

# A Tasting of Wines of Georgia

April 21<sup>st</sup> 2022

by Ormond Smith

After the pandemic enforced suspension of tasting activities, it was with an air of anticipation that members and guests gathered at the Loch Ness Country House Hotel on Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> April, eager to get back to what had hitherto been normal Goustevin wine tasting activity. The Connetable rightly felt that it was still too early for a get-together in a member's house so with warm memories of our last tasting two years ago at this hotel, it was decided to return, although the Thursday evening perhaps didn't suit everyone but with the hotel fully booked with weddings at weekends, our hands were somewhat tied in that respect.

The topic for the tasting was Wines of Georgia, an area of eastern Europe which the Goustevin had never previously considered, partly for good reason as the last time some members had tried Georgian wine, some thirty plus years ago, it was considered to be rather poor quality. However, with major changes, both politically and commercially, the Georgian wine industry has made huge advances in both their viticulture and viniculture and their wines are now marketed worldwide. The writer felt that it was therefore as good a time as any to organise a tasting and wines were procured from the Georgian Wine Guild in London. Due to non availability of Georgian sparkling wine at the time of ordering, it was decided to welcome everyone with a glass of Crémant de Limoux Brut and following the Connetable's opening remarks, he informed the assembly of a rather special occasion – member Alex Farquhar's 88th birthday, that very day! Alex was then invited to "cut the cake" which was duly done to great applause following the "blowing out of the candles" – and as Alex opined "thankfully a lot less than my age!"



**"Birthday Boy" - Alex cuts his cake!**



**A large qvevri being lowered into the ground**

Ormond Smith was then invited to introduce the Tasting and give a talk on not only the wines we were about to sample but some interesting history on wine production in Georgia which dates back to 6000BC. He went on to explain how this was ascertained – cultivated grape pips are different from those of wild grapes and large enough quantities had been found in clay jars, ancestors of the qvevri (see left and below) to eliminate any doubts. These primitive jars in time gave way to what is known today as qvevris (*pronounced kway-vree*) which can range in size from fairly small to being large enough to hold a volume of 1.5 tons! As qvevri makers will attest, qvevris are fashioned slowly and with much patience. Many men enter the practice in childhood, learning the tricks of the trade from their fathers and grandfathers....skills and knowledge passed down for

generations and regarded as sacred family secrets. A qvevri maker explains the process, *“It takes about three months to make one qvevri. Just a few centimetres of clay can be added each day, any more than that and the qvevri may collapse under the pressure of the new clay. Once the vessel is built, it needs three to four weeks to dry before it can be fired. A qvevri which can hold a volume of one to one and a half tons requires 7-8 adults to slowly transfer it into the kiln which can accommodate up to eight qvevris at a time. A brick wall is built to enclose the kiln and retain the heat. The qvevri firing lasts for a week at approximately 500 degrees Celcius. The wall is then dismantled and the qvevris removed”.* Unlike stainless steel vessels, the porous walls of the qvevri allow the jar to interact with the earth around it. Qvevris can also be coated on the outside with a thin layer of concrete and on the inside with hot beeswax which causes greater isolation between the vessel and the earth around it, yet allows for micro oxygenation so that the qvevri can breathe.



**The white wines.....**



**Ormond gives an insight into Georgian wine**



**.....and the reds**

The format for the evening was a food and wine pairing with the hotel producing a most imaginative menu. The starter, Great Glen Gin Cured Salmon Gravlax, served with Compressed Cucumber, Nasturtium and Seaweed Crumb and Wasabi Foam was accompanied with the opening whites, two offerings of the Mtsvane grape, both 2018, comparing a conventional vinification against a qvevri example.....the first, pale gold in the glass with floral notes on the nose and tropical fruits and mouth-watering acidity on the palate and the qvevri example – light orange in the glass, an intense nose of dried apricots and a soft but rich on the palate. The first Mtsvane was felt to be rather bland and although the qvevri example showed more character but greater acidity, it was the conventional wine which was preferred. The second two whites were presented between the starter and main course, both 2017 vintage, with a conventional Kondoli Rkatsiteli tasted against a Qvevri Rkatsiteli – the Kondoli a bright golden colour, with a fragrant and fruity nose including peach and apricot and on the palate, a refined fruity texture echoing the promise of the nose, whereas the qvevri example displayed a light amber colour, an intense nose of white fruits and fine herbs and a complex and mineral mouth finishing on herby notes and fresh tannins. Again mixed reviews from the audience but the writer found the qvevri example was more appealing. It could be the case that with qvevri wines being unknown to most if not all the members, the acidity and taste of this type of fermentation was perhaps a slight shock to the system.

Having suggested to the hotel that a lamb main course would be in keeping with wines from Georgia, the chef excelled in conjuring up a Chanakhi Lamb Stew with Parsley, New Potatoes and Spring Vegetables which would be enjoyed (very much so!) along with the opening two reds, a 2017 Chateau Mukhrani Qvevri Saperavi, a qvevri fermented blend of 65% Saperavi/35% Cabernet Sauvignon and a 2016 Saperavi Archili's Wine, 100% Saperavi but produced by blending both conventional and qvevri

styles. Archili Utiaşhvili is a legendary winemaker, handmaking his wines from a 40 year old vineyard, using only the highest quality grapes – the resultant production is understandably limited as evidenced by the 2015 vintage being limited to a mere 1700 bottles! Both reds were well received – the



**Heather and James read up on the wine information**

Chateau Mukhrani a brilliant dark red, tones of blackberry and blackcurrant on the nose and a satisfying balance of dark fruits, spices and dried herbs on the palate with a pleasant long finish while the Archili offering was dark ruby in the glass, a balanced floral aroma and a palate rich in tannins with tones of black berry fruits. The writer found both wines equally satisfying, the quality evident.

The dessert was a very “moreish” dish of rhubarb with a ginger and custard tart, ginger crumb and clotted ice cream ice cream and with that we sampled the last two wines, both semi sweet reds. The 2019 Kindzmarauli (100% Saperavi grape) showed purple red in the glass with an inky blue edge along the rim, the nose a myriad of black fruits and spices and on the palate, a confiture of sweet blackberry and cherry with lively acidity and a pleasing aftertaste – the paired red was a 2018 Alexandreuli (100% Alexandreuli grape – another ancient Georgian variety), bright ruby red in the glass, the nose displaying intense raspberries and strawberries underlined by white pepper hints and the palate was fresh, elegant and sweet with tones of pomegranate and pepper. Both wines were well received although comments indicated that perhaps they might be better sampled with cheese.



**The Kiindzmarauli and Alexandreuli dessert wines**

The evening ended with coffee and lively discussion on both the wines and the accompanying menu. The white wines were not quite so well received, the qvevri examples certainly seeming to be a bit of an ‘acquired taste but as they were wines which all present had not previously experienced, perhaps a case of more familiarisation? The reds were more acceptable as they “harmonised” well with their respective accompanying dishes. In the writer’s opinion, all the wines were interesting in different ways, the white qvevri examples certainly a new experience for all present and the reds were most acceptable. Overall, an interesting and educational experience of wines from the birthplace of viniculture 8000 years ago – a telling indication of the inevitable question of how long can the qvevri continue to exist in modern winemaking is easily answered by the fact that wine producers in countries who have only ever used “standard” production methods, are now experimenting with qvevri fermentation.....surely verification of the phrase “there’s nothing new in this world”.

All in all, a very pleasant return to Goustevin tastings after the enforced layoff and an interesting experience of wines produced in a very traditional method, being fermented in an earthenware container sunk into the ground and filled with bunches of grapes, skins, stalks and all, before being topped with wooden lids and then sealed with earth. Some of these qvevris can lie undisturbed for many years. In the writer’s opinion, the enjoyment of trying different wines is very much educational and the qvevri wines from Georgia certainly fulfilled that aspect. Yet another successful Goustevin tasting – good food, good wine and good company are indeed a most agreeable combination!