

## 8 Modern resilience of Georgian wine

### Geographical indications and international exposure

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#### Introduction

Georgia, a former Soviet republic located on the southern slopes of the Great Caucasian Mountains, is reputed to be the cradle of wine (Anderson 2013; McGovern 2003, 2009). It has experienced around 8,000 vintages, boasts at least 525 endemic varieties of grapes, features distinctive production techniques centered on the use of clay vessels, *qvevri*, and has an enviable reputation for hospitality involving lavish and lengthy feasts (Anderson 2013). Wine plays an important role in everyday life in modern Georgia but is also embedded deeply in the physical landscape and economic livelihoods. The relatively small land area of Georgia is home to archaeologically important agroecological landscapes, a distinct culinary culture and grape varieties largely unknown outside of its historic trading region.

One iconic image of traditional Georgian wine production (i.e., the Kakhetian method) is the use of *qvevri* for long-term fermentation. *Qvevri* are large clay vessels that are typically buried in the ground up to their neck and in which wine is fermented and stored (Glonti 2010; Barisashvili 2011; Field Notes 2015). During the fermentation process, which occurs naturally and without additives of any type, the buried *qvevri* remain sealed with a ceramic lid. The wine is left to mature for up to six months before being opened, then the unfiltered but clear wine is ready to be tapped or bottled (World Bank 2015). This millennia-old technique is still used all over Georgia. Wines were usually not filtered, and in fact, the ferment purposefully included not only the grape juice but also pulp, including seeds and skins.

Many occasions such as everyday meetings, communal work and collective decision-making are accompanied with wine, such that its production, distribution and consumption are structural anchors in Georgian identity (Manning 2012; Van Assche, Shtaltovna and Hornidge 2016). Georgia has a distinctive tradition of wine consumption and gastronomy, coupled with the continuing practice of sourcing wine through social networks and informal, often-illicit production. The persistence of these dense social networks around wine, and a continued practice of household production in rural areas, means that the

search for new vintages and determination of quality are resolved socially rather than by experts, governments or institutes.

The persistent distinctiveness of this tradition suggests that Georgian wine is not a case of delayed modernization but of an intentional continuation of wine traditions over generations, in spite of many technological and institutional alternatives. This orientation, however, cannot be taken for granted; rather, it should be seen as a testament to Georgia's cultural resilience over the past 8,000 years. Not only has Georgia survived the conventional sort of social, military and economic upheavals, but it has also seen its wine tradition often become an explicit target of wartime aggression, sabotage and foreign co-optation. This chapter will review some of these challenges. The most recent threat to this tradition, however, has emerged in the context of Georgia's integration into international capitalist markets after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Counteracting the specific threats to Georgia's wine sector faced by neoliberal market forces, including over-commodification, exploitation of labor, deterioration of agrobiodiversity and hegemonic trade standards, is arguably a challenge that Georgians have not encountered historically. However, Georgia's recent post-Soviet autonomy in the 1990s coincided with the reengagement of world trade and intellectual property authorities on a measure that seemingly provided the tools for managing capitalism's impact on heritage agri-food systems, namely geographical indication (GI). GI refers to products with specific characteristics, qualities or reputations resulting from their geographical origin. This differentiates products based on unique local features, history or distinctive characteristics linked to natural and human factors, such as soil, climate, local know-how and traditions (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2018). At face value, this measure provides a convenient and seemingly calibrated package of countermeasures that would not only help ensure the continuation of Georgia's distinctive wine traditions but also provide opportunities to attract global attention to Georgia's wine while creating high-value exports for rural development. Fitting its narrative of resilience, the government of Georgia moved fast to embrace GI laws in the 1990s despite the major headwinds caused by two civil wars and a rural sector that was still reeling from its transition out of the Soviet economic system. Even before being able to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) and benefit from GI protections under the WTO Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) in 2000, Georgia established national GI laws, inked a number of bilateral GI treaties and joined the Madrid Protocol for the international registration of marks (1998). In many senses, Georgia decisively set the stage for its full participation in the international mechanisms of GI.

And yet Georgia's pathway to adopting, and adapting, GI is faced with structural contradictions. On the one hand, GI is designed to acknowledge and protect the combination of traditional know-how and its attendant agroecological systems. On the other hand, the framework for terroir under which GI was created in Western Europe is at odds with some of the basic modes of recognizing

quality and consumption in Georgia. To begin with, as will be clarified in more detail, quality is fluidly created among the dense social networks for wine and, consequently, wine quality determination is less fixed and under the domain of experts. Indeed, the constant consumption and social networking around wine in Georgia creates a dynamic and multimodal space for assigning quality that might be dampened by reified models of quality recognition such as GI. While wine engagement, as expressed by personal relationships to growers, sourcing wine for special events and recursive learning about varieties and regions, is not automatically eclipsed by more static certification mechanisms such as GI, over the long term, this personal engagement may lose its cultural relevance to label-reading consumers. One more visible concern here is that the European organizing principle of terroir pushes Georgia to represent its wines principally on a geographical basis, with “product diversity” arising from the combinations of soil, water, climate and local know-how. However, the vernacular association of wine in Georgia most often begins with wines categorized according to variety (e.g., Saperavi, Mtsvani, Rkatsiteli, etc.), which in fact represents significant diversity in a country with more than five hundred endemic wine grape varieties (Charkviani 1962; Glonti 2010). While this aspect can be resolved in various ways in the codes of practice written for each GI, it is a truism that geographical area, rather than variety, always sits at the top of the organizational hierarchy of GI. Privileging a foreign, rather than local quality determination mechanism, even when restricted to a parallel system for export, can have unintended impacts on domestic consumption. Conserving the vernacular modality of wine organization and the important wine social networks presents a new challenge in establishing GI in Georgia. In this chapter, we highlight that one of the first signs that GI is disrupting traditions in transitional Georgia is the growing disparity between the elite and working-class support for modern wine protection tools such as GI.

This chapter reviews the optimistic narrative of GI and several critical perspectives about the universality of GI. First, we explore the sociopolitical factors in a potentially contentious country, whose agri-food tradition precedes and diverges from that of the hegemonic Western European countries who established the GI system. We will discuss what makes Georgian wine different from Western European wines. Second, we will discuss the role of the government and elite in Georgia. Being top-down or overprotective of Georgian farmers, they have played a crucial role in protecting the diversity and uniqueness of Georgian wine and farmers for thousands of years. Third, we discuss how appropriately GI captures the agri-food culture to which it is applied. Currently, GI helps to face various challenges brought by capitalism, such as (a) the growing demand from the Russian and Chinese markets for cheap wines; (b) the establishment of a positive Georgian wine reputation outside of Eastern Europe; and (c) the fight against counterfeits of Georgian wine. And fourth, we question whether the trend of GI is to become increasingly monolithic in its structuring of the wine sector in Georgia or whether it can sustainably become a discrete and parallel framework focused on export wine and

tourism. Georgia's historical legacy of resilience is being tested once again, this time to determine to what extent it can emancipate its wine sector from the threats of global capital or whether it will be compelled to compromises in its historic mission.

### **A history of resilience in Georgia's wine diversity and quality. Why Georgian wine is different?**

Georgia has always been a meaningful contributor to wine culture throughout history (Kharbedia 2015; National Wine Agency 2014). Indeed, as the cradle of wine, it is almost a truism to state that wine spread throughout the world from the territory that is now Georgia (McGovern 2003). However, while the basic evidence affirming modern-day Georgia as the origin of viticulture is growing in certainty, archaeological evidence is also increasingly implicating Georgia as the origin of advanced and differentiated viniculture (Kharbedia 2015). Evidence in archaeological records places Georgia as possibly the first region of the world to produce wine (Chkhartishvili and Darchiashvili 1980; Glonti 2010; Maghradze et al. 2016). Wine production goes back as far as 6,000 BCE (McGovern et al. 2017; Kharashvili, Chavleishvili and Natsvaladze 2014; Gomarteli 2017). Excavations have revealed not only grape seeds but also all of the accoutrement of wine production: clay vessels (*qvevri*), special knives for trimming vines and traces of tartaric (wine) acid (Chkhartishvili and Darchiashvili 1980; Glonti 2010). The purpose here is not to suggest that Georgia lays claim to higher forms of authenticity but rather to acknowledge in advance that protective measures for wine cultural practices, such as GI, are imported largely from the French or Italian experience and that it is fair to probe the hegemonic dimension of this transfer.

Besides its archaeological relevance, Georgia has also played a quiet, yet important, role in the institutionalization of wine culture. For example, Georgian wine, which precedes and likely plays a role in the spread of the cult of Dionysus, is acknowledged in the Homeric epic around 700 BCE (National Wine Agency 2014). And later, following the country's relatively early conversion to Christianity in the 4th century CE, both wine and the vine acquired political and religious meanings. Perhaps as a result of equating wine with the blood of Christ (a belief held in common within the whole Christian world), Georgia developed some of the earliest religious production traditions, in this case an integration of *Church, vineyard* and *irrigation channels*. This triad was often self-contained, a small administrative unit with theocratic powers. Through this religious legitimation and accumulation of power, viticulture played a part in efforts to preserve political and administrative unity and became one of the pillars for the country's government. Indeed, even historical documentation of pre-Christian Georgia inform us that the planting and irrigation of vineyards were symbols of the establishment of a state (Kharbedia 2015; National Wine Agency 2014).

This association of viticulture and state power in Georgia meant that wine played a role in official history – in diplomacy and trade but also conquest

(Kharbedia 2015). As a relatively small nation, distinct in religion from its non-Christian neighbors, Georgia was often a target, with its vineyards considered symbolic of the polity. After adopting Christianity, Georgia suffered numerous invasions at the hands of the Mongols, Persians and Turks, with the marauding armies promptly setting out to destroy the vineyards (Kharbedia 2015; Field Notes 2013, 2015). In the informal conception of Georgian history, vulnerability and invasion feature prominently but so does the stubbornness of the Georgians in their painstaking replanting of the vineyards.

Wine plays an important role in Georgian everyday life. Simple hospitality includes wine and toasting, but special guests and events are often celebrated with a *supra*, a more formalized gathering with lots of food and wine and many toasts organized by a *tamada* or toastmaster (Manning 2012). The *tamada* tells people when to drink, an action that has to happen collectively and promptly. The *supra*, in different guises, marks many events structuring the life of an individual and community, and thus it reproduces the embeddedness of wine in community life. Dense social networks around wine, and a continued practice of household production in rural areas, means that searching for wine and establishing quality are also often resolved communally. This extends also to the many monasteries, which produced and consumed wine in large quantities. The wine cellar of the Nekresi Monastery, for example, occupied around 200 m<sup>2</sup> and contained five wine presses capable of crushing 10 Mt of grapes at a time (Kharbedia 2015).

The 19th century was one of the most important periods in the history for Georgian winemaking, as it marks early initiatives to modernize wine production and the beginning of Georgia's role as a satellite wine producer. Under the Russian protectorate, prince Chavchavadze traveled frequently to Europe and invited French wine experts to Georgia (for example, the French vine expert Massono). Already in the 1830s, Chavchavadze started integrating some Western European grape varieties and methods of wine production, such as the targeted aging of wines, use of new tools for the care of vineyards and early forms of marketing, such as bottling (Interview with Batiashvili A., wine technologist, Chavchavadze winery, Tzinandali/Kakheti, 2013; Charkviani 1962). Probably the most significant difference was the use of oak barrels (as opposed to ceramic amphora/*quevri*) to mature the wine. But these changes were far from monolithic, and many of the changes ultimately adopted widely were reflections on, rather than direct transfers from, European winemaking. For example, Chavchavadze, among others, helped established more widely accepted, marquee varieties Rkatsiteli and Saperavi as the main wine grapes for the well-known Kakhetian region (Charkviani 1962), much like how chardonnay or cabernet sauvignon came to dominate many European regions.

In general, from the 19th century, Georgia's outward orientation was bracketed by national habits; it only cautiously adopted or integrated foreign winemaking practices for trade or elites while often holding onto indigenous practices for most domestic consumption. Even as wood barrels became more common, the traditional Georgian wine production (i.e., the Kakhetian

method) using *qvevri* vessels, has been repeatedly reappreciated for its utility, by both domestic and international observers. The earthenware walls of *qvevri*, made of clay and rich with mineral material, contribute to a particular flavor profile (Glonti and Glonti 2013). The unfiltered yet clear wine that emerges has been acknowledged as efficient and gustatorily beneficial. Famous winemakers of that time, such as G. Lants and M. Ballas, after having observed the Kakhetian winemaking method for years, wrote that it has “an undoubted advantage . . . to the European barrels and vessels” and noted its authenticity and uniqueness (Lants 1846; Ballas 1877; Glonti and Glonti 2013). The adaptations to the Kakhetian method have been incremental. The European methods introduced in the 19th century encouraged separating the grape juice quickly from the rest, an activity that was partially integrated into the Kakhetian method in the form of a secondary fermentation. Although the prevalence of these new methods increased, contemporary Georgians consume primarily bulk wine fermented in the historic manner (Field Notes; Interviews 2015).

These adaptations helped create alternative products for external markets, such as Russian elites. For this segment, Georgian wine simply needed to be refined sufficiently for it to offer a comparable product to European wines. Thanks to the efforts of Prince Chavchavadze and those of the Russian vice-roy, Mikheil Vorontsov, exported Georgian wine came close to matching the respectability and patrimony of European wine products by the end of the 1830s; in this period, the first European-style wine cellars were established in Georgia (Kharbedia 2015). Thus, Georgian wine has historically developed parallel products for elites or export, a characteristic that bodes well for its adoption of international GI products. Consequently, the latest uptake into world trade (i.e., China, Russia, the United States, Germany, etc.) is not unprecedented. Here already, however, the question emerges of how much agency Georgia has had in its international engagement and to what extent these engagements have appreciably impacted domestic winemaking and consumption. Although these questions cannot be answered directly, evidence emerged through a sequence of two major shocks to winemaking over the preceding century: the outbreak of phylloxera and the advent of the Soviet Union.

The first shock, caused by the phylloxera mite that had destroyed many European vineyards in the 1850s and 1860s (Interview with Meghradze D., Institute of Horticulture and Viticulture, Tbilisi 2013; Chkhartishvili and Darchiashvili 1980), encouraged institutional changes to Georgian vineyard management from end of 1880s. As the Europeans did, Georgians also had to experiment with grafting endemic varieties onto the stems of American wild grape species (Charkviani 1962), and in general the plague sped up the development of scientific wine development in tsarist Russia, which oversaw Georgia. The government established the first institute for viticulture in Georgia in the late 19th century. Despite this event, Georgia did not move to high production varieties. In fact, largely following historical trends, Georgia doubled down on its endemic varieties. After these events in the 19th century, studies were compared the qualities and requirements of the local grape varieties, and importantly, a

rigorous mapping of the varieties was conducted (Van Assche, Shtaltovna and Hornidge 2016). Hundreds of local varieties were discovered, more than most other world regions combined. There is now broad agreement that the number of discrete endemic varieties in Georgia is between five hundred and six hundred (Charkviani 1962; Glonti 2010). With international cooperation, including most prominently a group of Russian scientists, an eight-volume series was compiled covering 525 varieties of wine, their production methods and ecosystems. Here we see that, as in its long history, when faced with an external shock, Georgia doggedly worked to reestablish and maintain the diversity of Georgian grape varieties. To some degree, the documentation and reemphasis on traditional varieties represents a precursor to GI, but without the marketing and intellectual property focus of the modern legislative framework.

The next major shock, which dragged on for roughly seventy years after Russia's annexation of Georgia, arose from the way in which it was included in the Soviet Union. Perhaps fortunately for Georgia, the country was appointed as a wine-producing republic, but the transition from small peasant farming to collective production, combined with the strong role of Russian knowledge and trade institutions, radically reshaped the wine landscape. Viticulture became one of the main branches of agriculture of Soviet Georgia and, in many of its regions, the leading industry (Agricultural encyclopedia 1949; Van Assche, Shtaltovna and Hornidge 2016). Georgian wines quickly gained popularity in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Furthermore, the products of Georgian winemakers at this time even received recognition in European countries, where they repeatedly won prizes at international exhibitions. It was in the Soviet era that the production of such popular brands as Kindzmarauli and Akhasheni began (Dernyatin 2005).

The production of grape wines was taken care of by Samtrest, established in 1924. Samtrest was a state department of vines and wine and it regulated the issues of viticulture and winemaking in Georgia. Samtrest took over the entire winemaking industry of Soviet Georgia and became the owner of all the existing wine cellars and later came to dominate all wine production in Georgia (Kharbedia 2015). The wine production promoted in the Soviet era consisted of several lines: table wines, dessert wines, sparkling wines (*shampanskie vina*) and fizzy wines (*shypuchie vina*). The highest quality, and most characteristic for the wine areas, were the premium wines (*marochniye*).

In the 1930s and 1940s, Georgia was able to overtly reproduce many endemic grape varieties and integrate those into a diverse array of sixty different types of wine. Over time, however, rationalization largely pushed the reproduction of wine types and varieties underground, with only twelve of the sixty wine types ultimately being based on local technologies (Kharbedia 2015). Some of these were based on the *qvevri* method but were somewhat scaled up or industrialized (Amerine and Joslyn 1970). In general, the production of wine skewed toward the broad tastes of consumers in Russia and the rest of the USSR. In particular, Russian demand in the early 20th century was for large quantities of low-quality, semi-sweet mostly red wines (Anderson 2013; Kharbedia 2014,

2015). The main task of Georgian winemakers was to fulfill the state plan. Thus, production oriented toward quantity over quality. This also meant that, over time, grape varieties with higher output began to crowd out even the few varieties openly produced for the Soviet wine plan (Apziauri 2017). Ironically, after investing heavily in large-scale wine production, Georgia suffered a major blow from the anti-alcohol campaign (*sukhoy zakon*) launched in 1985 by Mikhail Gorbachev (Dernyatin 2005). Vineyards were cut down, and wineries were closed. This law plunged the Georgian winemaking industry into a crisis which lasted into the 1990s (Kharbedia 2015). And so here again, Georgia had to find a way to recover from external shocks while rebuilding its wine heritage.

### **Post-Soviet developments of Georgian resilience and wine**

Although the dissolution of the Soviet Union can be understood, in the longer term, as a release valve for the Georgian wine sector, the political and economic violence of the post-Soviet era brought about new challenges. To date, the Georgian government is still struggling to achieve basic policy adjustments, but this hurdle has not apparently slowed down the public drive to reestablish an independent wine sector (Shtaltovna 2016). The rural sector, in contrast, is still recovering from this period and struggling to embrace the myriad differences faced in a liberal market environment. The first major challenge arose through post-Soviet land privatization because it provided small plots to many families, including those with no prior agricultural experience (USAID 2011; Shtaltovna 2016). This step complicated the rationalization of agriculture, in the sense of consolidation, mechanization and professionalization, but it did quickly help to reinvigorate the previously suppressed diversity of wine and production styles.

Here, it is helpful to draw a picture of the post-Soviet farmer. Until independence, Georgian farmers had grown accustomed to top-down state directives. A farmer had for generations been understood as a character who lacked agency and who apparently does not have the means and expertise, agriculturally or managerially, to play the role ascribed to them by elite planners and international standards agencies. Land privatization, ironically, materialized this view: almost everybody received land and thus everyone became a farmer, including those in professions wholly unrelated to agriculture, such as medical doctors, teachers and accountants. Thus, the monolithic notion of “farmer” did not really match the intentions of agricultural or subsistence producers that emerged in Georgia and most of the former Soviet countries after independence (Shtaltovna 2016). Being fragmented in this way and emerging from Soviet centralization, “farmers” expected the government to act in a protective, guiding manner. When combined with the deficit in expertise and infrastructure, it is not surprising that post-Soviet farmers were not entrepreneurial or quick to engage (critically) with new policy experiments, such as GI. So the expectation that farmers, and by extension winemakers, at the small and medium scale of production – who represent a large swathe of agrobiodiversity

in Georgia – would appreciate the marketing potential and intellectual property protection afforded by GI is not a given.

One particular challenge in the context of the post-Soviet mentality is that farmers are averse to entering into cooperatives or cooperative-like structures given the fresh trauma of forced collectivization. GI certification necessarily requires some formalized structure, usually an association, to establish a consensus about the basic standards for a production area. An organizational structure based on mutual interdependence might appear suspiciously like a new form of collectivization, particularly as the government has been encouraging it in a top-down manner since the 1990s. Furthermore, such a structure would require producers to fix shared standards, which they are culturally unaccustomed to doing in the dynamic cultural economy of Georgian wine. These factors explain why the government's attempts to push producer ownership of GI associations has not been successful in the preceding two decades and why local ownership does not obviate concerns about the capacity of producer associations to protect the unique production and agrobiodiversity of Georgian wine and to establish democratic and representative governing structures.

Hoping to later align rural production realities to policy innovations, the Georgian government quickly moved to equate its indigenous tradition of recognizing the geographical place of origin to the dominant appellation modality present in the international wine market (Sakpatenti 2010). Although Georgians use a multimodal method of determining wine quality, with geographical origin as a subsidiary consideration, territorial demarcations have thus come to increasingly play a more prominent role in differentiating Georgian wine for external markets (Interview with Kasradze 2018; Anderson 2013). For example, during the difficult transition period in the early 1990s, when Georgia was engaged in two civil wars, illicit use of Georgian territorial markers frequently took place in former Soviet countries. Many former consumers of Georgian wine from the Soviet period were being misled by counterfeits to purchase low-quality imitations, which negatively impacted Georgia's reputation (Sakpatenti 2010; Interview with Kasradze 2018). The government and Samtrest therefore undertook urgent measures to shore up intellectual property protections for regional appellations. In 1998, a law on Vines and Wine was signed, and Georgia joined the Madrid Protocol on the protection of international marks. In 1999, the Law on Appellations of Origin of Goods and Geographical Indication in Georgia (hereinafter, "the Law") was approved. The Law regulates the registration, protection and use of appellations of origin and GIs of goods (and services). The Law also set out the basic procedures for wine production, regulated wine quality and protected the market against counterfeit and low-quality products (Kemashvili 2012). As part of the Law, eighteen GI wines were registered (Sakpatenti 2010). By 2000, Georgia joined the WTO and became a signatory of TRIPS, which provided a platform for strong international protections (Interview with Kasradze 2018). This was followed by a presidential decree (2002) on the protection of GI as an urgent matter in order to avoid misappropriation within the country and to more adequately prepare a basis

for legal claims at the international level (Interview with Kasradze 2018). This decree aligned the rules for the identification, registration, use and control of GI wines and brandies with TRIPS and set the groundwork for Georgia to join the Lisbon Agreement for the Protection of Appellations of Origin and their International Registration in 2004 (Kemashvili 2012).

Even as Georgia rushed to resolve counterfeiting and quality issues, a major shock lay in wait when, in 2006, Russia embargoed Georgian wines. The embargo was lifted in 2013 (Eurasianet 2013). The closing of Georgia's biggest market led to panic among Georgian winemakers, but such a sharp external shock was not new for the Georgian wine sector. Indeed, it harkened back to Gorbachev's anti-alcohol campaigns in the mid 1980s. Ultimately, many producers took this in stride, even considering it an opportunity to escape from the centuries of hegemonic Russian influence over Georgia's wine sector (Kharbedia 2015). Even in the toughest times, vineyards were seen as a good investment, as something that would always bounce back because of its deep local roots and a belief in the eternal foreign curiosity about Georgian wine (Van Assche, Shtaltovna and Hornidge 2016; Interviews 2013). In fact, when Georgian winemakers were pressed to export the volume previously earmarked for the Russian market to other countries, it led to increased awareness of Georgia outside its historical trade area in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. But awareness of Georgia abroad does not quickly, or even necessarily, translate into motivation to cultivate granular knowledge of wine territoriality among wine connoisseurs.

### **From post-Soviet to international: accommodating external wine standards in Georgia**

As Georgia began the slow and fragmented process of translating its wine diversity to foreign markets, a number of marketing pathways opened up.<sup>1</sup> In terms of protecting and promoting Georgia's range of wine offerings, some pathways (such as GI) were understood to be superior to trademarked or bulk wine sales, but it was still questionable whether the type of GI practiced for wine in Europe (*sui generis*) could fairly capture the unique agroecological diversity and quality associations in Georgia. Domestic sensibilities about how to organize wine quality, unsurprisingly, share many considerations with the European outlook, but they also differ in important ways from methods developed in Italy, Portugal and France (Van Assche, Shtaltovna and Hornidge 2016; Interview with Zibiashvili 2018). What is consistent between Georgian and European wine is the emphasis on agroecological considerations and know-how, but as we will discuss shortly, this emphasis can create blinders to other equally important considerations in the Georgian context.

People in the Kakheti region were called the wine people by communities in the mountains and further west. Knowledge of the *terroir*, of small differences tied to the village location and production method but also differences between parcels and plots, in terms of exposure, soil, drainage, slope and microclimate,

were discussed by everyday people and related to the type and quality of wine (Interview with Nikolaishvili N., Tsinandali, a small winemaker, Kakheti region 2013). Kakheti became the epicenter of wine production and prestige by combining this know-how with the agroecological characteristics of the region (Chkhartishvili and Darchiashvili 1980; Amerine and Joslyn 1970). Kakheti is a mostly flat region in the wide Alazania valley that encompasses a few smaller hilly areas, and 67 percent of all vineyards of Georgia are in Kakheti (Kharaiashvili, Chavleishvili and Natsvaladze 2014). The climate is dry, with spring rains, and features diverse sources of water. Local variations in soil and topography create conditions for diverse wine production (Sakpatenti 2010; Glonti 2010). A common meeting place would be the basement in old houses where the *qvevri* were dug in, sometimes bottles kept (although bottles were the exception). This was a place with social significance, dominated by men, who would come together to help each other in winemaking, discuss quality, plan for the rest of the year and drink heartily. Even in the Soviet era, people remember that it was considered shameful to treat guests with wine purchased from a store (Apziauri 2017). Producers would always keep the better wines for guests and themselves; wine of poorer quality would be sold on the market or on the street (Mukhranov 2017). In general, Georgian experts and winemakers agree that, as in times past, peasants and small entrepreneurs were the primary stewards of Georgian wine tradition during the Soviet era. Through their often-unauthorized informal production, they helped protect many of the unique varieties of wine and the integrity of unique production systems (Apziauri 2017; Mukhranov 2017), which are now reemerging in the post-Soviet era. Notwithstanding the importance of terroir, as understood in its European origin, there are key differences in the organization of wine and assessment of quality that are less suited to the legislative framework of GI.

The most obvious distinction is that wine grape varietal places an outsized role in a country with considerable diversity. The estimated five hundred to six hundred varieties in Georgia (Charkviani 1962; Glonti 2010), with a population of around 3.7 million (excluding Abkhazia and South Ossetia) far outpaces the next competitor, France, which has (in the most generous estimate) 273 varieties for a population of 67 million.<sup>2</sup> In searching for wine (through one's networks or in shops), variety is often the first point of reference. In the *sui generis* model of GI, in contrast, geography is so important that often varietals are not easily found on labels or, in some cases, not listed at all. Because labeling does not have to follow any specific convention, there is nothing stopping Georgians from prominently displaying varietal, but over the long term, the geographical origin may, for reasons of trade standards or marketing, displace this preexisting hierarchy. There is optimism that this problem can be mostly obviated by placing GI as a secondary point of qualification and avoiding varietal specification in GI codes of practice.

In the assessment of quality, Georgians continue to uphold a strong tradition of multimodal quality determination that is situated in the dense social networks of wine. While this does not, at face value, contradict *sui generis* GI standards for qualification, it questions the suitability of the formalized

institutional structures typical of GI certification. The durability of these informal social networks around wine, and the persistence of household production in rural areas, suggests that quality determination by experts or the government might be considered unwelcome in the domestic market. The resilience of the Georgian wine sector is built on its defense of cultural capital against assertive external demarcation initiatives, and this resistance is likely even higher now due to post-Soviet suspicion of grand top-down restructuring schemes. The concerns of producers are also not entirely obviated by the founding of more local producers associations, which are typical for GI certifications worldwide, because such associations do not have a natural geographical basis in rural Georgia and would marginalize an important stakeholder, namely consumers. This is an important consideration in a society where significant wine consumption forms the backbone of social relations, and certain wines are developed purposefully for certain events, ceremonies or times of the year (Manning 2012; Van Assche, Shtaltovna and Hornidge 2016). A wider stakeholder group than is typical of GI producer associations would be necessary to overcome this institutional difference.

A final difference that complicates the adaptation of *sui generis* GI certification mechanisms for Georgia is the need to raise the stature of the *qvevri* style of fermentation, which plays a significant role in Georgia. While the use of *qvevri* can be inscribed in respective codes of practice for GI areas, and thereby gain transparency, the stark nonconformity of *qvevri* with the hegemonic understanding of wine fermentation vessels in the world is perhaps worthy of more attention. The current state of expertise and consumption expectations surrounding high-quality wines assumes the use of wood barrels or stainless steel vats. Georgia, as a small country with limited cultural capital at its disposal, may struggle to educate world consumers about its unique form of fermentation and aging, not to mention the wide range of unfamiliar wine varieties. The support of multilateral agencies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the nascent fascination by wine sommelier and travel guides in unique wine, can hopefully help Georgia overcome its deficit in marketing capital. Georgia is also aggressively pursuing a policy of trade diversification and promotion of its wine in world markets that is beginning to break into new territory.

### **Wine in contemporary Georgia: resilience through trade diversification**

A number of events around the 2010s mark Georgia's increasing integration into the international community, especially the European Union. In 2013, the Georgian *qvevri* method was approved by UNESCO as a world Intangible Cultural Heritage. According to UNESCO,

the tradition plays a vital role in everyday life and celebrations, and forms an inseparable part of the cultural identity of Georgian communities, with wine and vines frequently evoked in Georgian oral traditions and songs.

Knowledge of this heritage is passed down by families, neighbors and friends, all of whom join in the communal harvesting and wine-making activities.

(World Bank 2015)

This was further buttressed by definitive archaeological findings confirming Georgia's 8,000-year pedigree of wine (Glonti 2010; Kharaishvili, Chavleishvili and Natsvaladze 2014; Maghradze et al. 2016; McGovern et al. 2017). Not only was Georgian wine increasingly visible and being taken seriously, but its accessibility was increasing through Georgia's pivot toward liberalism and the European Union. Around 2015, in a stream of EU integration processes, including a major free trade agreement, a number of joint Georgia-EU documents concerning agriculture and rural development were signed that directly affected the wine sector (Ministry of Agriculture of Georgia 2015; Association Agenda between the European Union and Georgia 2014). By tying together policy agendas promoting wine diversification (particularly GI) and trade diversification (i.e., wider trade networks), Georgia furthered its domestic initiative to create value around its wide range of wine patrimony.

Efforts to diversify trade have been helped by Georgia's new recognition as a producer of distinctive, quality wines. For Georgian wine exports, 2017 was a record year, with data showing that 76.7 million bottles of wine were exported to fifty-three countries, representing an increase of 54 percent compared to 2016 exports (National Wine Agency 2017a). In 2018, Georgia continued to sell a lot of wine. Georgia exported about 86.2 million bottles of wine to fifty-three countries in 2018, which is a record high in the last thirty years (Agenda 2019). The top importers are still former Soviet countries, including Russia (33 million bottles), Ukraine (6 million bottles), Kazakhstan (2.3 million bottles), and Poland (2.1 million bottles). However, China now imports 4.1 million bottles from Georgia, with Western Europe and the Americas receiving around 1 million bottles. Export growth is strongest in the European Union, the United States, Asia and former Soviet countries (National Wine Agency 2017b). This is made possible by improving grape harvests and better wine promotion. "By the end of 2018, about 100 million bottles of wine are expected to be exported," according to Levan Dolmazashviliashvili, Minister of Agriculture (National Wine Agency 2017a).

Exporting wine outside of Georgia's historical trading area has required continual engagement to create awareness, achieve standards and negotiate trade relations. As discussed above, the immediate post-Soviet period included a flurry of activity in this respect, including the signing of treaties on intellectual property and joining the WTO. Georgia has continued in this trend by continuously adding bilateral agreements that address certain concerns (counterfeit, standards) and/or open trade routes. For example, in 2007, intergovernmental agreements on the mutual protection of the geographical indications of wines, spirits and mineral waters between Georgia and a number of countries went into force, including the United States, China and several former Soviet countries

(Sakpatenti 2018). In 2012, the EU-Georgia Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Geographical Indications of Agricultural Products and Foodstuffs came into force. Particularly toward China, there continues to be a growing trend of exporting Georgian wine and spirits, which increasingly skews toward higher-quality GI wines (Egutia 2013; Interview with Dolmazashvili 2013).

For a small, lower-middle-income country like Georgia, increasing global recognition and international agreements and improving export values are important macro-level achievements. While this success cannot be underestimated, the fact that top-down governmental initiatives have been the driving force raises concerns about the extent to which rural producers are benefiting, particularly those who have continued to steward Georgia's diverse wine tradition. Given the weak post-Soviet rural sector, the Georgian government arguably stepped in to proactively position Georgian wine as best as possible in the global capitalist economy (Kemashvili 2012).

### **Benevolent authoritarianism in Georgian wine institutions**

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Georgian government has been the leading actor in deploying GI and other wine promotion policies. This is not to suggest that public sector involvement in GI promotion is unusual but instead that the roles ascribed to producers and professional associations in the Western European model have, in Georgia, largely been driven directly by the state. Samtresti, together with the government, encourages farmers and other producers to take over initiatives, such as GI producer groups, by suggesting that they “re-register the GIs to the farmers’ associations and production cooperatives,” but “[the stakeholders] have not been very active in this process” (Interview with Kasradze 2018). In the meantime, the state sees no other choice but to push on undemocratically by institutionalizing the future structures of the wine trade and hoping that the wine sector matures into the projected structures (Interview with Kasradze 2018). Since many of these activities appear inevitable given worldwide trends, such as joining the WTO, establishing *sui generis* GI regulations, fostering trade abroad and promoting wine heritage at UNESCO, the government’s actions appear to be benevolent and proactive. The Georgian government believes that GI can be a good tool for building awareness and improving the reception and value of Georgian wines, and it aggressively promotes GI in its national development strategy (Ministry of Agriculture 2015). The European Union has also recognized this, granting €1.5 million (US\$1.7 million) to Georgia to improve its legislation and quality control and to build capacity along the entire wine value chain (Interview with Kasradze 2018; Sakpatenti 2010). But by adopting what appears to be structurally preordained and by limiting the future room to maneuver for the wine sector, the government has also denied agency in this respect to many of the stakeholders who have stewarded the Georgian wine tradition over generations.

This potentiality, however, is at best abstract to observers of the wine sector. Historically, elites have always engaged with the wine trade internationally,

while the domestic sector followed a separate, vernacular course. The national intellectual property center of Georgia (Sakpatenti), which was established to promote GIs among wine producers, is nominally meant to cooperate with wine producers, exporters and business associations on raising awareness among different parties. While Sakpatenti interacts well the Samtresti and various relevant line ministries, it is poorly connected to small-scale producers (Egutia 2013). Here the task of adopting a foreign concept such as GI and strategically positioning Georgian wine for international audiences is understood as the purview of the government – as long as they do not impinge on the local idiosyncratic modes of production and consumption. One illustration of this is the government's pivot away from the hegemonic orientation of terroir based on geographical location to one based on variety:

Our products are different from wines supplied to Russia from other countries: we do not offer international and widely known varieties: Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot. In Soviet times, these wines were supplied to Russia mainly from Moldova, and in recent years, Moldovan wines compete with Chile, Argentina, Australia and other countries. From Georgia, Russia receives an original, unique product: Saperavi and Rkatsiteli, these are varieties that are not found anywhere else. Kindzmarauli and Khvanchkara are recognizable in Russia and have found their former consumer.

– Levan Dolmazashviliashvili, director of the Georgian National Wine Agency

(RFE 2014)

Although Georgia shares the European principles of terroir, it situates geographical origin lower on the hierarchy. Indeed, many shops in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi shelve wine based on variety rather than origin, reflecting the different constellation of quality valuation (Field Notes 2015). Defending this variation of terroir has significant implications for potential international trade. The Georgian government is concerned with the vulnerability of small grape farmers whose diverse range of production has historically been a dynamic asset in the Georgian wine landscape but who are now exposed to international market forces. One major worry is associated with the conversion of some vineyards to international varieties in order to cater to foreign tastes. One response has been to embrace a mechanism built into GI by encouraging a gradual move from protected geographical indication (PGI), which allows for the use of grapes from distant areas, to protected designation of origin (PDO), which would require wine producers to more exclusively seek out and compensate farmers for locally produced grapes (Interview with Kasradze 2018). Although this biases the hierarchy of quality toward geographical origin, rather than variety, the potential of higher economic returns associated with the maintenance of hyper-local wine heritage is encouraging a growing number of small and medium-size wine-producing enterprises to spring up in

rural communities, creating employment opportunities, supporting traditional winemaking practices and breathing new life into rural economies (Kemashvili 2012).

Here the Georgian government has, in comparison to many countries at similar levels of development, obviously moved relatively fast to institutionalize GI for wine from a technical standpoint and more generally to integrate Georgian wine into global trade. However, whether the top-down or state-driven promotion of Georgian wine will ultimately help to protect the diversity and uniqueness of Georgian wine depends on its eventual uptake by farmers and everyday consumers. The initial “benevolent authoritarian” stage of GI, which was ostensibly initiated in the 1990s to expeditiously begin using international tools for protecting Georgian intellectual property, began at a time when the wine industry was reeling from perestroika and ongoing civil wars, not to mention the restructuring and privatization of farming. Farmers and factories were considered by the government to be vulnerable and in need of protection, although they could perhaps not grasp the scale of the pending problem at that time (Interview with Kasradze 2018). In this sense, the embrace of GI in the face of the still-abstract threat of commodification of Georgian wine culture can be considered a progressive move by the government. Whether the government can incrementally democratize this policy shift remains to be seen.

## **Conclusion**

Georgian wine can be characterized by its resilience. Despite appropriation by cults and religions, destruction by invaders and civil strife, reorganization by the Soviet Union and transformation by capitalism, vineyards have always found ways to survive, maintain agrobiodiversity and uphold the unique cultural embeddedness of wine in Georgian society. Explaining this phenomenon with a broad brush is impossible, but clearly, one of the secrets of this Georgian resilience is the alignment of elite patronage – royal or governmental – in promoting national wine culture and persistent peasant support for wine in everyday life. This combination of top-down and bottom-up resilience is now on display again in Georgia’s attempt to engage with the international wine market.

To some degree, Georgia’s quick uptake of intellectual property laws, such as GI, which might help secure its wine heritage in the face of the commoditization pressures of the capitalist market, suggests that this resilience has taken on a new, modern form that is adapted to the challenges ahead. Some of these “new” challenges have familiar echoes, such as the growing demand from the Russian (and now Chinese) markets for inexpensive but fabled wines and the fight against the counterfeiting of Georgian wine abroad. But other challenges, such as establishing the reputation of Georgian wine outside of its home territory in the former Soviet republics, require a completely new positioning and branding of Georgian wines and wine heritage.

In this, Georgia is faced with a contradictory strategy in the framework of GI. On the one hand, GI is theoretically designed to acknowledge and protect

the combination of traditional know-how and its attendant agroecological systems. On the other hand, the framework for terroir under which GI was created in Western Europe diverges in slight but important ways from some of the basic modes of organizing and recognizing quality in Georgia. This difference clusters around three main areas, none of which preclude the utility of GI but instead highlight its awkward fit in Georgia and the potential long-term disruption of the hegemonic construction of quality emanating from Europe. The first difference is that the vernacular association of wine in Georgia most often begins with wines categorized according to the variety (e.g., Saperavi, Mtsvani, Ojaleshi, etc.), which in fact represents significant diversity in a country with more than five hundred endemic wine grape varieties (Charkviანი 1962; Glonti 2010). This complicates the establishment of geographically defined producer organizations and the marketing of Georgian wine on the international market. The second difference is that the constant consumption and social networking around wine in Georgia creates a dynamic and multi-modal space for assigning quality that is antithetical to quality determination by experts and government. While it is not uncommon to find preexisting quality determination schemes coexisting with GI, assertive intervention in the cultural domain of wine has a long history of being resisted in Georgia. The third difference is that the promotion of *qvevri* wines from Georgia, while technically possible to render transparent in codes of practice, will require a challenge to the hegemonic expectations of wine as fermented in wood barrels or stainless steel. Even with the recognition of *qvevri* winemaking as Intangible World Heritage by UNESCO, raising awareness about the range of quality considerations is a major undertaking for a small country with little cultural capital.

The question now is whether the dynamism and uniqueness of Georgian wine culture can be fairly captured by relatively statist, standards-focused policy mechanisms like GI or whether GI can be deployed, in a sustainable fashion, in parallel to preexisting wine recognition systems. Although GI is unlikely to become the monolithic organizing principle for wine in Georgia, it is fair to question whether GI may displace or disrupt some of the informal reproduction of wine culture in the long run. Because the European concept of terroir differs in important ways from Georgian principles of organizing and valuing wine, as described in the section about accommodating external wine standards, tension may emerge if domestic-focused production and consumption are fixed rather than allowed to be fluidly allocated in the dense social network around wine. The history of the Georgian Prince Chavchavadze, who is recognized for having built a discrete sector of winemaking for export, suggests that international quality attribution mechanisms such as GI can remain undistruptive if contained at the elite levels or if applied only as an expedient tool for communicating quality markers of Georgian wine.

The risks of Georgia's proactive and renewed public engagement with the international wine trade should be viewed in light of its historic capacity for positioning its wine despite adverse geopolitical conditions. Most relevant here

is Russia's recent dominance over Georgian wine export, which began at the end of the 19th century, continued on through the Soviet era and persisted thereafter. To some degree, this hegemonic influence kept Georgian wine sequestered from other regions of the world. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, however, Georgia has been trying to reestablish sovereignty over its wine sector through domestic autonomy and diversification in export partnerships. These efforts came into sharp relief in 2006, when ongoing geopolitical tensions resulted in a Russian embargo on Georgian goods, including wine. By pivoting toward other regions, namely the European Union, China and other former Soviet Republics, Georgia hopes to draw more attention to its storied wine heritage and reduce its dependency on traditional export partners. Doing so, however, has also required Georgia to embark on new ways to render its products and quality transparent and accessible to markets with different tastes, expectations and standards. The rapid embrace of GI by the government, despite the slow uptake and ownership by producers, is therefore indicative of its policy first, democratize later approach, which is anchored in Georgia's manifestly successful history of benevolent authoritarianism.

Meanwhile, the domestic market remains vibrant and, in many ways, unaffected by the shifting patterns of Georgia's engagement in export markets. To outside observers, Georgia may seem like a pre-industrial Spain or Italy, in that everyone still drinks large quantities of peasant-made wine, but that the change to more commoditized wine consumption seems inevitable.

This chapter presents both historical and current evidence to suggest that Georgia is likely to maintain this consumption pattern as it is (a) inimitable to the unique wine production system centered on *qvevri*-fermented wine and the use of endemic varieties, (b) anchored in the practice of sourcing and valuing wine through social networks and (c) grounded in a long history of employing informal, often-illicit production to survive external shocks. Georgians faced such crossroads throughout history and more recently in the 19th century with the outbreak of phylloxera, after which it expeditiously returned to production and consumption of local wines varieties. The country faced this crossroads again in a protracted manner during the Soviet era, when local idiosyncratic production was preserved by peasants in an unauthorized manner. As a small country, maintaining a parallel engagement with international trade and standards while providing domestic space and encouragement for local production represents the efficacious past combination. Whether the Georgian government can build on this historical success by creatively adapting GI to the wine sector or by keeping it aloof from domestic production and consumption patterns has yet to be seen.

## Notes

- 1 The following two-paragraph section is adapted from the author's previous shared publication, Van Assche, Shtaltovna and Hornidge 2016.
- 2 According to ONIVIN (Office national interprofessionnel des vins), FranceAgriMer Stats 2010.

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