

# Wine Tourism as a Great Opportunity for Georgia

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## Abstract

In a region with such an extensive wine history and culture, wine and food will be an important component of tourism. As more ventures get off the ground, Georgia will develop a critical mass of wine tourism offerings. Georgia's traditional winemaking method of fermenting grapes in earthenware, egg-shaped vessels has been added to the world heritage list of UNESCO. Georgia's ancient wine culture has seen a revival in recent years. Winemakers have realized that their traditional method of qvevri winemaking is one of their most valuable assets. In the last decade, wine tourism has become a key component of gastronomy tourism and a pillar in the strategies of diversification of many destinations. The quality, styles, and value of Georgian wine available internationally will stimulate interest in Georgian wine tourism, more so than vice versa.

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**Keywords:** Wine; Qvevri wine; Wine tourism; Georgia

## Introduction

Nobody knows when and how exactly the first grapevine was cultivated in Georgia, but earliest archeological evidence of viniculture that was discovered in Georgia dates back to 6,000 B.C.

The statue of bronze man (height 7.5 cm) was found in Vani region (Georgia) excavation. It is a man sitting in the arm-chair with a drinking-horn in his right hand. One has the impression that he is proposing a toast. The period of this statue's origin is considered to be VII-VI centuries BC.

History of winemaking is tightly intertwined with history of Georgia, and our country is almost unanimously considered to be the birthplace of wine as such. In this country, tending to vineries, harvesting grapes and making wine is a tradition as old as the country itself. For centuries, it was passed from one generation to another. Georgia also proudly boasts over 400 grape varieties, more than any other country in the world.

In Georgia, the grape harvest is called rtveli. It begins in autumn, by the end of September, and lasts for several weeks. In some regions of Georgia, harvested grapes are still crushed using a wooden basin called

satsnakheli. This method is centuries old, and used to have a ritualistic meaning back in the day.

Georgia's traditional winemaking method of fermenting grapes in earthenware, egg-shaped vessels has been added to the world heritage list of the United Nations educational, scientific and cultural organization (UNESCO).

The large earthenware vessels traditionally used to ferment grapes in Georgia are called qvevri and archaeological evidence of their use goes back to 8,000 years. They are typically buried in the floor of the cellar or Marani, a semi-sacred place to most Georgians and found in almost every house.

There are three main technologies of wine production in Georgia: European, Kakhetian and Imeretian.

When grapes are pressed together with seeds and branches, the outcome hick mass is poured in special crocks called qvevri, and qvevris then are dug into the ground for 3-4 months. This is the Kakhetian technique. After the liquid had been fermented in kvevri, they decant the juice out of it. Taste of this wine is tart and full. Kakhetian wines have higher percentage of antioxidant-polyphenols.

Imeretian way of winemaking combines both, European and Kakhetian approaches. Grapes are not cleaned from skin and seeds, but twigs are removed. The liquid mass is not fermented too long as in Kakhetian technology, only 2-3 months. Such wines are of higher acidity, slightly tart and have a smooth taste.

Georgia's ancient wine culture has seen a revival in recent years. Winemakers have realized that their traditional method of qvevri winemaking is one of their most valuable assets. Both viticulture and wine tourism hold great potential to help the country and inject much-needed growth into the economy.

Georgia's enotourism potential lies in showcasing what it has to offer the wine world. Georgia has much to offer that is very different from what you will find elsewhere. This includes (1) an extensive wine history, (2) a qvevri wine making tradition, (2) the celebration of wine and food through Georgian feasts or supras, and (3) Georgian wines made from indigenous grapes.

Tourism is one way that we experience and understand other nations, peoples, and cultures. It creates jobs, of course, but it also has the potential to increase understanding. International tourism has been one of the global growth industries of the last 30 years; so, it is not unreasonable that the UN pay attention to this economic and cultural exchange vector.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015, includes tourism as a tool for sustainable economic development. "By 2030," the document specifies, the UN should

“devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products”.

Table 1. Georgia’s wine tourism source markets

	Source market	USD per person	Remarks
1.	North America	25 – 55	The expenses for wine tastings, drinking wine during meals & buying wine as a souvenir.
2.	Georgia	5 - 15	The majority drinks & buys bulk wines.
3.	Japan	25 - 45	The expenses for wine tastings, drinking wine during meals & buying wine as a souvenir.
4.	UK	25 - 55	The expenses for wine tastings, drinking wine during meals & buying wine as a souvenir.
5.	EU	25 - 50	The expenses for wine tastings, drinking wine during meals & buying wine as a souvenir.
6.	Israel	20 - 40	The expenses for wine tastings, drinking wine during meals & buying wine as a souvenir.
7.	Baltic Countries	15 - 50	The expenses for wine tastings, drinking wine during meals & buying wine as a souvenir.
8.	CIS countries (Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan, etc.)	25 - 60	The expenses for wine tastings, drinking wine during meals & buying wine as a souvenir.
9.	Azerbaijan	10 - 25	The expenses for wine tastings, drinking wine during meals & buying wine as a souvenir.
10.	Armenia	15 - 35	The expenses for wine tastings, drinking wine during meals & buying wine as a souvenir.

**Source:** Economic prosperity Initiative (EPI) Georgian Wine Association and Georgian Incoming Tour Operators’ Association – Promotional Plan for Georgia’s Wine Tourism Sector, 2012.

The UNWTO had previously identified gastro-tourism as being an important element of its sustainable tourism development program. Wine tourism, as a crucial component of gastronomy tourism, has evolved into a key element for both emerging and mature tourism destinations in which tourists can experience the culture and lifestyle of destinations while fostering sustainable tourism development.

The link between wine tourism and culture, history and lifestyle and the contribution of this segment to the development of the sector was widely discussed during the 1st UNWTO Global Conference on Wine Tourism held in the Kakheti region in Georgia. During two days (7-9 September) the event convened over 200 participants including policy makers and tourism experts from nearly 50 countries.

The event was a unique opportunity to discover the richness of local Georgian culture and to exchange innovative ideas to promote wine tourism between destinations already experienced in wine tourism with others with a high potential in that segment. Ministries, Destination Management Organizations (DMOS) and National Tourism Organizations

(NTOs), universities, tour operators and wine professionals were among the participants.

“Wine tourism is intimately related to the identity of destinations and comprises cultural, economic and historical values. Furthermore, it constitutes a major driver in diversification strategies helping destinations to enrich the touristic offer and to attract different publics. This Conference tries not only to emphasize everything this, but also to promote exchanges and to build cooperation among destinations with a potential in this field,” said UNWTO Secretary-General Taleb Rifai at the opening of the Conference.

As an outcome of the Conference, the Georgia Declaration on Wine Tourism identifies a number of recommendations to facilitate the development of wine tourism that would help destinations to implement key actions. Items for fostering sustainable tourism development through intangible cultural heritage:

1. Wine tourism is a fundamental part of Gastronomy Tourism;
2. Wine tourism can contribute to fostering sustainable tourism by promoting both the tangible and intangible heritage of the destination;
3. Wine tourism is capable of generating substantial economic and social benefits for key players of each destination, in addition to playing an important role in terms of cultural and natural resource preservation;
4. Wine tourism facilitates the linking of destinations around the common goal of providing unique and innovative tourism products, whereby maximizing synergies in tourism development, surpassing traditional tourism subsectors;
5. Wine tourism provides an opportunity for underdeveloped tourism destinations, in most cases rural areas, to mature alongside established destinations and enhance the economic and social impact of tourism on a local community;
6. Wine tourism provides an innovative way to experience a destination's culture and lifestyle, responding to consumers' evolving needs and expectations;
7. Wine tourism's potential will be heightened if implemented appropriately through a public-private collaboration strategy, promoted through an effective communication across different sectors and involving the local community.

The tourist that travels to Georgia will be looking for “something different” to what they get in other destinations. Therefore, it is important that the Georgian tourism industry focus on answering the questions “why in the world would anyone want to travel to Georgia over all the other places that they can choose from?”

Several elements need to be in place to be successful at wine tourism and it seems that those involved in have a grasp of these elements and recognize that there is much work to do. There need to be more and better hotels and restaurants in the wine country. Other tourist attractions are desirable and fortunately, Tbilisi and the surrounding wine regions are also home to a treasure trove of archeological wonders. Multilingual guides are necessity. There need to be well-marked roads and wine trails. Customer service and hospitality are not universally understood; so, training hospitality staff is essential.

### **Conclusion**

Fringed by the Black Sea and the Caucasus Mountains, wine-makers in this small but stunningly beautiful country hope the trend will continue.

Not many things produced in Georgia are so exclusive and special that they can compete in the luxury segment of the market. Wine is one of these products, and that is for good reasons, as both domestic and foreign experts agree that Georgian viticulture is unique in the world. Academic research has shown that wine tourists enjoy not only tasting wine, but gaining knowledge about winegrowing processes and having fun.

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