

#WinesofGeorgia



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UNVEILING RKATSITELI

BY **CHRISTY CANTERBURY, MASTER OF WINE**

The Rkatsiteli grape lies at the very heart of Georgian viticulture. It is an ancient white grape—believed to date back to 3000 BCE—that has withstood the test of time, even through the difficult, high-production years of the Soviet regime. Rkatsiteli's historical longevity is woven into the centuries-old traditions and expertise of Georgian winemakers.

Rkatsiteli originated in the eastern Kakheti region's famous Alazani Valley. Today 35% of Georgia's vineyards are planted with Rkatsiteli, and the grape accounts for 54% of total annual production. It is authorized in ten of Georgia's 29 PDOs. Some dismiss it given its widespread planting, but that is shortsighted. No one dismisses Cabernet Sauvignon or Chardonnay for the same reason!

The grape's name is the combination of two Georgian words. Rka means vine cane and tsiteli means red. Its red stems make it easy to spot Rkatsiteli in the vineyard. Another trait makes Rkatsiteli visually distinctive in the vineyard when its vines are dry-farmed: the grapes glow with a pinkish hue. There is also a clone of Rkatsiteli called Vardisperi which is naturally dark pink. This is a recent mutation and discovery, having been found in Kakheti's Mukuzani area in 1948.

Its hardiness in the vineyards is in good part why Rkatsiteli is so popular today. It is not finicky about the sites on which it is planted, and it is winter hardy. This is key in the harsh continental climate of eastern Georgia. Yet Rkatsiteli is malleable and easily adapts to the many different climates across Georgia.

The grape is also easy to cultivate. It achieves good sugar levels while keeping its inherent, high acidity. It also crops consistently and generously. (Clearly, these were reasons Rkatsiteli flourished during the Soviet regime.) Moreover, relatively high yields—compared to other white grapes—do not quickly diminish the quality of its characteristics.

Rkatsiteli is also very flexible in the cellar, adapting to a wide array of winemaking styles and processes. This is thanks to its subtle aromatics and its naturally high acidity. It is mostly made in dry styles, but it can also be used to make semi-dry, semi-sweet, sweet and sparkling wines. The grape is featured in the fortified wine, Kardenakhi, it is used in brandy production and it is even eaten as a table grape. It is also friendly in blends and is frequently combined with Mtsvane Kakheti and/or Kisi in Kakheti. Plus, Rkatsiteli is agreeable to all sorts of winemaking creativity. It takes easily to Georgia's traditional qvevri vessels, but it also can be vinified and aged in stainless steel, epoxy lined tanks and barrels.

While most Rkatsiteli is enjoyed soon after its production, its vibrant acidity makes the best examples of the variety age-worthy. While there has not been a strong tradition of aging wines in Georgia, more and more producers are setting aside their best wines to appreciate in time.

The Rkatsiteli grape is truly exceptional for its heritage and its stylistic flexibility. It is the perfect white grape to offer to someone new to Georgian wine to showcase Georgia's viticultural and winemaking heritage. It is also the right grape to show a wine enthusiast thanks to its complexity of flavors and its noble structure. Within the broad range of Rkatsitelis available, there is truly something for everyone.