

#WinesofGeorgia



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### QVEVRI 101

BY **CHRIS STRUCK, GEORGIAN WINE AMBASSADOR**

One cannot discuss Georgia's storied winemaking history without mention of qvevri, a large, teardrop-egg-shaped earthenware clay vessel used in the Caucasus since antiquity to conduct a practice Georgians hold as sacred: the fermentation of grapes into wine.

Qvevri are always buried underground to facilitate a consistently temperate condition for wine fermentation. Scholars say the word qvevri comes from kveuri, which means "that which is buried" or "something dug deep in the ground." In fact, the prominent way that qvevris differ from Greek or Italian amphorae (or Spanish tinajas), is that they are always buried, serving no need as transport vessels in Georgia as they have throughout overlapping empires through the ages.

There is much romantic symbolism in how Georgians see humanity through the lens of the practice of qvevri winemaking. Wine is central to Georgian culture: art and how it imitates life. Ancient Georgian poets extolled the virtues of wine, Christianity and Judaism ritually celebrate with it, and warriors of old have been known to use grapevines as belts to secure their tunics. From the earliest to the most modern practices, qvevri winemaking is regarded thusly. Grapes are pressed—resplendent with all of their parts—skins, seeds, stems, and juice—into the buried qvevri for a winemaking period roughly equivalent to that of human gestation. After approximately 9 months (depending on circumstance), this womb of the earth "births" wine from juice from grapes that came from the same ground, in a godly miracle that takes place every year, just as naturally as any human conception and birth. Whether you dabble in the divine or not, it must be noted what a truly awesome component of Georgia's winemaking tradition that qvevri hold.

It is fitting and no wonder then, that in 2013 qvevri winemaking was added to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)'s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Equally impressive that such a functional treasure has persisted for 8,000 years of winemaking history is that it survived 70 years of Soviet rule, where winemaking in Georgia and elsewhere was publicly relegated to purely what could be churned out efficiently and voluminously, meaning mostly in titanic steel drums.

How are these beautiful, artisanal time capsules made? Clay is mined from a local quarry, after which it is cleaned and mixed with local river sand before being ground into a smooth consistency. It takes more than a month to form each one atop a wooden platform, in order to allow proper time for various layers to set and dry correctly. The clay is then fired in a gas or wooden kiln at approximately 1,000°C to 1,300°C for approximately one week.

After it properly cools, beeswax is often used to line the inside to create a waterproof, antiseptic seal. Qvevri are formed with a pointed base that allows solid grape particulates to collect in a more compacted manner, intentionally minimizing the surface area exposed to the fermenting liquid. This whole process is clearly a labor of love and craftsmanship, taking terroir to a more intimate level than anywhere else in the world, as the local clay and local traditions of shaping the vessels play a role in the ultimate organoleptic qualities of the finished wine, which vary from region to region. Small ones have capacity for thirteen gallons while the largest commercial ones 1,000, most commonly ranging from one to two thousand liters.

Global demand for these very niche vessels have skyrocketed in recent years, far outpacing the number the dwindling few artisans who can produce, but sparking unique academic gatherings around them, such as the International Qvevri Wine Symposium. Waitlists for winemakers seeking to vinify in new qvevri are years-long, as some qvevri making masters are aging into retirement without many to succeed them. There is now a small renaissance of interest among a few Georgian young people who wish to continue carrying on this venerable lineage of qvevri making, which gives a glimmer of hope that this beautiful tradition still has a long future ahead of it in our rapidly changing world.