OPINION

Sarah Abbott MW: why Georgia is out from under the radar

They might make a lot of their wine underground, but at long last the Georgian wine scene is no longer buried away known only to a few intrepid travellers. No, Georgian wines are now hot property and those importers, distributors and restaurants that have got behind Georgia in recent years are really now paying dividends. Sarah Abbott MW, who is helping to runs the campaign to promote Georgian wine in the UK, explains why she thinks wine buyers should all be taking Georgia seriously.

By **Sarah Abbott**
April 17, 2018

As Wines of Georgia prepares to host its annual tasting in London next week, Sarah Abbott MW, marks your card on why she believes every premium, food driven restaurant wine buyer should be

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looking to find room for Georgian wines on their list.

Georgian wine is no longer a wine story buried under ground. Picture: Miles Willis as is the main photograph of a Georgian wine picker

Why do you find wines from Georgia so interesting?

The paradox, and the potential. Georgia is a small country, but the climatic and topographic variation is huge. You can find a spot to grow almost anything in Georgia, from tea to walnuts. (It's one reason the country has been coveted by hungry and much larger neighbours throughout history.) Every wine style is possible in Georgia, and of course it is sort of the

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spiritual home of amber wines, which have probably been the wine discovery of my recent years.

Their wine culture is everything to Georgians. They are even more obsessed than the French when it comes to wine as an expression of national identity, which is saying something. But the Georgians have had to fight much harder much more recently to hold onto it. To see this culture, and wine quality, resurge over the last five years is thrilling. The energy and dynamism of the producers today reflect the stability and outward connections of the last two decades. Research and a better understanding of the ancient winemaking techniques have led to a resurgence in wine production which has seen great strides in quality, resulting in a worldwide interest in the wines from this fascinating country.

What makes them particularly suitable for UK wine buyers?

There is a niche but growing, and higher-spending, part of our market that highly values wines of high quality and individual character. The most exciting and innovative importers in the UK recognise that there are beautiful terroirs that are underestimated. And wines from these terroirs offer fantastic value for money, and the differentiating factor that is essential.

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Georgian wine sits within several categories, but that of “Eastern Med” is, I think, the most resonant. Wines, alongside the food, from across that part of the world are established as an essential part of a dynamic, forward-thinking wine offering.

Georgian wine is a great match with Eastern Mediterranean dishes says Sarah Abbott MW

Which styles would you highlight in particular

I love the new ‘Precision Qvevri’ style. Especially amber wines, made from aromatic varieties, increasingly with lighter skin contact. Well, Precision Qvevri is what I call them. Producers across Georgia are starting or expanding Qvevri wine production. There’s an idea in the UK that Qvevri are about “chuck it in and let’s see what happens”. That is so wrong.

These are highly effective fermentation vessels that have evolved over centuries to optimise maceration, extraction, manipulation of redox potential, control of oxidation, etc.

Every producer, whatever their vision or philosophy, has the power to be extremely deliberate and controlled when using Qvevri.

Reds are very thrilling at the moment. I like the more elegant styles of Saperavi that are emerging, and I love the new reds from rescued mountain varieties such as Aladasturi and Otskhanuri sapere. They are delicate, scented but intensely structured, especially when grown on the volcanic terroirs that are scattered across Georgia. We are starting to see those emerge onto the market now as the vineyards mature.

Georgians are also mad for their native reds. They nearly died out, but there have been many projects, some official, others personal, to find, identify and cultivate these old varieties. They achieve great complexity and depth even at moderate (11-13%) alcohol. I'm very excited about these.

Which price points do you need to be targeting in order to get the best value/quality

From £8-£15 retail. Those are the wines of character and quality that are of interest to the UK market.

Any restaurants and importers that you think are doing particularly well with Georgian wine?

The wine cellar and qvevris at Vita Vinea

Clark Foyster wines are doing great work with their range of Georgian wine. They have an immaculate portfolio and sell to top restaurants. They have got their excellent Orgo and Vita Vinea brands listed by the glass in top places, and have recently added a new brand, Schuchmann, to the portfolio. Doug Wregg at Les Caves de Pyrene has long been a champion of

Georgian wines and they have made great inroads with the wines they represent.

The specialists are doing well. Both Georgian Wine Club and Taste of Georgia are developing on-trade accounts, and have added new producers to the portfolio. 67 Pall Mall found, somewhat to its surprise, I think, that its members loved Georgian wine. They listed a couple initially and now have more than a dozen on the list. And they're looking at more.

Oddbins, The Wine Society, Waitrose and Marks and Spencer also list Georgian wine. While their range is small, their endorsement is highly significant. Two major importers are also currently tasting and selecting from a range of Georgian wine which could also be very significant.

Is the fact Georgia is now exporting to more countries and not just focused on Russian and its own domestic market mean we are getting more choice of wines in the export market?

Yes – more and more producers are seeing that the UK is a dynamic market with a growing appetite for wines from countries like Georgia.

What can we expect at the Wines of Georgia trade tasting next week?

We will be showing over 100 wines representing the different styles, terroirs,

Styles available to taste include aromatic whites and supple reds from contemporary large producers, as well as artisan wines from Qvevri in both amber and Red wine styles.

- **To find more about the Wines of Georgia trade tasting, which will be the biggest opportunity to taste wines from right across the country, click here. It all takes place on April 24 between 11am and 4pm at 67 Pall Mall, London, SW1Y 5ES. This event is organised by Swirl Wine Group on behalf of the National Wine Agency of Georgia.**

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