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Mountains, Markets, and Modernity

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Origins at the Crossroads: The Founding of Tbilisi
- **Chapter 2** Empires and Influences: Persian, Ottoman, and Russian Legacies
- **Chapter 3** Soviet Shadows: Transformation, Resistance, and Resilience
- **Chapter 4** Independence and Renaissance: The Modern Nation Emerges
- **Chapter 5** Layers of Identity: Communities, Architecture, and Tolerance
- **Chapter 6** The Market as a Mirror: Daily Life and Local Ingredients
- **Chapter 7** Khinkali & Khachapuri: The Heartbeat of Georgian Cuisine
- **Chapter 8** Supra: Ritual, Hospitality, and Celebration
- **Chapter 9** Flavors of the Regions: Diversity on Every Plate
- **Chapter 10** The New Georgian Table: Chefs, Innovators, and Culinary Change
- **Chapter 11** In the Land of 8,000 Vintages: Wine's Ancient Roots
- **Chapter 12** Qvevri Magic: Traditional Winemaking Unveiled
- **Chapter 13** Sipping the Future: Wine Bars and Urban Tastings
- **Chapter 14** Family Vineyards: Stories from the Cellar
- **Chapter 15** More Than a Drink: Wine as Culture and Community
- **Chapter 16** Art in Transition: From Soviet Walls to Avant-Garde Halls
- **Chapter 17** The Pulse of the Night: Electronic Music and Club Culture
- **Chapter 18** Street Style and High Fashion: Georgia's New Identity
- **Chapter 19** Words and Voices: Literature and Storytelling in Modern Tbilisi
- **Chapter 20** Creative Synergy: How Tradition Inspires the New
- **Chapter 21** Faces of Tbilisi: Portraits of Everyday Life
- **Chapter 22** The City Transformed: Gentrification and Urban Renewal
- **Chapter 23** Tech, Coffee, and Co-Working: Tbilisi's Digital Frontier
- **Chapter 24** Diaspora Returns: Coming Home and Changing the City
- **Chapter 25** Hopes on the Horizon: Challenge, Continuity, and the Future

Introduction

Nestled between the rugged peaks of the Caucasus and the winding currents of the Kura River, Tbilisi stands as a city where time appears layered, not linear. Here, echoes of Silk Road caravans, Soviet factories, and medieval fortresses commingle in the air scented with roasted meat, wild herbs, and acrid splashes of qvevri wine. Tbilisi is both ancient and astonishingly current—a mosaic where tradition and innovation are not at odds, but part of a dynamic conversation shaping the city's present and future.

Mountains, Markets, and Modernity invites you to enter this world in flux. This book is an exploration of Tbilisi's creative and culinary renaissance—an immersive journey into a city that is reimagining itself with every passing day. The aim is to look deeper than the postcards or Instagram feeds: to listen to the rhythm of the markets at dawn, sit at crowded tables during a supra feast, wander through graffiti-emblazoned alleyways, and join the hum of late-night clubs where a new generation is finding its voice.

Tbilisi's geographic and historical crossroads have always defined its destiny. The routes that once brought traders, invaders, and seekers of fortune also planted the seeds of resilience and openness. Here, Persian, Russian, Armenian, Jewish, and countless other communities have shared space, sometimes contentiously, often creatively—and it is precisely this layering of influence that has given the city its lasting vitality. As Georgia surged toward independence after decades under Soviet rule, Tbilisi became a symbol of both the scars and the hopes that define the nation. Today, every street tells a story—sometimes whispered through creaking balconies and tiled courtyards, sometimes shouted in avant-garde galleries or indie rock basements.

The recent resurgence of Tbilisi has been fueled by an unquenchable spirit of invention in food, wine, music, art, and daily living. A new generation is at work in repurposed factories, reinventing khachapuri for cosmopolitan palettes, refining natural wines from ancient grapes, and launching tech startups as comfortably as they curate street art festivals. Yet, they are equally devoted to the rituals—cheers and toasts, polyphonic song, the warm insistence on hospitality—that root them to the city's deep past. This unique blend of future and heritage is what gives Tbilisi its singular energy.

In the chapters that follow, we will meet celebrated chefs and unsung market vendors, veteran artists and entrepreneurial upstarts, grandmothers kneading dough and DJs spinning under historic arches. Through interviews, vignettes, sidebars on recipes and traditions, and practical tips for visitors, this book seeks to reveal Tbilisi as it is

lived—messy, resilient, vibrant, proud, and perpetually moving forward.

Whether you are drawn to Tbilisi as an armchair traveler, a food lover, or a curious observer of cultural change, you'll find here a city that defies simple summary or cliché. Instead, you'll discover a place defined by its capacity for renewal: a city where the mountains shape the skyline, the markets shape daily life, and modernity is never simply imported, but reimagined, recast, and celebrated on Georgian terms. Welcome to Tbilisi—where the renaissance is real, and the story is just beginning.

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CHAPTER ONE: Origins at the Crossroads: The Founding of Tbilisi

Before Tbilisi was a city of bustling markets and buzzing art galleries, it was a place shaped by the very ground it stood upon. Its genesis, like many ancient capitals, is shrouded in a blend of legend and historical record, a tale that speaks to the very essence of Georgia's enduring spirit. The story begins, as many good stories do, with a king and a fortunate shot.

The most popular founding myth attributes Tbilisi's origins to Vakhtang I Gorgasali, the King of Iberia (an ancient Georgian kingdom, not to be confused with the Iberian Peninsula). Sometime in the 5th century AD, so the legend goes, King Vakhtang was out hunting in the heavily forested region that now constitutes central Tbilisi. His falcon, or perhaps a wounded pheasant he was pursuing, fell into a hot spring. To his astonishment, the bird emerged fully cooked, or, in some versions, miraculously healed. Recognizing the therapeutic and strategic value of these naturally warm waters, Vakhtang was said to have declared, "I will build a city here!" And thus, Tbilisi, deriving its name from the Old Georgian word "T'pili," meaning "warm," was born.

While a delightful anecdote, historical accounts suggest that the area around Tbilisi was inhabited much earlier, with evidence of human settlement dating back to the 4th millennium BC. However, King Vakhtang did indeed play a pivotal role in establishing Tbilisi as a significant political and economic center. He is credited with moving his capital from Mtskheta, Georgia's ancient spiritual heart, to Tbilisi, recognizing its strategic location at the confluence of trade routes and its natural defensive advantages. The city's position, nestled in a valley along the Kura River (Mtkvari in Georgian), offered both protection and access, making it a natural hub for commerce and a formidable stronghold.

Tbilisi's early development was deeply intertwined with its geography. The hot sulfur springs, which originally captivated King Vakhtang, not only lent the city its name but also became the foundation of its famous bathhouse district, Abanotubani. These domed brick structures, built over the natural springs, have been a constant feature of Tbilisi life for centuries, serving as places for cleansing, healing, and social gathering. Even today, the distinctive scent of sulfur still occasionally wafts through the old town, a constant reminder of the city's warm beginnings.

The city's strategic importance, however, also made it a coveted prize for various empires. Situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, between the Black and Caspian Seas, Tbilisi became a perpetual battleground. It was a key point on the

ancient Silk Road, connecting East and West, a vital artery for goods, ideas, and cultures. This geographic destiny meant that Tbilisi was rarely its own master for long. Each conqueror, while leaving their indelible mark, also contributed to the city's unique, layered identity.

The early centuries saw constant struggles for control. The Sasanian Persians, the Byzantines, and the Arabs all vied for dominance over this crucial transit point. In the 7th century, the Arabs established the Emirate of Tbilisi, which lasted for nearly four centuries, profoundly influencing the city's architecture, administration, and even its religious landscape, though Christianity remained firmly entrenched. Remnants of this period can still be glimpsed in some of the older structures and the general layout of the Old Town, with its narrow, winding streets and enclosed courtyards.

Despite the constant flux of power, Tbilisi maintained a remarkable resilience. The city's inhabitants, accustomed to shifting allegiances and foreign influences, developed a certain adaptability, a knack for absorbing and reinterpreting external ideas while fiercely holding onto their own cultural core. This ability to blend and adapt, rather than simply assimilate, became a defining characteristic of Tbilisi's spirit.

By the 11th and 12th centuries, Georgia entered a "Golden Age" under unified rule, and Tbilisi flourished. King David the Builder liberated Tbilisi from Arab rule in 1122, making it the capital of a unified Georgian kingdom. This period saw significant construction, with churches, bridges, and fortifications being erected. The city became a vibrant center of trade, art, and scholarship, drawing merchants and scholars from across the region. The architecture of this era, while largely rebuilt over centuries of destruction, speaks to a sophisticated and confident urban center.

However, the Golden Age was not to last. The Mongol invasions of the 13th century brought widespread devastation, and Tbilisi, like much of Georgia, suffered immensely. Yet, even in ruin, the city found ways to endure, its strategic value ensuring its eventual resurgence. Subsequent centuries brought further invasions from the Ottomans and the Persians, each leaving their own architectural and cultural imprints. The distinct Persian influence, particularly noticeable in the bathhouse district with its intricate tilework and domed roofs, stands as a testament to these long periods of occupation.

Throughout these tumultuous times, the Kura River remained the city's lifeblood. It provided water, a means of transport, and shaped the urban landscape, dictating the layout of bridges and the placement of various quarters. The river, flowing directly through the heart of Tbilisi, served as a constant witness to the city's trials and triumphs, its waters reflecting centuries of changing skylines and shifting fortunes.

The city's diverse influences also fostered a remarkable spirit of tolerance. For centuries, Tbilisi has been home to a multitude of ethnic and religious communities

coexisting, often in close proximity. Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Jews, Kurds, and many others have lived alongside Georgians, each contributing to the city's unique cultural tapestry. This long history of diverse habitation has imbued Tbilisi with an inherent openness, a welcoming embrace of the 'other' that continues to define its character today. Even in times of hardship and conflict, a spirit of shared humanity often prevailed in the narrow streets and bustling squares.

In essence, Tbilisi's founding was not a singular event but a continuous process, shaped by its extraordinary geography and its position at the nexus of civilizations. From King Vakhtang's legendary hunt to the ebb and flow of empires, each chapter in its early history contributed to the complex, resilient, and uniquely charming city it is today. The warm springs that gave it its name seem to symbolize its enduring spirit: a city that, despite countless challenges, continues to bubble with life, warmth, and an unwavering sense of identity. The foundations laid in these early centuries, both mythical and historical, continue to resonate in the city's very fabric, a silent narrative woven into every stone and every street.

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