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American Hamburgers and Changes in Georgia

By Paul Rimple

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I'm sitting at Tbilisi's first Wendy's and do not feel the slightest bit guilty. This is the second time I've had a burger here since the joint opened a few months ago and probably the fourth time in the past 25 years. I just don't do corporate fast food — or at least I didn't until I moved to Georgia.

However, just as American fast-food corporations are changing the way thatthe people of Georgia eat, so has living in Georgia transformed my life.

When I arrived in 2001, the country had earned a reputation as a failed state and suffered from constant blackouts. Tbilisi was decorated in billboards advertising the kidnapping of a businessman to pressure the government to react. The first thing I learned upon living in the country was "don't sweat the small stuff."

Once, visiting my relatives in California, the headlines of a local newspaper read, "Storm

knocks out electricity for eight hours." I laughed. Was that all? I dealt with that everyday, regardless of the weather. "How can you live like that?" people asked. "With lots of candles," I replied.

Today, we rarely break out the candles, and Tbilisi has four McDonald's. I don't boycott them out of principle — sometimes a hangover calls for a Big Mac. It's the atmosphere and flavor that keep me away, but not the thousands of Tbilisians who flock there daily. But who can blame them?

Georgia is a dining nation. I recall driving along a major avenue on a Saturday night in 2003 trying to find a free table for six at half a dozen restaurants. "I thought everybody's supposed to be poor," a friend said.

Think again. Supping is a serious matter, even if it's just khinkali and beer with your friends. You don't just "grab a bite" and don't even consider trying to "clean your plate." At a Georgian dinner table, you indulge magnanimously and drink to the bottom. And nobody dines alone.

American fast-food joints offer a respite to what can be an oppressive institution. They offer an alternative to traditional Georgian fast food — the cheese bread khatchapuri and tarragon flavored soda pop. And like the chains or not, the growing presence of fast-food in places like Tblisi is a sign that Georgia is catching up with the rest of the world.

I'm happy to see burger grease dripping on my plastic tray instead of just secret sauce. I consider Georgian food to be among the best in the world, but sometimes I just want a burger.

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