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Conquering the World With Wine and Food

By Paul Rimple

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In August 2008, I was sitting on a curb in the Georgian village of Akhalgori with journalist Wendell Steavenson watching Ossetian troops loot stores and homes. "This whole thing is crazy," she said. "All Georgia had to do was invite Russia to the dinner table. They would have conquered it with food and wine."

She, like many foreigners who have spent any time in the country, is intimately familiar with Georgia's most formidable weapon. It's not the "strategic partnership" that brings all those Washington lawmakers to Georgia. It's the food.

Georgians aren't accidental hosts. They steadfastly believe that their cuisine is the center of the universe. They live for the chance to impress guests, and that means the guests are going to get played. In 2005, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili picked up U.S. President George Bush from the airport, showed him a traditional Georgian dance performance and whisked him off to a nearby restaurant for an unscheduled dinner of henkhali and kabobi.

The next day, Georgia became the "beacon of democracy." ⊠

This didn't digest well with President Vladimir Putin, who implemented a gastronomic foreign policy strategy in 2006 that ultimately backfired. His embargo of Georgian wine forced Tbilisi to improve its product to make it competitive in the Western market. Western food aficionados are now discovering what the Russians have known all along: Georgian cuisine rocks. Elyse Pasquale of the Huffington Post calls Georgia "one of the world's most fascinating up-and-coming culinary destinations," second to Spain.

⊠The Russia-Georgia Economic Cooperation Center recently ironed out technicalities to get Georgian wines back on Russian dinner tables, which is expected to happen soon, along with Borjomi water and other produce. Before the embargo, Russia made up about 75 percent of Georgia's wine exports. While Georgia has since managed to break into other markets, the end of the ban will further stimulate the industry and profoundly boost many private vineyards as grape demand increases.⊠

Some winemakers in Georgia, however, see the Russian market as a threat to the many small wineries that have come along and branded traditional Georgian winemaking into a niche international market. Russia, with an underdeveloped wine culture, will create a demand for large quantities of lesser quality wine, they maintain. That might be so, but having Georgian wine and products in Russia is good for everyone, especially Georgia, which has a clear advantage in dinner-table diplomacy.

Paul Rimple is a journalist in Tbilisi.

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