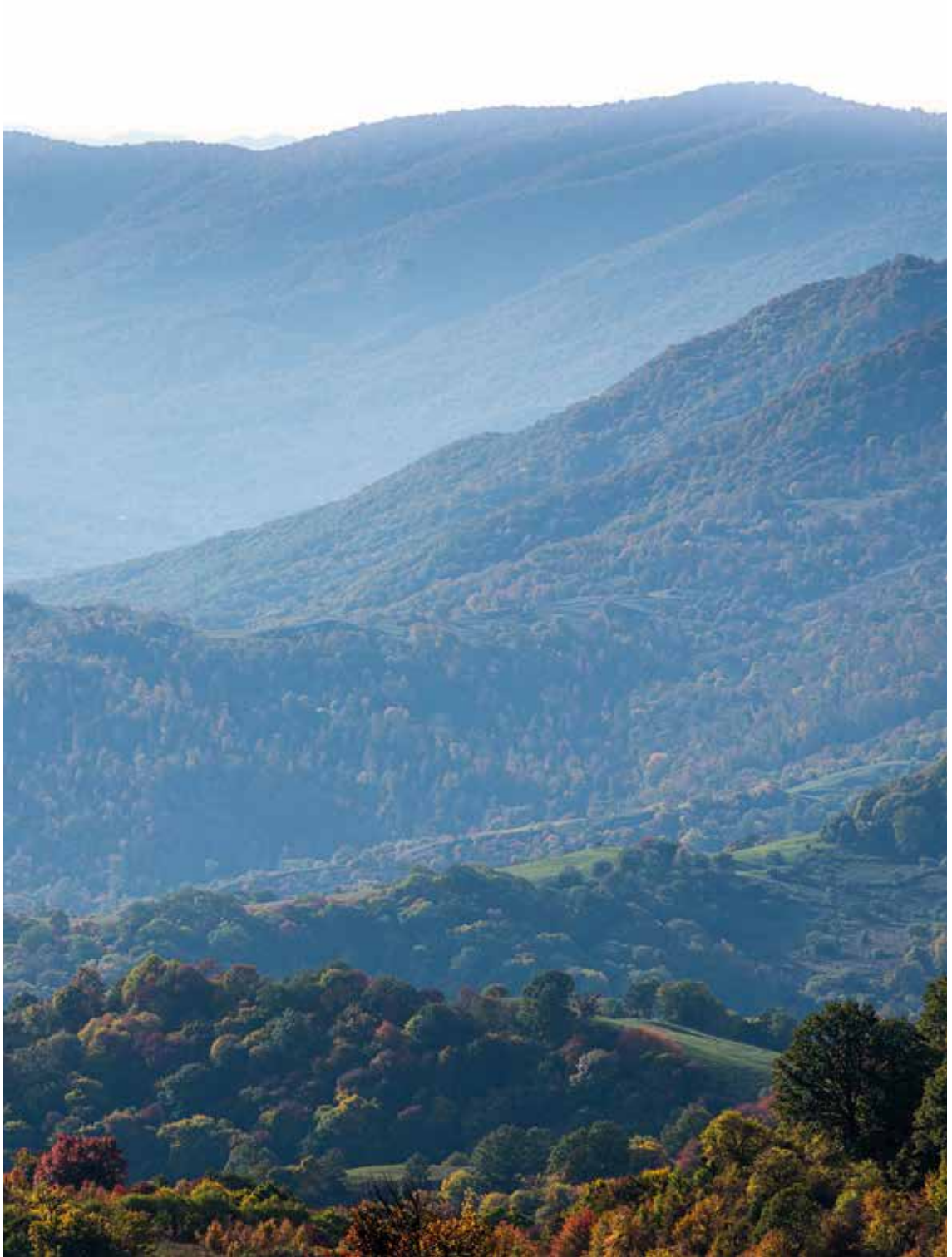
*Prefaced & Edited by*  
Sarah Abbott MW

# UNTAMED

8000 Vintages of Georgian Wine

*Principal Photographer*  
Angus Leadley Brown





*'Georgians enjoy giving,  
like other nations enjoy receiving.'*

Alexandre Dumas,  
*Le Caucase,*  
1859

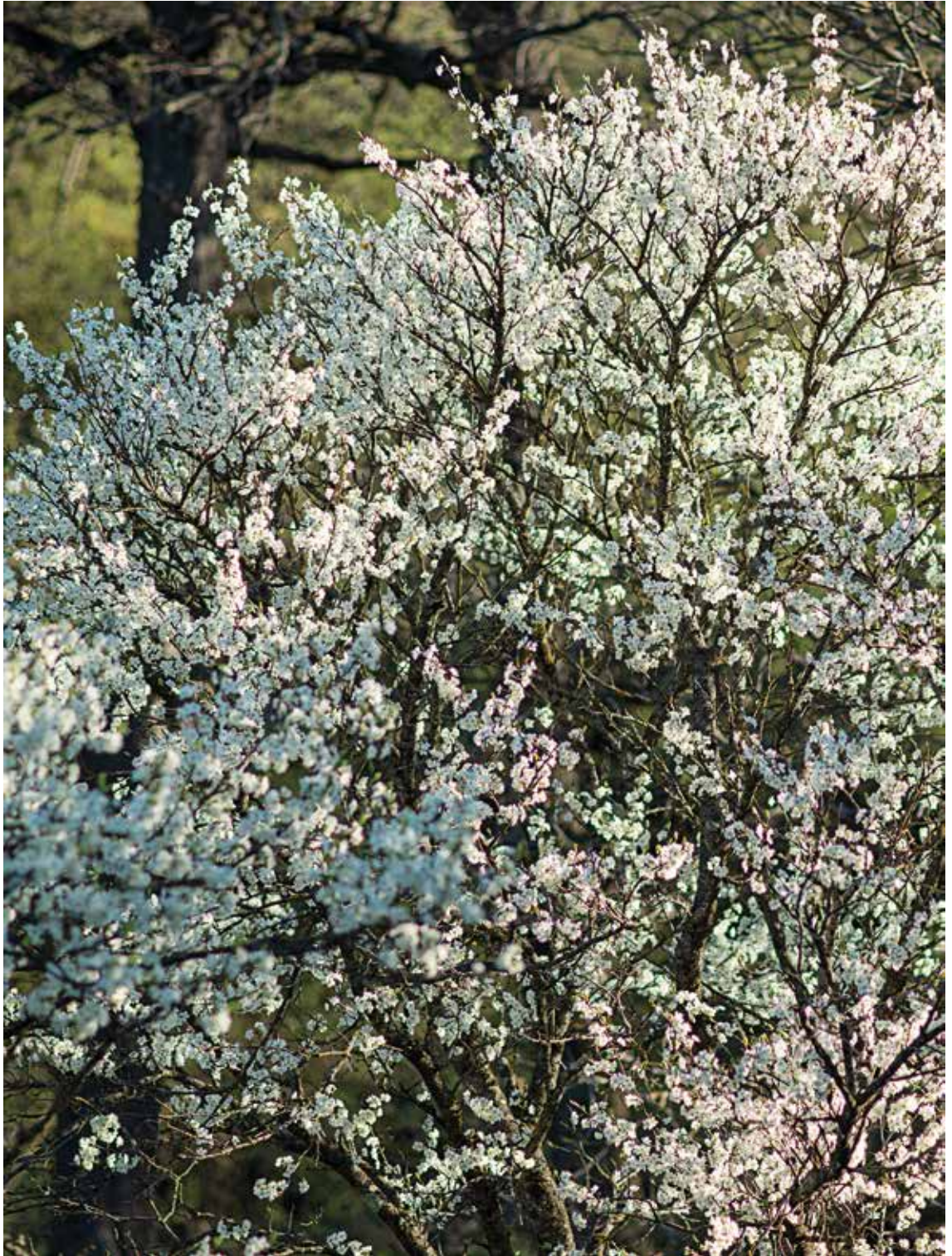
Autumn on the road from Tbilisi to Kakheti, over the Tsiv-Gombori mountain range (*previous spread*).

Small clay jars wait to be filled with wine at the entrance of the Targameuli *Marani* (wine cellar), Samegrelo region (Mingrelia) (*opposite*).

Spring in Kakheti, and a bunch of Goruli Mtsvane grapes (*next spread*).













## PREFACE

Wine tells the story of its country. Georgian wine is both deeply ancient and newly reborn. I have never known a country to identify itself with its wine as much as Georgia. Wine is the blood of the nation. But until recently, Georgian wine was unknown in European markets. Georgia was the breadbasket and vineyard of the former Soviet Union, and producers were used to servicing that market. When Putin banned imports of Georgian wine in 2006, it was a disaster for the Georgian wine sector. Or so it seemed. But Georgians are creative and determined, and the story of the last 10 years has been the story of Georgian wine moving away from being the darling of the CIS to emerging on the world stage of wine.

The potential of Georgian wine is huge and is increasingly being realized. This is a country with thousands of years of unbroken wine tradition, hundreds of native varieties, diverse wine styles, and a wide range of price points. It has not focused on easy drinking low-cost international varieties. The terrain is too mountainous, and the grip of the indigenous varieties is too strong. Georgia has varieties that can't be found anywhere else. And of course, Georgia has *qvevri* wines, which are a specialist wine style with a niche but powerfully emotional and spiritual appeal.

The country is a gem. I have been lucky to visit and enjoy the hospitality of wine nations across the world, and Georgia just captures your heart. It is so beautiful, and so vibrant, and so engagingly individualistic. I hope that this beautiful book inspires you to visit Georgia and to experience its generous, soulful and delicious wine and food, which are the essence of this very special place.

Sarah Abbott MW

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In 2013, when Unesco listed the ‘*qvevri* wine-making method’ as part of the world’s Intangible Cultural Heritage, it came as a surprise to many. Very few people knew that Georgians made wine, let alone in strange clay vessels they buried in the ground. And yet, many recent archaeological discoveries have led scientists to believe that Georgia, with its longest uninterrupted wine-making tradition, is the cradle of wine.

How come the world’s wine aficionados are only now becoming aware of Georgian wines? On my quest to find answers, I met a wonderful new generation of wine-makers who, as it turned out, were also on a quest of their own: they wanted to make a truly Georgian wine, a wine like no other. These modern pioneers were feeling their way along, building on the ruins of the Soviet era, armed with a strong belief that wine would lead them to the safe shores. Walking in the footprints of their ancestors, they focused on using *qvevris* and the Georgian wine-making method, trusting it could proudly rival the best European-style wines. They planted new vineyards, buried new *qvevris*, built new *maranis*, and began to make a wine they could be proud of. With the untamed spirit for which they are famous, these Georgians have helped to shine a light on their country’s *terroirs*, its regions, its 525 indigenous grape varieties, its habits and customs of hospitality and polyphonic singing.

These *qvevri* pioneers are now catching the attention of wine lovers all over the world, but the Georgian wine landscape is even more diverse. Newly rehabilitated historic wine-making estates are producing excellent European and Georgian wines. Large wine companies, heirs of the Soviet wine industry, have adapted themselves to modern international standards. All are important, large and small, and work alongside each other to revive Georgia’s rich wine culture by showcasing its thrilling diversity, versatility and wealth.

This book is a humble introduction to a complex wine culture. It is neither an ethnographic study nor an œnological treatise, nor does it claim to be exhaustive. It merely aims to arouse curiosity, and to encourage the discovery of something which is at the same time very old, and yet also very new.





# THE QUEST

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## AN UNTAMED SPIRIT

Wine tells the story of its country, and Georgia's history can help us to understand the current revival of its wines.

Due to its geopolitical location on the edge of western and eastern civilizations, Georgia's history is rife with unrest. Invasions, wars, and the unwelcome rule of neighbouring empires – Russian, Persian, Ottoman and Mongol – have shaped Georgian culture and the sense of identity of its people. Like David fighting against Goliath, Georgia always fought against powerful empires<sup>1</sup> in order to safeguard its political freedom, its Christian faith, and its unique cultural identity. Like a reed it bended to their rule but never snapped, rising again every time.

The untamed Georgian spirit was legendary in the Caucasus, and many believed that wine might be their magic potion. Georgians shared that same belief. Back in ancient times, when their primitive ancestors worshipped the sun, they believed that grapes had the unique capacity to gather the sun's power and energy. By pressing the grapes and drinking their juice, they thought the energy could be transferred to men, thus making them invincible. As wine altered the perception of reality, it was believed to be a way to better communicate with the gods, among whom was Aguna, the God of wine.

'When God created men, He also gave them wine,' an old Kakhetian adage tells us, and Georgians always associated wine with victory. It was victory over the enemy, over fate, over everyday hardship. Perhaps they believed that as long as they would be connected to wine, their civilization would survive any upheaval. This peculiar attachment was not a secret for the invaders. All of them would cut down the vineyards as part of their attacks, hoping that by eradicating Georgia's wine culture, they would weaken the soul and courage of its people. Thankfully in vain.

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<sup>1</sup> The Caucasus and Georgia have been part of the Sassanid (224-651), Safavid and Ottoman empires (1501-1736). The Russian Empire annexed Georgia in 1800, and Persia finally renounced its claim to the country in the early 19th century. Georgia remained under strong Russian domination until 1917 and later throughout the Soviet period until 1991, when it finally regained its independence.



The *qvevri* gives Rkatsiteli wine its dazzling sun-gold hues.



## A JOYFUL LIGHTNESS OF BEING

Tbilisi, the capital, lies at the heart of the joyful Georgian lifestyle. A city of merchants, it was and still is a huge cultural melting-pot. Georgians, Armenians, Russians, Turks, Jews, Persians and many others all lived together in a lively hurly-burly.

Here, wine was an important ally to the *karachokhelis*, the urban troubadours who until mid-19<sup>th</sup> century were the city's bohemian elite. They were famous for their drinking skills, their songs and wit, their camaraderie and courage. Armed with bowls full of wine, they helped endless unlucky suitors win the heart of the woman they loved.

In Tbilisi, one can still walk up Wine Street and imagine the merchants with their wine-skins filled to the brim, and the endless carousing in the noisy *dukans*. After all, the city had been founded by the 5th-century King Vakhtang Gorgasali during a hunting party: when a pheasant was found accidentally boiled in a hot spring, the amazed King ordered a city to be built on the very spot (*tbili* in Georgian means 'warm'). This is what the Georgian mindset is all about.

Here, on the southern slopes of the Caucasus, enjoyment is never totally dissociated from gravity, and serious matters are never lacking in a light playfulness. Perhaps it is from these tensions that Georgians derive their renowned creative energy – the power that has enabled them to walk the line between eastern and western civilizations, absorbing influences from all over the world whilst maintaining the distinctiveness and vibrancy of their cultural identity.

*'In these terrific Georgians we had met more than our match.  
They could out-eat us, out-drink us, out-dance us, out-sing  
us. They had the fierce gaiety of the Italians, and the physical  
energy of the Burgundians. Everything they did was done with  
flair... Nothing can break their individuality or their spirit.'*

John Steinbeck,  
*The Russian Journal,*  
1948



## SIPS OF WISDOM

A mere couple of streets uphill from Old Tbilisi, in the Sololaki neighbourhood, a flight of wonky steps leads down into an old vaulted cellar. The heavy steel door, with its hand-written Georgian quotations, seems more like a gate to some secret society's headquarters than an entrance to a wine bar. Welcome to Vino Underground, a friendly enterprise which soon became the national and international gathering point for all those who love natural wine.

Ramaz Nikoladze, an impressive and charismatic Georgian wine-maker from Imereti, is the cellar's proud guardian. Together with a handful of others he is responsible for the rebirth of traditional Georgian wine-making in the mid-nineties. After the fall of the Soviet Union, as Georgia took its first stumbling steps on the road to independence, life in the big cities became increasingly difficult. Food, wine and even basic necessities were scarce. Luckily some young entrepreneurs still had fond memories of spending time in the vineyards with their grandparents, and decided to go back to their *sopeli* (village) and make wine just as their forefathers did.

While Georgian wine-makers were busy rediscovering their roots, new ideas were shaking Europe. In 1980, Marcel Lapierre, a French wine-maker from Beaujolais, started championing the natural wine movement. Supported by Jules Chauvet, a fellow dealer and wine taster, the movement resonated with a more general public concern for healthy products. A community of single-minded growers and vintners slowly began to coalesce over the course of various natural wine fairs. The movement was encouraged by pioneering journalists such as Alice Feiring and Isabelle Legeron MW, who helped to publicize the fact that something really unique was going on in the wine business.

The timing could not have been more perfect. Once again, their *qvevris* and bold natural vintages would enable Georgians to rejoin the international world of wine. This time, however, their unspoiled, environmentally friendly methods would have something really priceless to teach to the world. For this young generation of Georgian wine-makers, the expression *in vino veritas* held a far deeper meaning.





Vardzia, a cave monastery built in the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. during the reign of Queen Tamar, Meskheti.



Sections of vine covered in thin silver leaf that were found in a tomb of the 'Bedeni' culture, 3rd millennium B.C.

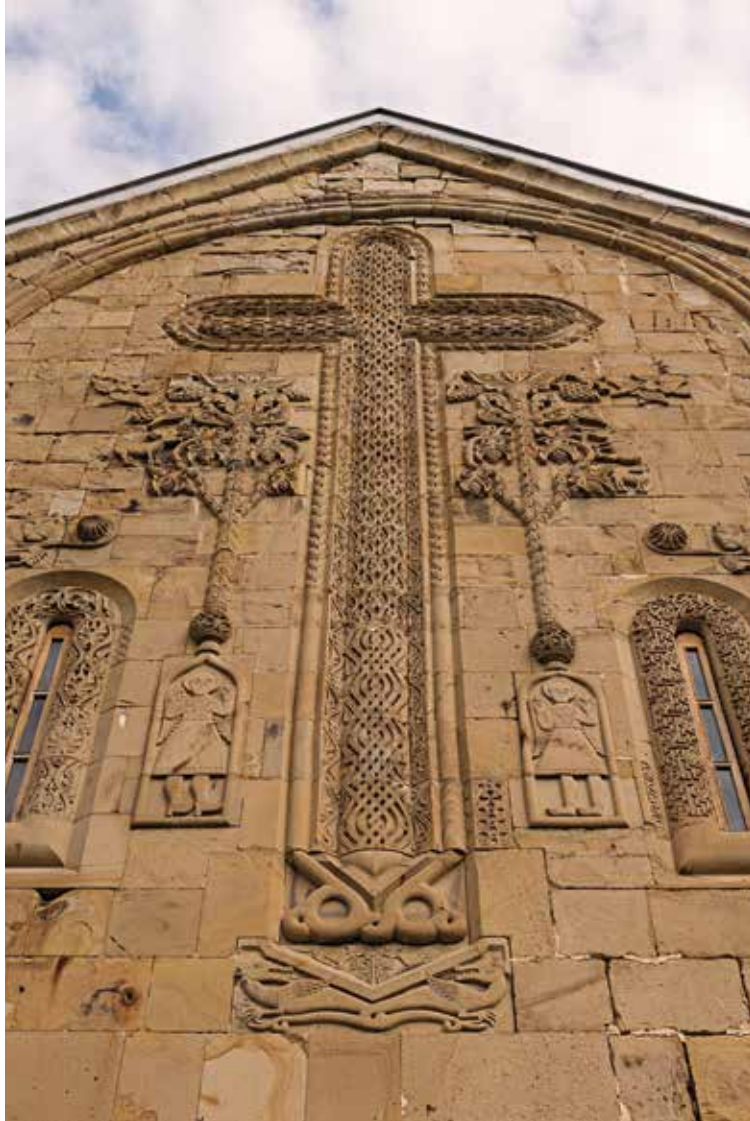
According to one version of the legend, the Georgians used to attach small vine shoots to their armour when they went to war, so that after their death the battlefield would be covered in vines.

© Georgian National Museum



Archaeological evidence indicates that grapevines and wine have played a defining role in Georgian civilization as far back as prehistory. In the ancient settlement of Uplistsikhe, which began to be hewn out of the living rock during the 2nd millennium B.C. (*see above*), cavities have been identified as having served as wine presses (*satsnakheli*), and even the remains of a *marani* (wine cellar) with several buried *qvevris* have been found. Similar traces can be found in Vardzia (*see p.25*).





Grapevines adorn the facade of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Church of the Assumption in Ananuri.



## THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

Wine plays a major role in Christian culture, but nowhere else have the two been so closely linked as in Georgia. The Bible makes frequent references to the drink, and the iconic ‘eat my flesh, and drink my blood’ is at the very core of the Holy Eucharist. However, the Georgians’ pre-existing attachment to their wine created an even tighter connection between the two: according to legend, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., St Nino, a girl from Cappadocia, preached Christianity to the inhabitants of the pagan kingdom of Iberia using a cross made of two vine branches tied together with her braid. This kind of cross has no equivalent in any other Christian culture, and scholars maintain that the association of the two was only meant to reinforce the importance of each.

Georgian churches and monasteries began to cultivate their own vineyards. Wine-making, along with other scientific and theological matters, was taught in major academies such as those of Ikalto in Kakheti or Gelati in Imereti. Although many European monasteries followed the same path, the superbly kept vineyards of Georgian monks, be it in Georgia, in Jerusalem or on Mount Athos, were highly praised by visitors. Vines inspired a number of religious, iconographic and architectural monuments, as well as a number of liturgical chants: with its extremely subtle polyphonic harmonies, *Thou art a Vine*, a masterpiece of composition, compares the Virgin Mary’s purity to the delicacy of a young plant.

Thanks to St Nino, and despite its location at the eastern periphery of Europe, Georgia had become an early member of the Christian family of nations. This affiliation proved critical. The rising concern for the protection of the Christian faith against the threat of pagan and Islamic civilizations from the Middle East and Central Asia intertwined ever more powerfully the destinies of the Georgian Church and the culture of wine. Not content with destroying its vineyards, Georgia’s enemies also ravaged its churches. While the former was meant to undermine their courage, the latter was intended to shatter their faith. This shared struggle explains why and how the Church became the depository of Georgia’s wine culture, and why the rise of the former automatically encouraged the rebirth of the latter.



## HIGHWAY TO HEAVEN

The Alaverdi monastery is a prime example of the ongoing connection between the Georgian Church and Georgian viticulture. Resembling a gracious white bird nestling among the green grass of Kakheti's Alazani valley – the richest wine-producing area of Georgia – the monastery was a former pagan temple of the moon. It was founded in the 6<sup>th</sup> century by Yoseb (Joseph) of Alaverdi, one of the thirteen Assyrian fathers who propagated Christianity in the country. From the outset, the monastery is believed to have been one of the biggest producers of wine: archaeological excavations have uncovered a number of impressive *qvevris* within the church walls, evidence of a well-organized ancient *marani*. The earliest *qvevris* date back to the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D., and have survived many invasions; enemies probably filled many of them with earth, and the loving hands of the wine-maker would have painstakingly cleaned them over and over again. Yet the final blow was inflicted during the Soviet era: fighting against everything religious, the authorities used the Church as a warehouse for several decades and stored chemicals in the thousand-year-old *qvevris*. But the wind would turn.

In the nineties, the Soviet Union collapsed and Georgia began to rebuild its independence the hard way. Strong ideological and political divides had split Georgian society, and civil unrest was looming. After eighty years of enforced atheism, many Georgians turned to the Church again for solace and guidance. Several young entrepreneurs decided to escape from the cities and return to their rural roots, to memories of happy times spent in the vineyards with their parents and grandparents. Some businessmen, on the other hand, had bigger ambitions: Georgia had been the Soviet Union's main supplier of wine and alcohol, and they were quick to grasp that the privatization of state-owned facilities could offer great opportunities. The epoch was clearly Western-orientated. New or foreign products were in great demand, and Georgians developed an increasing appetite for Western instead of local wares. French, Italian and German sellers of wine-making technology flocked to the country, helping up-and-coming wine-makers to produce European-style wines.

Whilst these European wines made of Georgian grapes tasted good, concerns were voiced about the survival of the original Georgian *qvevri* method. Wasn't it at risk of being relegated



The Alaverdi monastery in Kakheti was built in the 11<sup>th</sup> century over the remains of an older church dedicated to St George. At over 55 metres, Alaverdi is the second-tallest religious building in Georgia (*above and the following spread*).

to the level of a local ethnographic curiosity? Bishop David of Alaverdi, the monastery's dynamic and charismatic abbot, had his own idea of a solution: he became a strong advocate for the reconstruction of the monastery's *marani* and the revival of its 1,500-year-old tradition of making wine in *qvevris*. The *marani* was finally restored in 2006 with the support of the Badagoni wine company, and produces excellent *qvevri* wines labelled 'Since 1011' under the careful supervision of Father Gerasime.

Bishop David's contribution to this revival went further still. He encouraged local growers and wine-makers to cultivate more indigenous grape varieties and to replace chemicals with more environmentally friendly farming methods. His example inspired a whole new generation of *qvevri* wine-makers.







