stay hungry

Nothing has ever come easy for the former Soviet republic of Georgia, but it is still a place of fascinating cuisine, centuries-old bathhouses, and steadfast good humor. On a visit to Tbilisi and the nearby mountains of the Caucasus, Gary Shteyngart learns that resistance comes in many flavors

Photographs by Tom Parker

Grilled vegetables in bazhe (walnut paste) at Ninia's Garden in Tbilisi

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: SpaceFarms, Georgia's first vertical farm, at Stamba Hotel; Apotheka, a bar in a former pharmacy; the reception area at Stamba Hotel in Tbilisi; the city's iconic Georgian Orthodox Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition

Clockwise from top left: Meriko Gubeladze at her restaurant Shavi Lomi; the Writers' House of Georgia, a Tbilisi literary center in an old mansion that is home to Café Littera; a server at Café Littera; a lunch spread featuring khachapuri at the Kitchen restaurant at Rooms Hotel Tbilisi; the reception area at Stamba Hotel

Every child who grew up in the northern wastes of the Soviet Union, as I did, remembers an early encounter with a local Georgian restaurant: the surprising combinations of walnut and garlic in chicken satsivi; the kick of cherry plum in kharcho, a beef soup that made Leningrad's cold cabbage concoctions seem like a bad dream. In a world of heavy, buttery food and even heavier ideology, a trip to a Georgian restaurant could offer a Russian child a taste of life and community and tradition (and for the adults, some decent wine). When I was about six, my family took a flight—my first—to Sukhumi, part of Abkhazia, which since 2008 has been occupied by pro-Russian forces. The palm trees, the temperate but sticky heat, the roadside cheese pies and candies, the smiles on the faces of old ladies...if anything led me to become a traveler, it was that visit.

Today the signs at the airport proclaim, "Tbilisi, the city that loves you." And visitors seem to love it right back. The capital of Georgia, and the unofficial capital of the Caucasus region, Tbilisi has become a tourist magnet and a club destination for European youth. Georgia is one of the great ancient wine centers of the world and the contemporary scene has been growing in recent years. But even more than wine, Georgian food has become one of the country's great cultural exports. The cuisine offers a truly distinct blend of unexpected flavors (where else does the walnut play such an important role?) while also being visually arresting, with frigate-size cheese boats and soup dumplings as big as your head.

I have come to Tbilisi not only to stuff myself but also to attend the Zeg Storytelling Festival, an event bringing together culture-meisters from around the world. One panel, Delicious Resistance, features two female Tbilisi chefs—Tekuna Gachechiladze, the founder of the lovely Café Littera, and Meriko Gubeladze, the owner of what will soon become two of my favorite restaurants in Tbilisi: Shavi Lomi and Ninia's Garden. They discuss how Georgian food provided a way to oppose Soviet rule. "They took over us, but on food we took over," Tekuna says, citing the "vibrant flavors as opposed to boring ones" that the rich, spicy, garlic-laden cuisine injected into the Soviet kitchen.

"Food was supposed to be healthy," Meriko says of the culinary ideology that came with Soviet rule, "but not for pleasure." Of course, at a time when Russia continues to illegally occupy about 20 percent of Georgian territory—and Georgia's own journey toward democracy has suffered at the hands of the sometimes Russia-aligned Georgian Dream party, which has ruled since 2012—the idea of resistance through pleasure might seem fantastical to some. But when a nation fights for its freedom, there is more at stake than just religion and borders. There is the beauty of culinary tradition, of the rituals of the table, of the complexity of wine made through ancient methods that exist nowhere else.

Pleasure can be a weapon too.

Clockwise from top left: The film director Levan Gabriadze inside the Rezo Gabriadze Marionette Theater, which has a clock tower known as the leaning tower of Tbilisi; lamb fillet and charred vegetables at Otsy, in Tbilisi's Old Town; the city's Gudiashvili Square; the dining room in Ninia's Garden

Many foreign encounters with Georgian cuisine center on khachapuri, the venerable cheese-filled bread boat that sometimes comes with an egg cracked over it. Not far behind is khinkali, a large-and-in-charge kind of soup dumpling. (To eat it with anything but your hands is considered disgraceful.) The question of who serves the best khinkali in Tbilisi—as determined by the fillings, the spices, and the structural integrity of the twisted knobs of dough that form the shell—is a subject of heated dispute among locals.

The current favorite seems to be Café Daphna, a sleek new place in the center of the city. Here waiters in leather-like aprons serve me plates of this national treasure. The beef khinkali is a meaty herbal bath of coriander and parsley, while the potato and cheese version tastes like a sweet and savory dessert, especially with a heavy dollop of butter sauce. A khinkali can be eaten in a number of ways, but I like to turn it over by its doughy knob and sprinkle black pepper over its flat bottom. (This is definitely a sensuous snack.) Some of the juice runs down my fingers, which I remedy by keeping the dumpling close to my mouth, ready to catch the steady drip.

Blissed out on khinkali, I feel the need for a shvitz. From Istanbul to the Caspian, this region is known for its high-quality bathhouses. I head past the picturesque wood balconies of the Old Town to the Abanotubani, or Bath District, where the underground hot sulfur springs have kept such visitors as Alexandre Dumas and Alexander Pushkin happy and clean. I choose the Persian-flavored, blue-tiled architecture of the Orbeliani baths. Before I know it, I am soaking in a private mosaicked bath, the smell of sulfur surrounding me. A large Georgian man walks in to bathe me. After some friendly waterboarding, he begins to scrub my skin with what looks like a coarse sponge lost within a giant soap bubble. He takes off a piece of my chest, but the bleeding will stop eventually, and I feel cleaner than I have ever been.

I have been speaking in English in deference to Georgia's difficult recent relationship with Russia, but the bath attendant seems to smell the Soviet residue on me and asks in Russian where I'm from.

"Leningrad," I tell him.

"Which neighborhood?"

"Moskovskiy Prospekt."

"My brother lives there!"

It is hard to escape the intersection of food and hospitality with politics in Georgia, which for centuries has been a target of Russian and Persian aggression, in addition to being the birthplace of Joseph Stalin. I am sitting in one of the prettiest courtyards in Tbilisi, if not the world: the old Writers' House of Georgia, now also home to Café Littera, Tekuna's restaurant. I am dining with Giorgi Lomsadze, a local journalist, and some of his friends. There's dry white Mtsvane in a bucket of ice and veal tartare with Georgian truffles. But the ghosts of the past are never far in Tbilisi, even on a

glorious summer afternoon, with the restaurant's cats traipsing past the shrubbery and a lone palm tree. "Beria"—one of Stalin's henchmen—"had a torture dungeon on the other side of this wall," Giorgi tells me. "Rumor was he put it there so that the writers could hear the others scream." This is often the rhythm of a Georgian evening: friendship, the clinking of glasses, and horror close by.

As the days pass, my beltline expands with help from many new friends. At the city's restaurants I chase all the garlic and walnut and pork fat with chilled summer qvevri wine made by a Georgian method that involves pressing the full uncircumcised grape, skins and stalks included, into an ancient jug where it is fermented for around half a year.

My local friend Marco North, a Brooklyn boy married to a Georgian girl, takes me to Shavi Lomi, in Didube-Chugureti, one of the gentrifying neighborhoods across the river from the action of Rustaveli Avenue (the main drag), the Old Town, and the prestigious hilltop neighborhoods above the city. Shavi Lomi, or Black Lion, is the mainstay of Meriko Gubeladze from the Delicious Resistance panel. The restaurant has a warren of cozy rooms, but despite the heat, everyone has chosen the sweetly lit courtyard. Marco orders a 2021 qvevri from Rotchco's Vineyards, which he says has a "dry, quenching mouth grip." It's like a blast of air-conditioning; qvevri has a sophisticated, slightly sour taste that suggests a Manzanilla sherry. We share a Georgian pkhali plate, a collection of dips and vegetables, alongside bread and nadugi cheese, which tastes like a cousin of sheep's milk ricotta, and a simple lula kebab with the minced meat impaled on sticks of cinnamon that haunt every bite.

I also try Meriko's new place, Ninia's Garden, where an angel fountain outside serves as a meeting point for cats and one inquisitive toddler. I eat a chicken liver paté with beetroot confit that may, despite its Georgian provenance, be the most Jewish dish in existence. Equally creamy is a rabbit confit in bazhe, the ubiquitous Georgian walnut paste, and ghomi, which tastes like porridge in a fried crust.

My favorite Georgian dish may be chicken shkmeruli, which is fried in a rich sauce of garlic and milk. ("It's a garlic with chicken," a Georgian friend of mine jokes.) Throughout my trip I am presented with strange Westernized versions meant for the garlic-phobic. Luckily, Salobie Bia, right in the middle of Rustaveli Avenue and close to the wonderful collection of Niko Pirosmani paintings at the Georgian National Museum, offers one of the most succulent shkmeruli out there. (The garlic-milk bath is perfect for bread dipping.)

Another restaurant that scores high on the authenticity meter is Archive, in the basement of an old caravansary by the banks of the Kura River. The focus is local wine (there is a museum devoted to it before you enter the premises), but the food is just as brilliant. "Can I see a wine list?" Marco asks. The answer from the sommelier is a blunt no. Instead a long discussion leads us to a bottle of Tevza winery's Crazy Alive red qvevri. The wine is sweet and sour, leading with the taste of cherries and not light on the tannins. It is, in two

words, crazy alive. We order the Georgian ham board, which features a thick, delectable lard we agree works perfectly with the almost oily undertones of the wine. A garlicky bite of lobio, a stew of kidney beans and walnuts, will linger on my tongue for days.

It is almost impossible to stay in Tbilisi for a week without venturing into the velvety green mountains that surround it. Georgia is one of those rare small countries blessed with everything from beaches to ski slopes, but I have a more nostalgic side trip in mind.

I hire a driver and head past Stalin's hometown of Gori to the resort town of Borjomi, home of the eponymous carbonated beverage that was once one of the Soviet Union's most widely known exports. (It was also beloved by Stalin.) Borjomi was definitely part of my childhood "delicious resistance" against the boredom of all things Russian, but it is an acquired taste at best. The bubbly water is salty with a sulfuric aftertaste, as if your taste buds have visited the Bath District. I had always wanted to take the waters of Borjomi, as Chekhov and other elites did. The drive is lovely, aside from the Stalin museum it passes in Gori. The glistening cupolas of village churches line the highway, until you reach the cow-strewn plains beneath the stegosaurus ridges that hide the town of Borjomi.

I check in to the Golden Tulip, a small hotel built as a residence for the Persian ambassador to Russia in 1892. It drips in period details, from the ornate breakfast room to the courtyard fountain surrounded by blue tiles and framed by mountains. I walk past signs in Russian touting cures for hemorrhoids and settle down at an old country place called Pesvebi for a lunch of grilled quail and mutton ribs. The fatty mutton seems to go down especially well with the help of the Borjomi water, not to mention a large mug of draft beer.

The Golden Tulip is just steps away from Borjomi Central Park, which leads directly to the hot springs of the water I so love. The former Borjomi bottling plant hosts a great exhibition of photographs, including one of a member of the Roman clan sitting next to a stag's head. The park has shaded allées that evoke 19th-century strolls. A woman offers me a free cup of Borjomi water straight from the source. Drinking it without carbonation or refrigeration is not for the faint of heart. The walk to the hot springs takes about an hour, during which the gentility of the allées gives way to the ruins of bizarre Soviet buildings of immense proportions. I try to peek over the fences to figure out what they were. Corn factory? Socialist moose-breeding center?

The hot springs themselves relax me immediately. There are three modern pools to capture them, each filled almost entirely with Russian tourists ignoring the "Don't jump into pool" sign. My skin tingles with salt and memory; it is like being inside a giant bottle of Borjomi. Despite the hum of Russian all around, when I speak it to the kid selling water and sodas, he says, "Speak English please."

"It is too late to drink Borjomi," goes a line from an old Soviet movie, "when your kidneys have failed"—meaning that a situation is beyond repair. But the kid's insistence on English instead of Russian gives me hope. The delicious resistance continues.

Clockwise from above: Inside a guest room at Stamba Hotel; the Golden Tulip, a historic hotel in the resort town of Borjomi; at Ninia's Garden

Tbilisi is not a large capital and a week spent here will inevitably bring up familiar faces. This is not only because of the city's size but also because of the hospitality and affability of its citizens. There is a vast population of stray and semi-stray dogs, and it is not uncommon to see a man with a hairbrush gently grooming the pelt of an enormous husky that is clearly not his. Perpetually full of wine and khinkali, one stumbles around the Dry Bridge Market looking at Soviet and pre-Soviet bric-a-brac, postcards from servicemen sent during the Second World War, drinking horns large enough to accommodate magnums, and Brezhnev-era Elton John LPs.

I meet my friend Sheraz Gasri, the French ambassador to Georgia, for dinner at Otsy in the Old Town. She brings along friends who have helped design Rooms and Stamba, two of the finest hotels in Tbilisi. "This is the best food in the city," the ambassador tells us. Upon tasting the "crying tomato," which bursts with herbed cream of cashew, I have to agree. It's like being back in Georgia as a little kid. Everything tasted so bright and fresh back then. Even a six-year-old knows the juice of an heirloom tomato should run down his cheek.

A breeze picks up. It is the perfect night to dine on a terrace with views of the so-called leaning tower of Tbilisi, a deliberately askew clock tower that belongs to the whimsical theater complex of the famed puppeteer Revaz "Rezo" Gabriadze.

"To democracy," the ambassador toasts.

"To love and freedom," we reply.

stay

→ TBILISI

Like Georgia itself, the country's hotels represent a confluence of continents and eras. For a taste of Soviet architecture with contemporary flair, look to **Stamba Hotel,** whose Brutalist design and famed casino draw glamorous international crowds. Stamba and its more laid-back twin, **Rooms Hotel Tbilisi,** both occupy a complex that once held a printing press in the buzzy food and fashion district of Vera. Across the river in trendy Marjanishvili, another sibling property, **Fabrika,** in a former sewing factory, gives guests front-row access to Tbilisi's vibrant street-art scene. Meanwhile, the nearly century-old **Tbilisi Marriott Hotel** showcases the city's Western influences with a façade, a patio, and balconies that look straight out of Haussmann's Paris.

→ BORJOMI

The **Golden Tulip Borjomi** embodies the spa town's long-standing resort culture. Opened in 1892, the hotel provides access to the Borjomi Nature Reserve and the storied mineral hot spring baths, where guests can pamper themselves like generations of writers and artists before them.

Clockwise from top left: Curator Consignment, a boutique in Rockland; grilled sardines at The Alna Store, near Camden; an oarlock cast at the Apprenticeshop in Rockland; bartender Steel Kilgore at the Norumbega hotel in Camden

Opposite page: The Marshall Point Lighthouse overlooks the southwest stretch of Penobscot Bay