



THIS NATION'S
UNIQUE CHEESE
CULTURE WAS
FLATTENED BY
DECADES OF
INVASION AND
OCCUPATION.
BUT IN MOUNTAIN
VILLAGES AND
REMOTE VALLEYS,
HANDMADE TRA-
DITIONS ENDURE

The
LOST
CHEESES
of GEORGIA



BY **DAVID FARLEY**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **SIMON BAJADA**





Zurab CHKADUA WAS ACTING AS THE TAMADA,

the toastmaster, for a traditional Georgian *supra* at his house in Lakhamula village in the Svaneti region of northwestern Georgia. The job is sort of like being both a pastor and a quarterback for a dinner party. He had just instructed us to raise our glasses and give thanks. “To our guests at the table,” he said, as we downed ample portions of amber wine in a single go. “We must also be grateful for this treasure God has given us.” He meant the cheese, which his wife, Ira Ansiani, makes in her kitchen, about 10 feet from where we were sitting.

Calling cheese a God-given treasure did not feel even a little bit like hyperbole because this wasn’t any ordinary cheese. *Narchvi* is a rich, creamy cow’s-milk variety with a deeply funky aroma, a buttery texture, a sweet initial flavor, and a lingering saline quality. It’s aged in wooden boxes for up to a year, which is when it takes on a sharp, nutty flavor. Ansiani might be the only person in the country who still makes it.

She had used it to prepare two pizza-size *khachapuri*, cheese-filled breads that are a staple of Georgian cuisine. One, which had a satisfying sour intensity, featured year-old *narchvi*. The other had fresher *narchvi* spiked with hemp seeds, another half-forgotten tradition in this corner of the country, which gave the *khachapuri* a lovely crunch.

Lakhamula was the last stop on my weeklong tour around the country with Ana Mikadze-Chikvaidze, who is known in local food circles as the “mother of Georgian cheese.” Until recently, Georgians had recognized only four “traditional” styles of cheese: semisoft *sulguni*, briny *imeruli*, *guda* cheese (completely unrelated, confusingly, to Dutch Gouda), and *karkhunli*, which translates to “factory cheese.” To a foreigner,

From left:
Cheesemaker Ira
Ansiani milks a cow
in her village of
Lakhamula before
sampling the curds
made from the milk.

the names might sound exotic, but imagine living in a world in which we had access only to Colby, American, Swiss, and provolone.

In the past few years, though, Mikadze-Chikvaidze has helped introduce the people of her country to their lost cheese heritage, uncovering traditions that have been practiced in isolated mountain villages for generations, and bringing them to the masses. I had met Mikadze-Chikvaidze at a winery here in Georgia a few months earlier, where she told me about her mission and invited me to join her on a visit to some of these village cheesemakers. “Come,” she said that day at the winery, waving her hand as if we were going to go just then. “I will give you a preview of what people will someday see: that Georgia is a great cheesemaking country.”

FOUR MONTHS LATER, WE WERE DRIVING OUT OF Tbilisi, the capital. Georgia is wedged in the Caucasus mountains between Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia, and our destination was Andriatsminda, a Georgian village about 12 miles from the Turkish border. After three hours of driving, we turned off the main road and onto a steep, bumpy dirt path to the village, a jumble of rickety wooden houses clinging to the top of a mountain.

Cheesemaker Galina Inasaridze, 65 years old, ushered us into her house. She had been busy folding cheese into *khinkali*—doughy, golf-ball-size dumplings. I stole a piece from her assembly line. It had the texture of aged parmigiano, complete with crunchy crystals, but with a flavor reminiscent of a sharp cheddar. “This one is *pashvis nagbiani kveli*,” Mikadze-Chikvaidze said. It was a cow’s-milk cheese that had been aged for three months in the stomach of a goat. *Khinkali* are usually meat-filled, but hers had only cheese, with an irresistibly creamy texture.

While this particular cheese is rare in Georgia, it wasn’t even the main reason Mikadze-Chikvaidze took me there. An hour later, we walked through the ramshackle village to Inasaridze’s nearby farm to watch the laborious process of making a cheese called *temli*. After separating the curds from the whey, she and her neighbors warmed the curds over a fire until they congealed into a pliable mass. At this point, one



of the women began moving the cheese around her hands with a confident pedaling motion, flipping the thick ribbon in a spinning loop. She pulled and stretched. She spun and spun as the loop got bigger and thinner. After about seven minutes of stretching and pedaling, she dunked the whole thing in cold water, and it separated into little 3-foot-long strings reminiscent of thick bucatini noodles. She hung the strings of cheese across a horizontal wooden beam, where they would rest until the next day, when she would dip them in heavy cream and stuff into a small clay pot. At this point the cheese would be ready to eat, or to age for up to a year.

“There is no other cheese like this in world,” Mikadze-Chikvaidze said. “And only Galina and her two neighbors know how to make it.” She then rattled off the names of some restaurants in Tbilisi that were newly serving it.

Inasaridze told me that the remote location of her village was the only reason tenili existed at all. “The Turks occupied this region for centuries. They erased some aspects of our culture, but they never made it

Clockwise from above: A feast of flatbreads, cheeses, and chicken salad with celery and pomegranate at Ansiani’s home; large wheels of cheese aging; Salema Khan, Ansiani’s mother (left), stands with the “mother of Georgian cheese,” Ana Mikadze-Chikvaidze.

all the way up here,” she said. “So some of our cheeses were able to survive.”

The four-and-half-century Turkish Ottoman Empire fell in 1922, but the Soviets showed up that same year. “The socialist economy didn’t have room for the cheese industry—at least, not small-batch, artisanal, aged cheese,” Mikadze-Chikvaidze said. “Sulguni and imeruli were mass-produced and churned out the next day. It was all about feeding the people, not about savoring food. That was considered too bourgeois,” she said. “In the Soviet period, and a decade or so after, there was the attitude that if it wasn’t for sale at the market, then it didn’t exist. It’s a very Soviet mentality. When I’d turn up in a village and ask about artisanal cheese, they’d stare at me blankly and then point me to the supermarket to get some sulguni or guda. People were afraid of being punished for making something that wasn’t within the system.”

After the fall of the Soviet Union, in 1991, independence came to Georgia. So did a lot of uncertainty, poverty, and corruption—Georgians call the decade



the “dark ’90s.” Unexpectedly, around the turn of the millennium, the country’s wine industry took a turn toward the artisanal. Wine, like cheese, had languished under the Soviets, and winemakers continued producing mostly rotgut through the ’90s. But a growing scene of winemakers has returned to the ancient tradition of carefully aging the wine in below-ground clay amphorae. Today many Georgian bottles are sought after by natural-wine fans around the world—the kind of thing that pops up at Los Angeles grain bowl places and Parisian neo-bistros.

This was the model Mikadze-Chikvaïdze had in mind when she founded an annual cheese festival in 2010. One year later, she set up a cheese shop in Tbilisi, the first of its kind in the country, and five years after that she opened a small workshop outside of town where she produces some of these old-fashioned cheeses herself. Now there are a handful of shops selling handmade cheeses in the capital, and an upscale supermarket chain called Good Will has begun to stock them as well.

MIKADZE-CHIKVAÏDZE SEARCHED FOR *sushvela* for seven years—in the wrong place, it turns out. We were rattling down the road in Kartli, a region about two hours south of Tbilisi. “I’d heard about this cheese that was made in the region of Adjara, on the Black Sea coast,” she said. “I scoured the entire region for years, turning up in villages and asking if anyone had

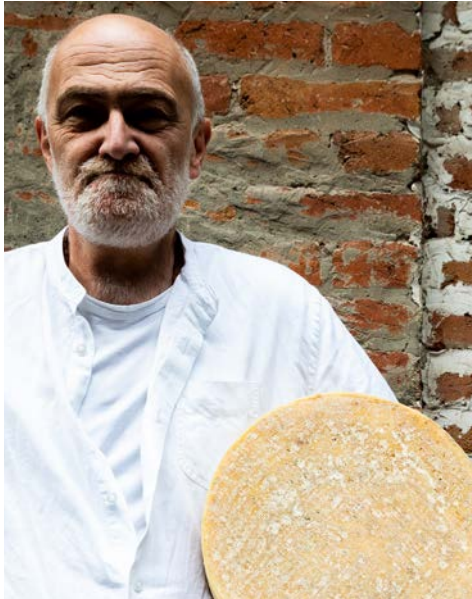
heard of it. They said I was crazy. But just before I was ready to give up, one guy said to me that my only hope was to find one of the Adjaruli communities that had been relocated after the big 1989 landslide that took out a few villages there.” She paused. “So that’s this place,” pointing to a cluster of two-story detached houses in the middle of the Disveli Plateau.

Here we met Meri Makaharadze, the head of a six-woman cheesemaking co-op called the Disveli Female Cooperation. They make and sell the well-known types such as *sulguni*, but we were there for their *shushvela*. Makaharadze’s entire village, Tsablana, was destroyed by the 1989 landslide and the government relocated most of the residents here, about 250 miles east. The people still speak with an Adjaruli accent and eat traditional foods. Case in point: Within moments of entering her home, we were greeted with an Adjaruli-style *khachapuri*, along with *sinori*, balls of bread rolled up around cheese and doused in a garlic sauce. They are something not found outside Adjara very often, and these were made with the *shushvela*.

After we ate, Makaharadze waved me into the kitchen to show how *shushvela* is made. The root of the word is “to stew” in Georgian, and the name became obvious as Makaharadze stirred a plus-size pot over medium heat, adding cornstarch to

Above: An assistant at cheesemaker Galina Inasaridze’s home pulls hot Meskhetian khachapuri from the stone hearth. Below: *Tenili*, a cheese made by stretching pliable curds into thin ribbons.





thicken the creamy mixture. She poured the oozing mixture into vaguely heart-shaped molds, in which the cheese ages for up to a year.

Next, she began making something called *borano*, a traditional dish from Adjara that she makes with the cheese. It's a rich, buttery dip for bread, often eaten in the morning by farmers to help sustain them through the day. She stirred melted butter into the slowly melting cheese in a saucepan. "I've been making this [cheese] for as long as I can remember. Since I was girl," she said. "We never thought anyone would be interested in shushvela, so we just made it for ourselves. Then Ana convinced us to take it to the cheese festival in 2016, and everything began to change."

A few minutes later we returned the table, where the *borano* was waiting for us. I tore off a chunk of bread and plunged it in. The *shushvela* tasted as a wild, aged cheese should: a funky, musty aroma with a deeply rich and creamy texture. I could see how a typical Georgian, used to consuming the four types of mass-produced young cheese all his or her life, might think this akin to tasting cheese for the first time.

"The thing that baffled me," Mikadze-Chikvaidze said, "was that Georgia is an ancient agricultural society. One theory is that our name comes from the ancient Greek, *Georgios*, meaning 'farmer.' We have nine regions and each one has a distinct and rich food and wine culture. But there was no diversity in cheese. It didn't make sense to me. So that's what set me off on this quest."

There is plentiful historical evidence too. In the Georgia National Museum in Tbilisi, display cases exhibit ancient cheesemaking tools from 8,000 years ago. The first evidence of cheesemaking was found in nearby Turkey, so it's no huge leap to assume craft also found its way just east of there to what is now Georgia.

A FEW DAYS LATER, MIKADZE-CHIKVAIDZE and I sat down at a hip Tbilisi restaurant called Shavi Lomi. The owner, Meri Gubeladze, is a local celebrity chef with a weekly TV show. She was soon sitting at our table presenting a cou-



ple of cheese-forward plates. One was a fondue of melted *tenili*. This is a common dish in the capital, but the complexity of the cheese still comes as a shock to many of her customers. "It's been challenging to introduce an especially aged, stinky cheese to Georgians," she said. "[Until recently] we had very safe cheeses. They didn't smell. They didn't taste funky. This dish isn't a bestseller, but I am certain that over time Georgians will come to love it."

Another restaurant, *Barbarestan*, has begun to introduce to some regional dishes that are traditionally made with flavorful old-fashioned cheese, using a once-obscure cookbook from the late 19th century for inspiration. Owners Maka Jabuti and Zviadi Qurasbediani sat with us at their restaurant the following evening as a server drizzled melted *dambalkhacho* at a tableside cart. The cheese, which is infused with tarragon, had been discovered by Mikadze-Chikvaidze in a village in the northeastern region of Mtiuleti just a few years ago. It was thick and creamy, with a slightly sour taste. The sharpness of the tarragon emerged on the palate after a few seconds. "Our aim is to present Georgian cuisine in an old way," Qurasbediani said. "So Ana's cheese is very congruent with our menu and philosophy. This dish is old, but 99 percent of Georgians don't know it, so in this way, it's like a new dish."

"Hopefully not for long," Mikadze-Chikvaidze said. "The world is finding out about our wine, and soon enough, Georgia will be known as a great cheese nation too. I'm certain of it." ■

Clockwise from top left: David Gognadze at the Tbilisi cheese shop; *tenili* cheese in the process of being pulled into strands; Galina Inasaridze's cheese-stuffed *khinkali* dumplings.



GEORGIAN CHEESE BREAD (MESKHEIAN KHACHAPURI)

SERVES 4

Active: 15 min. Total: 45 min.

Georgian bakers achieve this cheese-filled flatbread's light and airy texture using a simple, unleavened dough that is stretched paper-thin, then layered with melted butter like strudel or philo. But according to Carla Capalbo's, from whose book, *Tasting Georgia: A Food and Wine Journey in the Caucasus*, this recipe was adapted, a ready-made, all-butter puff pastry is a quick and toothsome substitute. To approximate the texture and flavor of the local cheese, a mixture of mozzarella, feta, and Emmental or Jarlsberg is used.

All-purpose flour, for dusting
 One 14-oz. box frozen all-butter puff pastry, thawed in the fridge
 3 oz. low-moisture mozzarella, shredded (¾ cup)
 1¼ oz. feta cheese, coarsely crumbled (½ cup)
 1½ oz. Emmental cheese, coarsely grated (½ cup)
 1 large egg yolk, beaten with 1 tsp. water

1 Place a heavy, flat or overturned baking sheet or a baking steel or stone in the center of the oven and preheat to 425°F.

2 In a medium bowl, stir the mozzarella, feta, and Emmental to combine. Set aside.

3 Lightly flour a rolling pin and a clean work surface, then unfold the puff

pastry. Give the dough a few gentle rolls just to smooth out the folds, then use a sharp paring knife to trim the dough into a 9-inch square. (Re-freeze or refrigerate the remaining dough and reserve it for another use.) Spread the cheese in an even layer atop the square, then pick up two opposing corners of the dough and bring them into the center, pinching the tips together to seal. Repeat with the remaining corners. Press the dough down to expel any pockets of air in the parcel, then pinch the seams firmly together so they don't come apart during baking.

4 Gently flip the pastry over onto a sheet of parchment paper. Brush the surface with the egg yolk mixture, then immediately slide the bread and parchment onto the preheated baking sheet in the oven. Bake until the top is a deep golden brown and the dough is cooked through, 25–30 minutes.

5 Remove and let cool slightly before cutting the khachapuri into wedges. Serve hot.

CHEESE AND HERB-STUFFED DUMPLINGS (KHINKALI QVELIT)

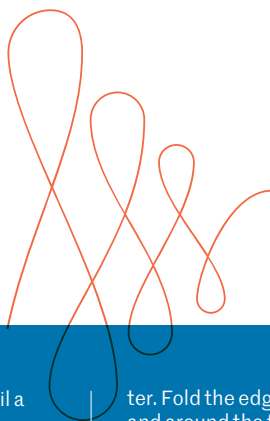
MAKES 25 PHOTOP.TK

Active: 1 hr. 30 min. • Total: 2 hr. 15 min.

Made of twisted knobs of dough and stuffed with either seasoned meat, fresh curds, or prepared cheeses, these boiled dumplings which originated in the mountains are now widespread across the regions of Georgia. Locals sometimes serve the dumplings with a side of ground black pepper for dipping.

4 cups (1¼ lb.) all-purpose flour, divided, plus more for dusting
 1¼ tsp. kosher salt, plus more as needed
 2 cups (1 lb.) ricotta, excess moisture strained and discarded
 ½ cup (4 oz.) sour cream
 ¼ cup finely chopped cilantro
 ¼ cup finely chopped fresh mint
 3 large eggs, beaten
 Freshly ground black pepper

1 In a large bowl, use a wooden spoon to stir 3¾ cups flour, 1¼ teaspoon salt,



and 1¼ cups of warm water until a dough begins to form.

2 Lightly flour a clean work surface, then turn the dough out onto it. Knead until firm and smooth, about 6 minutes, adding the remaining flour 1 tablespoon at a time as needed if the dough feels sticky. Wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate for 40 minutes.

3 Meanwhile, make the filling: In a medium bowl, stir the ricotta, sour cream, cilantro, mint, eggs, and a pinch each of salt and pepper until combined. Set aside.

4 Retrieve the dough and form it into 25 equal balls (1 ounce each, or about the size of a ping-pong ball). Use a rolling pin to flatten one piece into a 5½-inch disk. Hold the disk in the palm of one hand and spoon 2 tablespoons of filling into the cen-

ter. Fold the edges of the dough up and around the filling, pressing out any air pockets and creating pleats as you go, until sealed. Grasp the top of the dumpling where the pleats meet, and pinch and twist to seal and form a top knot. Set the dumpling on a floured work surface or a baking sheet lined with lightly floured parchment paper, then repeat with the remaining dough and filling.

5 Bring a large pot of salted water to a rolling boil. Working in batches of 4 or 5, hold the dumplings by their knots and carefully drop them into the pot. Stir gently, then cook until the dumplings float to the top and the dough is tender, 7–8 minutes. Use a slotted spoon or spider strainer to remove the dumplings to a large serving platter as they finish cooking. Serve hot, sprinkled with more black pepper if desired.

ROLLED FLATBREAD WITH BUTTER AND CHEESE (SINORI)

SERVES 6

Active: 30 min. • Total: 1 hr.

Sinori, a rich dish from the Adjara region often served at breakfast, is made by smothering rolls of flatbread in butter and *nadughi*, a fresh Georgian cheese. In Georgia, Meri Makaharadze prepared her version using the more rustic, aged *shushvela* cheese. To approximate its aged flavor and aroma, this adapted version is topped with a sprinkling of Emmental.

Two 10-oz. packages lavash, trimmed and cut into 2x10-inch strips

1 lb. unsalted butter

1 garlic clove, minced (1 tsp.)

1 lb. whole-milk ricotta (1½ cups)

Kosher salt

Freshly ground black pepper

2½ oz. low-moisture mozzarella, coarsely shredded (½ cup)

2½ oz. Emmental cheese, coarsely shredded (½ cup)

1 Set a rack near the top of the oven and preheat to 375°F.

2 In a small pot, melt the butter over medium-low heat. Add the garlic and cook just until fragrant, 2–3 minutes, then stir in the ricotta. Remove from the heat, season with kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste, and keep warm while you prepare the lavash.

3 Roll the lavash strips into short rolls and place them, cut side up, in a 10-inch cast-iron skillet. (They should be tightly packed enough that they do not unroll, but not crushed or flattened. You may not need all of the lavash). Pour the butter mixture evenly over the rolls so that it covers the lavash just about two-thirds of the way. Sprinkle the top of the rolls with the cheeses, tent with foil, and bake until the cheese is melted and bubbling, about 15 minutes. Uncover and continue cooking to lightly brown and crisp the edges of the lavash if desired, 10–12 minutes more. Serve warm.

