

A GUEST AT THE FEAST



No one hosts a feast like the Georgians. In the mountainous Racha district, supras — gatherings of friends and family over food — are long, lively and distinctly alcoholic affairs, where tables creak under the weight of dishes, the wine flows freely, and the toastmaster must be obeyed at all times

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Getting to Khimshi isn't easy. To reach this village in the Racha region of northwestern Georgia, take the highway out of Tbilisi, passing the sixth-century Jvari Monastery and then the ancient former capital, Mtskheta. Whizz through Gori, the hometown of one Joseph Stalin — perhaps alight to see the hovel he grew up in (now enshrined beneath a marble canopy) — before hitting the village of Surami on the Rikoti Pass, home to an ancient Jewish community. Make like a local and pull over to buy warm, just-baked loaves of sweet nazuki bread that will melt on your palate as you traverse the hilly, tunnel-laden, pothole-dimpled road past the former mining town of Tkibuli and the Shaori Reservoir. Finally — about four hours of bumpy road later — there'll likely be a herd of cattle blocking the bridge over the Rioni River; negotiate a safe passage past the bovines, then take a left up the gravel road. There, in front of their two-storey home, will be Eka Gobejishvili and her husband, Beso Giorgobiani, awaiting your arrival to partake in their traditional Georgian feast.

In many parts of the world today, the word 'feast' has lost its true meaning. Not so in Georgia; the supra is an all-day, mouth-stuffing, wine-guzzling occasion, complete with a specific nomenclature, ritualistic drinking, dozens of toasts, and enough gluttony to cause an entire table to develop gout in a single afternoon. Supras are staged for special occasions — weddings, birthdays, funerals — or for no occasion whatsoever. You can learn a lot about a culture from its untranslatable words. The Georgian the word 'shemomechama' is used to describe a state of being uncomfortably full during a meal while being simultaneously unable to stop eating. It's not your fault — the food is just too good. This word is commonly uttered at a supra.

Guest at a supra are guided through the drinking by a toastmaster. The tamada, as he's called (and it's always a he), is like a priest of partying, a reverend of revelry, a governor of gluttony. After each of his toasts — and a true supra will have dozens — the diners must follow his lead and empty their wine glass the moment he's done speaking.

I arrive a couple of hours early, eager to see the preparations and behind-the-scenes action. The extended family are already at work. As Beso grills veal kababis (Georgian kebabs), I'm whisked to the 'black kitchen', a partially covered outdoor spot where the baking is done (it's called this because the ceiling usually turns dark from smoke). There, I find Eka and her mother, Lili Jeladze, hard at work kneading dough. They're making khachupuri, the baked cheese bread that's a staple of the Georgian diet. Khachupuri varies by region, the most famous being the Adjara khachupuri, from the Black Sea coast: canoe-shaped and filled with molten, briny white cheese and a raw egg. Here in Racha, the khachupuri of choice is a round double-crust flatbread stuffed with beans, smoked ham, and an all-purpose seasoning called khmeli suneli. "Because Racha was isolated for so long — thanks to the mountainous terrain — two things happened," explains Lili. "We were never invaded and we relied on ingredients that we could preserve for a long time — like beans and cured pork."

This explains why beans feature so often in classic Racha dishes. In the house kitchen, I find Beso's 62-year-old sister, Eteri, alongside his 20-year-old daughter, university student Nino. They're making both chkmeruli (chicken baked over the fire in a thick milk and garlic sauce) and kotnis lobio lorit, which literally means 'clay pot beans with ham'. "This dish is very important to us," Eteri tells as she stirs. "But it doesn't taste as it used to." She explains that when she was young, there were four beans endemic to the region. Then, about 15 years ago, Georgia started trading with other countries and suddenly new types of beans — mass produced abroad — were everywhere, and the traditional beans of Racha vanished. "So, this is what we have to work with now," she adds, shrugging before leading me into another room, where a slab of cured pork hangs from the ceiling. As she cuts off a thick slice, she tells me that they kill a pig here every November, let the meat age until Easter and then use every single part of it.

"For this dish, we mostly just use the..." She pauses for a second, then says "utsvimara" (literally, 'the part where the rain does not go'; otherwise known as the belly).

Previous pages, from left: the mountainous Racha region; the Giorgobiani family table laid for supra, with khvanchkara (local red wine) and a clay pot of lobio (beans) taking centre stage. Left, clockwise from top: Lili preps dinner; Eteri cuts a piece of cured, smoked pork; cows crossing a bridge, Khimshi

Beso takes me to the backyard to see their pigs and cows. When we return, there's a man just arriving: Zauri Davlianidze. Our tamada. But not just any tamada. Zauri is so renowned he gets requests to lead supras in villages far and wide. Fifty-four years old with kindly eyes and salt-and-pepper hair, Zauri has been ruining livers at least twice a week for 25 years.

He explains the rules. Firstly, you don't drink until the tamada finishes a toast. But then you have to drain your glass. It's then instantly refilled by the meriqipe (pronounced 'merry keeper') for the next toast. If he looks at someone and says 'alaverdi', it means he's giving permission for that person to give a toast.

Key to supra etiquette is being able to drink as much as is required without showing signs of degraded facilities. Georgians pride themselves on their ability to imbibe barrels of booze without defiling themselves. It's probably for this reason I find myself a little nervous about the supra, so I mention this to Zauri, thinking he might ease my fears. "Listen," he says, placing a hand on my shoulder, "if you pass out, don't worry. I'll take care of you. It's my job." He nods at the stairway to the second floor, where the supra has already begun. We solemnly ascend.

Time to toast

About eight of us are seated around the table as a procession of plates begins to

materialise. These include large clay pots of the lobiani, the bean stew spiked with small nuggets of sautéed pork belly, and chkmeruli, chicken slathered in a creamy garlic sauce. As I expected, there are plates and plates of khachupuri, but this being a Georgian meal there are also three other types of bread: a dense corn bread, a sesame seed-dotted loaf, and light and flaky canoe-shaped wheat bread. There's also dark-meat chicken in a tangy blackberry sauce, bowls of soft white cheese, plates of barbecued veal on sticks, and a whole dried trout doused in a thick walnut sauce. In fact, there's so much food, Eka, Lili, and Etera begin putting dishes on top of dishes.

Then, of course, there's the wine — litre carafes of khvanchkara, a local, semi-sweet red, and Rachuli Tetra, a dry white aged in underground amphorae. Misho and Eke's 17-year-old son Beso is today's meriqipe. But before any imbibing, or indeed any eating, can start, Beso, the family patriarch, says a few words, telling us how grateful he is to be hosting both new and old friends.

With the preliminaries over, we finally start digging into the layers of food, but the atmosphere is at first surprisingly stiff. Maybe it's because of me, a stranger at the table. About five minutes in, Zauri clears his throat. With a glass of the orange-tinged Rachuli Tetra wine raised, he makes the first of many toasts: "I want to thank everyone here for

Chkmeruli

This classic Georgian chicken dish includes a delightfully creamy, garlicky sauce — just crying out to be mopped up with a hunk of fresh bread

SERVES: 5 TAKES: 50 MINS

INGREDIENTS

- 1 whole young chicken
- 30ml vegetable oil
- 150g butter
- 50g crushed garlic (9-10 cloves)
- 100ml full-fat milk (or 80g sour cream with 20ml water)

METHOD

- 1 Clean and salt the chicken, then place in a large, deep, preheated frying pan with the vegetable oil. Cook on the hob over a medium heat until the skin turns golden brown — this should take 20-30 mins.
- 2 Remove the chicken from the pan, cut into several pieces and set aside. Add the butter to the pan and mix with the oil.
- 3 In a small bowl, mix the

- crushed garlic with 80ml water, then add this to the oil and butter mixture and continue to cook over a medium heat until the garlic has turned lightly golden.
- 4 Stir in the milk (or sour cream and water mixture) and cook until it starts to boil.
- 5 Put the chicken pieces into the pan and mix well to coat the chicken in the sauce. Serve immediately.



Clockwise from top left: veal ready for the barbecue; Eka Gobejishvili rolls butter into the khachupuri dough; local specialities including chvishtari (cornbread) and ekalas pkhali (spinach and walnut appetiser); seasoning chicken before cooking it in a clay pot



From left: the supra begins;
Eteri Giorgobiani drinking tetra
(local white wine)



Every five minutes a new toast is made: to Georgia, to world peace, to living parents, to dead parents, to siblings, to deceased loved ones, to life, to housewives, to women, to men, to nature, and to neighbours

coming, especially the guests who had to travel a great distance to get here.” And with that, the drinking is on. He dispenses with his wine like it’s a shot of medicine, and we follow suit with our relatively small, stemless glasses.

Every five minutes a new toast is made: to Georgia, to world peace, to living parents, to dead parents, to siblings, to deceased loved ones, to life, to housewives, to women, to men, to nature, and to neighbours — not least the guy who shows up halfway through the feast and begins eating. It all becomes a blur.

Eventually, we toast ‘to the children’, which is a cue to swap drinking vessels, exchanging our small glasses for large wooden grails. In between toasts, we chat about random things, and with each glass of wine the talk becomes easier. I gesture towards the mountain of food in front of us and ask where it all came from. “We make nearly everything on the farm,” says Eta. “We only go to supermarkets to get things like napkins and dish soap.” She begins counting off on her fingers. “So butter, wine, cheese, milk, potatoes, beans, herbs, cucumbers, tomatoes, corns, walnuts, pumpkins, grapes, apples, figs, honey, persimmons, and all manner of pork and beef are all made right here.”

“Do you use the brains of the animals you slaughter?” I ask. “Yes, for a dish called khaladetsi — headcheese in aspic.”

“The region really changed in the 1970s,” Eteri adds, “when many people from Racha moved to bigger cities like Tbilisi and Kutaisi to work in factories. This left us with a

dwindled population but we still had this incredible bounty of food here, just for us.”

When I ask if the cooking process has changed much, all the women shake their heads from side to side. “Technology has sped things up a little,” says Eka, “but we only cook very traditional food here — that’s mostly because my husband doesn’t like modern food like salads, pizza, and burgers.”

Hearing himself mentioned, Beso adds, “and the supra is the best opportunity to cook traditional food. I’d do them every single day if I could.” The family hosts up to four a month; the exact number depending on how many members of their extended family have descended on the village.

A couple of hours and several toasts later, we move downstairs to the garden. The remaining food, of which there’s plenty, is transferred too. A neighbour with an accordion arrives. The toasts continue, but the vessel of choice is now a traditional horn, or khantsi, which adds a new dimension to the drinking: you can’t put the curved horn down, so you’re forced to empty your glass quickly. Everyone begins dancing. I find myself in a twirl with the tamada. Nino and Beso are cutting a rug. The awkwardness of a few hours earlier is a distant memory.

I take a break from dancing, and as I sit there, chewing on more khachupuri, having eaten enough to feed a small village, I’m reminded of that untranslatable Georgian word: shemomechama, when you’re full but you can’t stop eating. Yes, I’m definitely experiencing a supra like a true Georgian.



RACHA CLASSICS

Lobiani khachupuri

There are almost a dozen types of a khachupuri (baked cheese bread) in Georgia; the variety found in Racha is stuffed with beans. “You can use butter or oil, but we use lard,” says Eka. “It gives a much richer taste.” The whole process takes about 90 minutes: raising the dough, boiling the beans, and mixing it together takes most of the time, with only 10 minutes given over for baking in the tone, a tandoori-like oven.

Kotnis lobio lorit

Literally ‘clay pot beans with ham’, this is Racha’s most popular dish, thanks to the historical prevalence of beans and the Racha tradition of curing pork to get through the long winters. “The most important thing in making this dish is that it must be prepared in a clay pot,” says 70-year-old Lili Jeladze, who prefers hers without the meat. “It takes longer but it produces a much deeper, stronger flavour.”

Chkmeruli

Essentially chicken in a creamy, milky garlic sauce, chkmeruli is a Racha staple. “I hated it when I was a kid, because, you know, children hate garlic,” says Beso and Eka’s daughter, Nino. “But now I love it. I like the creaminess and the tenderness of the chicken. I’ve tried to make my own but it never turns out like when my mom and grandmother do it. So instead, I come home as often as possible from Tbilisi and they always make it when I’m here.”
See page 70 for recipe.



At the table with Zauri Davlianidze and Besika Giorgobiani

TABLE TALK

Zauri Davlianidze

A PROFESSIONAL FEASTER IF EVER THERE WAS ONE, 54-YEAR-OLD ZAURI HAS BEEN A TAMADA FOR OVER 25 YEARS, OVERSEEING GEORGIAN-STYLE CELEBRATIONS AT LEAST TWICE A WEEK

What’s the key to a good feast?

The food must be good, the wine must be good, and the tamada must be good — it’s the triumvirate of an excellent Georgian feast. If one of those is off, it really dampens the spirits of the supra.

What makes a bad feast?

When the tamada gets drunk before the others at the table. The tamada must inspire good conversation around the table, and it’s harder to do that when you’re drunk.

What’s the secret to holding your booze?

It really depends on your mood. Sometimes when I’m really happy because I’m in a good mood, I’ll have too much emotion at a supra and I’ll drink more than I should. It’s all about balance, actually. Not too happy, not too sad, somewhere in the middle.

Have you ever had to kick someone out of a supra because they were too drunk?

Oh yes, of course. It often happens when someone shows up mid feast and they feel they

need to catch up to the others, so they end up drinking too much, too fast.

Any advice for first-time feasters?

Don’t be nervous. The only person that should be nervous is me, the tamada. The key is to try to imagine the people around the table with you are old family members and dear friends — because we all will seem like it by the end of the feast. If you do that, it makes things easier for you and thus easier for me.

What’s one rule of the supra no one should break?

Listen to the tamada. Listen to each toast. Don’t interrupt and be respectful to everyone at the table, even when you don’t agree with something said in the toast. And then, after, drink all the wine in your glass. You have to drink as much as possible.

Why are you so in demand?

I’ve been doing this at least two times per week for the last 25 years. I love it.

How’s your liver?

Let’s not talk about that [laughs]. ●