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Georgian Wine Finds U.S. Savior

By The Moscow Times

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Georgia exported 15 million bottles of wine last year, plummeting from 59.3 million in 2005, before Russia's ban. **Vladimir Filonov**

TBILISI, Georgia — John Wurdeman uncorks a bottle of Pheasant's Tears, holds it to the sun, and drinks with a smile.

Vintners describe the longhaired American artist, with his imaginatively named wine, as an unlikely savior of their industry in the Black Sea country of Georgia.

He started the business after a Russian trade embargo, which threatened the existence of 35 existing wineries. Georgia makes some 90 million liters a year and previously exported 80 percent to Russia.

"There is an 8,000-year wine-making tradition, and there are 520 wine grapes here," Wurdeman says. "We have the best wine story on the face of this planet."

Georgia, a republic of 4.6 million people, once on the Silk Road, expelled four Russian

servicemen it accused of espionage in 2006. In response, Vladimir Putin's government cut road, rail, air and sea links, blocking imports of mineral water and wine. Local boutique winemakers are fighting back by making better-quality products — what Wurdeman calls "amber wine," not white wine — that can be exported at a premium outside Russia.

He is producing 40,000 bottles a year of his distinctive wines, named after a legend that only specially made wine can make pheasants cry. They are for sale at $25 to $45 each in nine countries, including the United States, Canada and Hong Kong. The company, founded in 2006, plans an annual 60,000 bottlings by the end of this year and aims to boost this to 120,000 when possible.

Wurdeman, 35, says it is "a failed strategy" for local wineries to mass-produce poor copies of Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, Bordeaux or Burgundy.

Tourists prefer the products in his organic shop, which shuns factory methods and uses traditional qvevris, large clay vessels used to store and ferment, with extended skin contact for both reds and whites. His dry whites include Rkatsiteli, Mtsvane and Kisi; the dry reds are called Saperavi and Tavkeri.

Wurdeman is preparing for the September harvest and says seven varieties of grape are used in Pheasant's Tears, as well as an experimental planting of 340 variants. He is busy in his stone-built estate in Sighnangi, laying tables for visitors in a small sampling restaurant that serves local cuisine, then rushing off to the village of Tibaani, where his vineyards grow.

He has tousled long hair and talks fluent Georgian to his staff and children. The company also organizes wine tours and Kakhetian cuisine tasting.

Many years before he started making wine, John Wurdeman was a 15-year-old aspiring artist from Virginia. He was rummaging through CDs in a record shop hoping to find some alternative world music when he came across one of Georgian folk songs. The disc changed his life.

He became fascinated by Georgia and arrived in Tbilisi in 1995, going to a feast where the same folk group was singing. Wurdeman is now married to a musician from Kakhetia, and they have two children. He has also made a name as a painter of vineyards.

Georgia exported 59.3 million bottles of wine in 2005, 80 percent of it to Russia. Exports plummeted 67 percent with the embargo to 19.5 million bottles and have stayed at about 11 million a year since, the Agriculture Ministry reports. The 2010 total was 15 million bottles, up 34 percent on 2009, going to 46 countries. Of the larger companies, Tbilvino sold 2 million bottles in 2010 and forecasts purchases to rise about 20 percent this year.

President Mikheil Saakashvili said last year that the worst of the wine crisis was over, Wurdeman says. Georgia's government says it has invested 600,000 lari ($365,000) into private wine production since the embargo. Still, Wurdeman says the government and international financial institutions are spending money in the wrong places and coordination is lacking.

"Georgia went from a dead frozen situation to a minimal amount of growth," he says. "The

situation needs nurturing further." The money would be well spent, with much more brought back from wine tourism, he says.

"Georgia is known as a cradle of wine," Malkhaz Kharbedia, president of Georgia's Wine Club, says in an interview. "I wouldn't even look at the Russian market anymore; this is a dead market. The Georgian market will certainly survive. However, we must not compete with Australian or Chile wine; we need to retain our distinctive mark in the market."

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