

The Georgian Art of Drinking and Toasting

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David Manjiashvili slipped on his high-tops early one morning, intent on finally getting his father off his back by going for what would be the first of a program of jogs to reduce his expansive stomach.

As he shut the front door, Manjiashvili met his neighbor, who was coming home after a long night of celebrating and wanted to continue. Manjiashvili resisted the invitation, explaining that he was going for a run, but his neighbor was relentless. "Just one," he implored.

There is never "just one" in Georgia. Needless to say, Manjiashvili never went jogging again.

The neighbor, who "celebrates" a lot, might be considered an alcoholic in other countries, but in Georgia, where there are no formal Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, he's just Georgian. It's bad form to drink alone.

This isn't to say there are no alcoholics, however. It's just that you rarely see them. It's a cultural abomination to stagger down the sidewalk with your eyes bleeding down your cheeks, although it's perfectly reasonable to pass out in your khachapuri at a wedding.

Put another way, getting drunk is a given, whereas being a drunk is shameful. This is reflected in the World Health Organization's study of alcohol consumption. Georgia's per capita average of adult consumption of pure alcohol in 2005 was 6.4 percent. Russia, in comparison, was 15.76 percent. For a country with a strong reputation for drinking big, Georgia's number is quite modest.

Drinking, by and large, is a social affair. The minimum necessities are newspaper for a table cloth and bread and cheese, or some other snack, as a chaser. Then you're ready for the toasts, a cultural etiquette that is endured or embraced before each drink. In many cases, the toastmaster rattles these off with the passion of a shopping list recital. Sometimes, though, they are eloquent heartfelt statements that can coalesce a table of strangers into a circle of intimates.

Not everybody is fond of toasting. Some say that toasts are an artificial tradition imposed by the Soviets. Others just prefer to free themselves of the burden and drink like Westerners. But these people don't see how traditions, whether ancient or not, actually helps keep the country sober.

"There's no alcoholics in Georgia. If you have to drink, you just bring a couple of bottles to your friend's house," a former professional wrestler said, describing the Georgian version of Alcoholics Anonymous.

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