

Export of Georgian Qvevri Wine to the United States - Sharing Culture, History, and Traditions

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"Wine is Georgian's poetry and their folklore, their religion and daily bread".

Alice Feiring

Abstract

Viticulture and winemaking not only strengthen country's economy, but also endorse socio-cultural and political relationships, create its image as the country of ancient culture, supports development of wine science and implementation of advanced winemaking technologies, promotes successful market strategy and wine tourism. Georgian wines have been exported to the US for the last decade and have deserved considerable attention from American consumers. Georgia offered to the market Qvevri wine which is produced according to ancient Georgian traditions – wine maturing in ceramic vessels deeply dug in the earth. Georgian winemaking is now focused on production of ecologically pure wine, bio-wine which can be achieved by applying natural treatment and Georgian authentic winemaking methods.

Keywords: Bio-wine, ecologically pure wine, Georgian culture and wine, Georgian wine export, Georgian wines in the U.S., Qvevri wine

Introduction

Export of Georgian Wines to the US produced according to ancient Georgian traditions should become one of the vital aspects in US-Georgian Relations. Wine, as a trade commodity has different aspects and a country which sells wine abroad also communicates its history, religion, culture, traditions, national character, unique architecture and cuisine. Today, when the world wine market demands are increased and main focus is made on ecologically pure products and on high nutritious qualities of wine, together with its taste and body, the importance of Georgian traditional winemaking, including Qvevri wines, has been enhanced in value.

The present article is an attempt to analyze cultural and social aspects of Georgian wine, the importance of export of Georgian wines to the United States. Moreover, it focuses on Qvevri wine marketing strategies since a demand on bio-wine is increasing worldwide. The article also provides interesting materials which testify the success of Georgian wine brands including Qvevri wine in the United States.

Historical Overview

Traditional winemaking is a part of identity of Georgian nation, its cultural heritage. Ancient Georgians recognized unique qualities of wine, its positive influence on civilization process, peaceful coexistence among people and formation of the society. Wine is an integral part and of Georgian civilization process and religious culture: St. Nino, the first who brought Christianity to Georgia in the 4th century, is said to have formed her cross from grapevines, the statue of Mother of Georgia, one of the landmarks overlooking Tbilisi, holds a wine chalice in one hand, and a sword – in another.

According to ancient Greek historian Thucydides, "The peoples of the Mediterranean began to emerge from bar-

barism when they learnt to cultivate the olive and the vine" (Wine – a Culture of Moderation, 2017).

New archaeological findings indicate that wine-making and possibly viticulture already existed in Georgia about 8,000 years ago. The discovery was made by the international team of scientists; among them was American scientist- anthropologist and bio-molecular archaeologist Patrick McGovern of the University of Pennsylvania, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Prof. Patrick McGovern is the author of the study *"Early Neolithic Wine of Georgia in the South Caucasus"*, published online in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)* on 13 November 2017. The scientists from research institutions of Georgia, France, Italy, Israel, Canada, Denmark and the USA who participated in the "Research Project for the Study of Georgian Grapes and Wine Culture" also confirm the theory (Harding, 2017).

An ancient mosaic discovered by the archeologists shows a skeleton reclining with a pitcher of wine and loaf of bread alongside Greek text that reads: 'Be cheerful, enjoy your life' (Wine – a Culture of Moderation, 2017). The abovementioned mosaic and the inscription could be relevant also to Georgian reality because viticulture and wine production molded and determined Georgians' character. The country's population which survived so many invasions and hardships has still maintained its optimism, moderate and cheerful character mostly because vine-growing, making and drinking wine has always been inseparable part of Georgian people's lifestyle. Wine inspired creation of numerous Georgian polyphonic folk songs, myths, poems and ballads which testify the importance of wine culture in Georgia. It also plays a vital role in everyday life of Georgians - in the celebration of secular and religious events and rituals.

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At present, ancient tradition of Qvevri winemaking defines the lifestyle of Georgian communities and represents an inseparable part of their cultural identity and inheritance.

Georgian winemakers today continue using clay vessels for wine fermentation called Qvevri which is not dissimilar to the jugs dug up by Dr. McGovern's team. "Taste a wine made according to this ancient method (from any of Georgia's 500 indigenous grapes such as Saperavi, Rkatsiteli, or Chinuri), and consider that it's probably not a far cry from the preferred tippie of an 8,000-year-old ancestor. "With yesterdays' news, Georgians feel like they finally have a diploma for what they always knew: that they invented wine," says Alice Feiring, author of "For the Love of Wine: My Odyssey Through the World's Most Ancient Wine Culture" (Kemper, 2017).

Qvevri winemaking takes its name from the distinctive egg-shaped vessel (in Georgian language "Qvevri") deeply dug in the earth in which wine is fermented and stored. This method of wine making has been always popular, mostly in villages, small scale farms and household production, but recently, commercial interest towards Qvevri wines started to grow and it acquires due recognition on the world wine market. Wine cellars, or "*Marani*" in the floor of which Qvevri is buried are still considered the semi-sacred place in the family home (unesco.org-archives).

In Georgia, wine making fostered the development of different grape varieties and cultivation techniques. No wonder the oldest wine ceramic vessels have been found on the territory of Georgia. Chemical evidence of wine was obtained from residues of ancient pottery excavated on the archaeological sites of Gadachrili Gora and Shulaveris Gora, about 50 km south of Tbilisi, Georgia. (unesco.org-archives).

Qvevri, the traditional Georgian winemaking method, has been added to the world Intangible (UNESCO) December 4, 2013. (unesco.org. December 4, 2013).

One more significant event in the life of Georgian Qvevri Wine was its recognition in Bordeaux, France. In her article "*Georgians in Bordeaux*", November 15, Julia Harding writes "*Georgia won the opportunity to be the first in a series of annual exhibition devoted to a specific country. It was both fascinating and very, very, beautiful and had required transportation of unique and extremely valuable artifacts*" (Harding, 2017).

In Bordeaux Georgian ceramic huge size vessel - Qvevri was exhibited that played a significant role in recent breakthrough discovery of evidence of winemaking 8.000 years ago.

Georgian Winemaking as a Part of Georgian Culture

"There is likely no place where the wine is so interwoven into culture as it is in Georgia".

Andrew Jefford, Wine Writer, Financial Times.

Over the last 20 years, Georgian wine making has been totally transformed and modernized. Market economy in-

tenfies competition between different producers, thereby triggers the producers to be more creative and original. In 2006, Russia imposed sanctions on Georgia's major agricultural export commodities, such as Georgian wine and mineral water. It was a very hard blow on Georgian economy and particularly for wine industry because Russia had been the biggest importer of Georgian wines as Georgia sold 80 % of wine in Russia. Consequently, in 2007 the total value of Georgian wine export decreased by almost 50% and continued to decrease in the subsequent years. However, the restrictions imposed by Russia forced Georgian winemakers to introduce modern technologies and increase the quality, develop non-Russian markets, and adjust to international standards to make the product competitive. Indeed, in the result of implementation of advanced technologies in production a much finer quality of red and white Georgian wines were obtained (Georgian wine exports and Russia's economic leverage, 2016).

In 2014, in the prestigious International Wine and Spirit Competition and in the International Wine Challenge 39 and 32, Georgian wines received awards, respectively (International Wine Challenge, 2014).

Market demands are changing rapidly, and the wine makers have to adapt to new demands, therefore, there is a threat that the world ever-larger market may lead Georgian wines to losing its individual character. The consumers' demand for bio-wine and ecologically pure product which is full of nutritious and curing ingredients is increasing. Therefore, the future success and increase of market share of Georgian wine is mostly connected with Qvevri wine produced according to unique Georgian traditions which means without herbicides or pesticides.

The great history of Georgian winemaking was acknowledged internationally. Since July 2012, Georgia has had the exclusive right to sell wine in the European Union with the slogan "*Georgia – The Cradle of Wine*" (www.decant-er-wine-news.com).

Appreciation of Georgian Wines

At present, European and American consumers discuss the virtues and vices of wine with greater enthusiasm than previously. Experts of different countries are full of praise for Georgian wine. The webpage of a UK wine importer (Gaumarjos) states that the 2005 Kondoli Rkatsiteli has "complex, honeyed, ripe apple aromas, and is crisp and steely on the palate with just a hint of buttered toffee." About a 2007 Qvevri wine, we can read that it has a "rich golden color, with complex aromas of baked apple, dried pear and quince, overlaid with creamy vanilla hints. In the mouth, it is serious and weighty with intense fruit and a surprising structure for a white wine, which will enable it to age elegantly. An intriguing snapshot of tradition, but don't serve it too cold – just lightly chilled." (Economic Potential of Georgian Wine from Financial). Recognition received by traditional Georgian wine brands increased the role of wine in the export capacity of the country and augmented the state revenues

Wine experts and sommeliers who visit Georgia discover a wonderful world of ancient wine culture which together

with breathtaking folklore songs, dances and poetry forms inseparable part of Georgian people' identity. For Georgians, "Supra", a feast table, and "Tamada", a chief toast master of the party, is a traditional way of drinking wine. The authenticity of this tradition helps all guests of Georgia feel how wine can shape the nation's character and institute peaceful coexistence in a community based on mutual respect, encouragement, sympathy and affection. When foreign wine experts write about Georgian wines, they always describe authentic method of winemaking in Qvevri, also speak affectionately about a feast table - "Supra", a welcome table accompanied by poetic toasts and songs, and about other century-old traditions connected with viticulture and wine drinking.

In one of the prestigious Wine @ Spirit Magazine, Wine Enthusiast, four Georgian wines from four producers were awarded 90+ points in August issue 2018. "Wines from Orgo, Teliani Valley, Lukasi and Mildiani wineries all received scores of 90+ points and many others received "Best Buy Awards" (Georgian Wines in USA).

This is how the wine journalist describes his visit to one of the wine producers: "SolikoTsaishvili's wines instantly transport you back to a crisp late October evening by a Kakhetian fireside, where friends are cooking mtsvadi (open fire grilled pork) in preparation for a feast. This 2013 Wine Rkatsiteli has as much character as its wine maker. Soliko started making wine as a hobby 30 years ago. He now farms 13.5 acres in Kakheti under biodynamics, some vineyards reaching 50 years old. Everything about this wine is done by hand. Soliko and his family destem the grapes and then adds some stems back along with the grapes in the traditional Georgian earthenware Qvevri. After a spontaneous fermentation, the wine remains in the Qvevri for about six months. That extended skin and stem contact makes for gripping wine, almost more food than drink." This picturesque description will hardly find anyone indifferent, and I believe, the stories like this would bring the nations closer and could serve as the best marketing strategy. Wine produced by SolikoTsaishvili's Marani is Saperavi 2012 Orgo, which also deserved high appreciation (92 points) from Wine & Spirits Magazine (Corus Imports: Georgian Wine Importer, United States).

Kisi 2012, Vinoterra, 92 points, Wine & Spirit Magazine

Kisi 2012, produced by Vinoterra Company deserved high appreciation and got 92 points. This is how it is described in the same Magazine: Kisi in the traditional Qvevri style with 6 months of skin contact tends to be more Aromatic than Rkatsiteli but with sound structure, aggressive tannin and balance acidity. It is a perfect varietal for the Kakhetian style ready for aging" (Georgian Wines in USA).

Georgian Wine has become popular in both USA and other parts of the world providing 100% authentic Georgian Wines. The "US CORUS IMPORTS" is one of the trusted distributors which sells Georgian wines in the United State since 2006. The company main offices are located in Stamford, CT. It supplies the customers with the highest quality products at the most competitive prices. Some of the Geor-

gian Brands sold in the US imported by CORUS IMPORTS are Batono Georgian Wine (Corus Imports.QvevruliSaperavi, QvevruliKrhkhuna, and QvevruliTetri).

When advertising Georgian wines, besides its quality, duration of fermentation, chemical characteristics, alcohol level, ingredients, taste and price, the media usually offers the country's rich history of grape farming, viticulture, authentic Qvevri winemaking method, and a live picture of a household of wine producers, their traditions and rituals connected with wine. The distributors give some valuable advice to the buyers that Georgian wines offered in New York City often have lower price that it deserves in regards with its quality, healthy ingredients and bouquet (Why You Should Be Paying Attention to Georgian Wine).

Wine has always been one of the strategic products for Georgia and played a role of a mediator in the strengthening political and economic relations with outer world. Opening the US and EU markets for Georgian wines was a significant part of the country's foreign policy which aims to achieve integration into western political system. Active support of the partner country in promoting export of Georgian product was also a new step in the US –Georgian relations. Georgian Wine export to the US which has been increasing steadily for the last few years, will strengthen the relationships between the two countries and support further development of wine industry in Georgia. Georgian wine is now also available in restaurants, including Georgian restaurants. Georgian wine producers are committed to producing high quality, fresh and 100 % authentic Georgian wine with sustained availability to the customers.

The US wine experts and sommeliers characterize Georgian wines as pure product safe for health "The best Georgian wine NYC is made from high quality natural ingredients which consist of grape vines. Most of them are planted in the fertile South Caucasus valley of Georgia. In fact, there are over 500 grape species in Georgia. Of all these numerous varieties, 40 species are used to produce commercial wine. The best wine is devoid of chemicals. Instead, it should be 100% made from natural ingredients so that it is good for health. To add on, the mountain region where grapes are grown has many natural springs. Rivers too drain water which is rich in minerals to the vineyards. Therefore, Georgian vines are pure hence safe for health" (Georgian Wines in USA - Why Georgian Wines are loved by Americans).

In most articles, comments and advertisements, wine connoisseurs, experts, authorities, refer to Qvevri wines focusing on its exceptional nutrition qualities; therefore, the mission of Georgian producers is not only to increase wine production capacity, but also maintain authentic method of vinification devoid of any chemical treatment, and further enhance the quality of wine.

Andrew Jeffort, a wine expert wrote an article "Where the Wine is Rooted in the Heart" in Financial Times: This extract is a good example how Georgian viticulture and winemaking serves as a country's best advertisement. "There's likely no place on Earth where wine is so interwoven into culture as it is in Georgia. In the countryside, where most people still grow their own grapes and make their own wine, homes typ

ically have dedicated wine cellars (marani). Even in Georgia's cities, urbanites who balance progress with tradition nurture their own vines.... The opening of a qvevri—a buried clay pot in which most Georgian households make their wine—is a celebrated event, a reason for feasting in and of itself. At the heart of communal life's many milestones—happy and sad—is the supra, a feast with a succession of toasts. Often compared to an “*academy of learning*,” these ritual feasts draw from monastic tradition—in which an abbot would introduce topics for discussion in the form of a toast. To this day, drinking wine during a meal is a vehicle for examining life's deep questions and answers. Feasting in Georgia is an unforgettable experience in which wine, the “*Nectar of the Sun*,” plays the central role; and the supra serves up a welcome table” (www.winesgeorgia.com/site/winery-directory).

According to data of January-October, 2018, 38 392 510 bottles of wine have been exported from Georgia to 50 countries around the world, that is 37% higher than the similar data of the last year.

In period under review 88,3 million USD worth of wine have been exported, that is 14% higher than the similar data of the last year. Increase of export is notable not only on market of countries of European Union but also on such traditional market as China: and the US (Data Of 10 Months of Wine and Alcohol Beverage Export).

In marketing strategy of Georgian wines, the focus should be made on bio-wines, as a natural product. Most foreign sources emphasize Qvevri wine as a healthy product full of nutritious qualities and they are produced without chemical treatment. Here is an example of Chonashvili's family wine cellar located in Telavi described by American experts. “Family owns vineyards in Tsinandali micro-zone, which is specially maintained - no herbicides, pesticides or system solutions are used here. The family has over a century of history in producing natural wine at home. It entered the market as “*Chona's Marani*” (Chona'sMarani).

Development of marketing strategy involves close cooperation of representatives of the government and nongovernmental sectors with the wine connoisseurs of wine markets around the globe. Strategy includes modification and popularization of product image, as well as special events directed towards the diversification of export market. Many scientific conferences, symposiums and wine exhibitions are held in Georgia which assist promotion and popularization process of Georgian wines.

Georgian Wine Association, supported by the National Wine Agency of Georgia, conducted the first “International Qvevri Wine Competition” in Georgia, in September 2017. In 2016, Georgian Academy of Agricultural Sciences (GAAS) organized international Conference on: Modern Technologies for Production of Ecologically Clean Products for Sustainable Development of Agriculture. The aim of the Conference was to emphasize the importance of production ecologically pure product including wine, and that bio production aims to improve socio-economic conditions of Georgian population and protect environment through sustainable development of bio-farming. Another Conference conducted by GAAS, in 2017, “*Viticulture and Wine-making*

in European Countries: Historical Aspects and Prospects” in Tbilisi, Georgia, was dedicated to the problems of origin of grape-vine and wine-making of Georgian wines and recognition of its place of in European and world winemaking. Among the Conference guests were renowned scientists and wine specialists who discussed the most sensitive problems connected with winemaking, such as affect of global warming on viticulture, bio wine production, and once again confirmed that Georgia was acknowledged as a cradle of winemaking (GAAS. Conference Proceedings. 2017).

The Competition aimed to introduce the best Qvevri Wine to the world-both from Georgia & other countries; it aimed to encourage the production and consumption of Qvevri Wine and increase awareness and different characteristics of Qvevri wines produced in different countries (Georgian Wine Association, Qvevri Wine Competition).

Robert Joseph (USA), recognized as one of the influential authorities in wine world, paid his third visit to Georgia; he had business meetings with the Ministry of Agriculture of Georgia, National Wine Agency and Association Georgian Wine on market characteristics of Britain, China and Hong Kong. Besides the specifics of separate markets, connoisseur participates in development and promotion of general image concept of the Georgian wine, together with Master of Wine Lisa Granik (USA). By sincere endeavors of Robert Joseph and Lisa Granik, Georgia was presented at Bordeaux Wine Exhibition for the first time, including Georgian wine workshops (Georgian Wine marketing Strategy).

Conclusion

Viticulture and winemaking in Georgia have evolved as a part of life, culture and diet, and as a form of communication since time immemorial. It is one of the most ancient countries of viticulture and winemaking and it is successfully developing its rich traditions in the twenty-first century, creating new brands, enhancing the quality of the product and struggling to occupy its share in global wine market. Georgian wine is a trademark of the country, its most important export commodity, and plays the role of a mediator in Georgian foreign relations with the rest of the world. Wine is the best ambassador of Georgia in the countries it is imported - It communicates culture, traditions and spirit of the nation.

- The perspectives of promotion of Qvevri Wines on the world wine market heavily depend on the following:
- Georgia should offer exclusive brands, among them, Qvevri Wines to establish its place in the world wine market;
- Georgia should enhance production of ecologically pure wine and bio-wine since the demand on such product increases rapidly;
- Georgian Qvevri wines should be promoted as having unique nutritious qualities due to its technology – an authentic method of fermentation in ceramic vessels;

- Georgia has to offer original Marketing strategy which will communicate not only exclusive wine qualities, but also Georgian traditions connected with viticulture, such as rituals, folk songs, dances, also different sweets, spirit and other products made from grape juice , and introduce the function of Georgian feast table, called Supra” and its head “Tamada” which is a brilliant form of setting friendly and affectionate communications between nations,.
- Qvevri wine inscription on the UNESCO list should serve as an advertisement to promote awareness of the intangible cultural heritage together with traditional wine making practices, associated skills and rituals.

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