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Taste of Tbilisi

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Introduction

Tbilisi, the enchanting capital of Georgia, is a city forever poised between worlds. Here, at the crossroads where Europe merges into Asia and the old Silk Road once hummed with caravan bells, geography has shaped a unique story—a story that pulses through every laneway, market, and kitchen table. Today, as travelers, foodies, and seekers of the exceptional uncover Tbilisi, they discover a city shaped by centuries of exchange, resilience, and creativity. What was long a hidden marvel is now claiming its place on the world stage, celebrated for both its ancient roots and its cosmopolitan energy.

Why is Tbilisi suddenly on everyone’s lips? The answer lies in its remarkable fusion: a place where Persian, Ottoman, Russian, and Soviet legacies blend with a fiercely independent Georgian identity. Tbilisi is a capital where the scent of fresh bread from a centuries-old cellar bakery mingles with the beat of electronica spilling from an underground club; where local grandmothers and avant-garde chefs both preserve and reinvent the nation’s beloved dishes. In Tbilisi, every meal is a cultural event, every market stall a portal to both history and hope.

Yet, the city offers more than just exceptional food and wine. Tbilisi is a living mosaic—the colors of painted balconies in Old Tbilisi, the jumble of languages in the bazaar, the warmth of strangers inviting you for a glass of homemade saperavi. Its cuisine is as much about story and soul as it is about taste and texture. From hand-rolled khinkali dumplings to celebratory supras where hospitality flows as freely as wine, Tbilisi asks you not just to visit but to truly immerse, to share stories, to raise a toast, to become part of its living narrative.

This book is an invitation to dive deep—beyond guidebook checklists and Instagram snapshots—into the heart, flavors, and rhythm of Tbilisi life. Across its chapters, you will trace the city’s dramatic evolution: from ancient fortresses and hidden passageways to modern art spaces and buzzing street cafes. You’ll follow the stories of bakers and butchers, home cooks and renowned chefs, winemakers and musicians—people whose lives are inseparable from the foods and feasts of the city. Along the way, practical tips, recipes, and personal interviews will bring texture to the journey, whether you’re traveling in person or from your own kitchen.

For each reader, “Taste of Tbilisi” hopes to offer something lasting: an understanding of why food is so central to Georgian life, a respect for the traditions kept alive in everyday rituals, and inspiration to savor the city—on the ground or at your own table. May you find, in these pages, the city’s abiding secret: that Tbilisi is a place where every guest is considered “a gift from God,” and where to eat and explore is, truly, to

belong.

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CHAPTER ONE: Origins on the Ancient Silk Roads: Tbilisi's Founding Story

The story of Tbilisi begins not with grand pronouncements, but with a warm spring and a wounded pheasant – or so the most beloved legend goes. King Vakhtang I Gorgasali, a powerful 5th-century ruler of Iberia (ancient eastern Georgia), was supposedly hunting in the dense, forested valley along the Mtkvari River. His falcon (or, in some tellings, a hawk) pursued a pheasant, only for both birds to fall into a steaming sulfur spring. When the king and his retinue found them, the birds were miraculously healed, or in other versions, simply cooked by the hot water. Impressed by this natural wonder, Vakhtang I declared that a city should be built on this very spot. He named it "Tbilisi," derived from the Old Georgian word "T'pilisi" meaning "warm place," a direct nod to the city's therapeutic hot springs, which still bubble up in the Abanotubani district today.

While the tale of the falcon and pheasant is enchanting and deeply ingrained in Tbilisi's identity, the city's origins are, as is often the case with ancient settlements, a bit more complex. Archaeological evidence suggests human habitation in the area dates back to the 4th millennium BCE. The earliest written records referencing a fortress on the site of present-day Tbilisi appear in the 4th century CE. This Persian citadel, later to become the iconic Narikala Fortress, stood high above the Mtkvari River, long before King Vakhtang arrived on the scene.

King Vakhtang's true legacy lies not in founding an entirely new settlement, but in recognizing the strategic significance of this location. He conquered and restored the existing Persian stronghold in the 5th century and, crucially, decided to move the royal capital from Mtskheta, just 20 kilometers away, to Tbilisi. This decision marked the beginning of Tbilisi's ascent as a vital political, economic, and cultural hub in the Caucasus. Across the river, another fortress, Metekhi, was also established, eventually becoming the residence of Georgia's subsequent rulers. During this formative period, Tbilisi was encircled by robust defensive walls, and the Anchiskhati Basilica, one of the city's oldest surviving structures, was constructed.

Tbilisi's unique geography—nestled in the foothills of the Trialeti mountain range, with the Mtkvari River carving its way through the valley, and those distinctive sulfur springs—made it a natural crossroads. This position, linking Europe and Asia, placed the city directly on a branch of the ancient Silk Road. The Silk Road was more than just a path for silk and spices; it was a conduit for ideas, technologies, religions, and art. For centuries, caravans laden with goods from the East passed through Tbilisi, creating a vibrant melting pot of cultures.

The strategic importance of Tbilisi on these lucrative trade routes meant that control of the city was hotly contested. It was a prize that various empires—Persian, Byzantine, Arab, Ottoman, and later Russian—would vie for over the centuries. This constant ebb and flow of empires, each leaving their indelible mark, is precisely what gives Tbilisi its distinct architectural and cultural polyphony. The city's layered history is literally built into its streets, where medieval fortifications stand beside classical facades and Soviet-era structures, creating a cityscape unlike any other.

The 6th century saw Tbilisi begin to flourish, its growth fueled by its prime location along key trade routes. However, this burgeoning prosperity also brought increased attention from larger regional powers. The Sassanid Persians largely controlled Tbilisi in the second half of the 6th century, effectively abolishing the Kingdom of Iberia around 580 CE. Yet, even under foreign rule, the city continued to evolve, absorbing influences and adapting to new realities. This early period established the pattern for much of Tbilisi's future: a continuous dance between independence and foreign dominion, each chapter adding another layer to its multifaceted identity.

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