



THE VINE GROWERS SOLIKO TSAISHVILI AND RAMAZ NIKOLADZE

By Soliko Tsaishvili,
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From time immemorial, vines and wine have been spread across the entire territory of Georgia, influencing everyday life and reflected in religion, art and folklore. For a Georgian, a plain was where vines grew, while the mountains started where vines could no longer be cultivated. Although Georgia is a small country, its climate and soil are amazingly diverse and rich, which explains why over 500 different grapes are grown here, each perfectly adapted to its place of origin.

Soliko Tsaishvili says: "I am a Doctor of Philology, and from 1998 to 2003, I was editor and reviser of the journal *Literature and Art*. I am also a translator from German and Russian.

Wine-making was my hobby for a long time. I made my first wine in 1987 and I worked on the wine production chain with passion and love until I was 42 years old in 2003. Then, I decided to change my life completely, giving up my very interesting career, and dedicating myself entirely to vine-growing and wine production. A fundamental element in this decision was my



meeting with the wine producer Giorgi Tushmalishvili, who introduced me to the secrets of growing grapes and their possibilities.

With three friends, I bought a small house with a hectare of vineyards in Kakheti, east Georgia. I still remember that day in May quite vividly. It was the first time I had seen the vine blossom at close quarters. Then, practically under my eyes, this turned into tiny soft pips. A little later these green, poorly attached, fragile pellets turned into beautiful clusters of the *Rkatsiteli*, *Saperavi*, *Mtsvane* and *Khikhvi* grape types.

In the meantime, it was already mid-September so, just like our forefathers had done for many centuries, we pressed our harvest – heavy, healthy, sweet grape juice – into *kvevri*, huge



earthenware amphoras dug deeply into the ground. And, following the rules laid down by our ancestors, we added some cluster stalks and grape skins to what would become white wine and only the grape skins to what would become red.

Although we hadn't added any yeast, in a little while the juice began to ferment in the pots. But why was it so surprising? We hadn't tried to enrich the soil with any chemicals or modern additives. The fermentation was quite even, neither too strong nor too weak, which must definitely be attributed to the *kvevri* – this wonderful clay invention of the past. Dug deeply into the ground, these oval amphoras create ideal conditions for natural fermentation. For our part, we certainly assisted the process. Just like our ancestors, we stirred the juice

with a special long pole four or five times a day so as not to allow the grape skins to retain unnecessary and unwanted gases at the bottom.

In about three weeks, fermentation was complete, the *kvevri* were filled to the brim and securely sealed, but not airtight since the second stage of fermentation was not far off. In December, the *kvevri* were sealed for good, with a thick layer of soil above them. The next three months passed in tense anticipation. It was only in March that we were able to taste the result of our hard work.

Both wines, the white and the red, proved to be rich, with a distinct aroma and texture and simply delicious. The white had a fiery taint to it, while the red was the colour of a ripe pomegranate. After taking a sip or two for testing, we all decided we wanted to drink more. And we did, which was followed by a lot of singing. We certainly enjoyed it... When I woke up in the morning, I realized I had turned into a true vine-grower and wine-maker – literally overnight!"

Ramaz Nikoladze works for the European Union Security Service as a bodyguard and tells us: "My ancestors cultivated vineyards in Nakhshirgele village, Imereti

region, and natural wine was at the heart of both my area and my family. They cultivated grape varieties such as *Tsistka*, *Tsolikouri*, *Krakhuna*, *Zvelshavi* and *Aladasturi*. In their backyards, *kvevri* were buried in the earth; they also owned *marani* (wine cellars).

Once I had tasted real, natural, *kvevri*-made wine in the mountain village, I decided I had to use *kvevri* to produce wine myself. I researched modern enological literature and talked to elderly people about the traditional methods of wine-making. I washed the old, abandoned *kvevri* thoroughly and used beeswax for their internal surface. I crushed the grapes by foot, and I poured the juice into the *kvevri* without any yeast; however, I did not follow the advice of my elders but did the fermentation without grape husks. The wine was excellent, but not perfect.

So, the following year, I added some grape husks to the grape juice and, after that, I increased the amount of husks to 6 percent as in the past and left the juice to macerate for four months. As a result, I obtained a bright gold, normal acid and excellent wine.

In 2004, I was invited to "Terra Madre", organized by the international organization "Slow Food", where farmers





gathered from all around the world to share common experiences. I talked to the managerial personnel of Slow Food's Biodiversity Fund about the forgotten phenomenon of *kvevri* wine. We decided to set up a project on "Georgian amphora wine".

During my work and research, I met people who had experience working with traditional

methods of wine-making; although some were novices they were, like me, full of enthusiasm. Under the project, ten wine-makers were selected from the Kakheti region and six from the Imereti region. We created a management protocol and set up an ethical codex for each participant in the project. We do not use chemical inputs, and we adhere to the slogan "Good, clean, and fair".

