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Hidden Gems of Georgia: A Culinary Journey

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Introduction

Georgia is a land where the mountains meet the sea, where Orthodox churches cling to cliff edges and grapevines climb ancient walls, and where every table seems to overflow with an offering of culture, history, and breathtaking hospitality. Set at the intersection of Europe and Asia, this enchanting country has long been a crossroads of trade and tradition, its cuisine a living testament to centuries of exchange, adaptation, and celebration. Ask any Georgian what defines their sense of home, and chances are the conversation will soon return—joyfully and unforgettably—to food.

My own journey in Georgia began in Tbilisi, where narrow cobblestone lanes wind past bustling markets and the scent of tarragon, cilantro, and freshly baked shoti floats through the air. From my first meal, I was struck not just by the vibrant flavors on my plate, but by the warmth and ritual with which each dish was shared. In this country, food is not simply nourishment; it is the glue of community, the bridge between generations, and a spirited invitation to strangers and friends alike.

What drew me deeper into Georgian cuisine was its ability to surprise and delight at every turn. Yes, I had tasted khachapuri and khinkali in New York and Berlin, but nothing prepared me for the kaleidoscope of flavors found at a winter supra in Kakheti, or the spice-laden cornmeal porridge in a Samegrelo village, or the tang of tkemali plums in a backyard Adjara feast. Every region I visited revealed new cornerstones—unique cheeses, wild herbs, robust spice blends, pickles and preserves distilled from landscapes as varied as the Black Sea lowlands and the snowy heights of Svaneti.

Yet Georgian food is more than its recipes; such dishes carry stories of war, migration, resilience, and joyful celebration. The feast table is a stage where toasts ring out like poetry, and where wine is poured not just to be drunk, but to bind together the living, the departed, and the yet-unborn. To eat in Georgia is to step into a timeless ritual, guided by the wit of the tamada, the dedication of home cooks, and the ingenuity of a new generation rediscovering their culinary heritage.

This book is an invitation to travel through both landscape and memory, to uncover Georgia's hidden gems—dishes rarely found outside their native villages, secret spice recipes safeguarded by grandmothers, and the rich winemaking customs that trace back eight millennia. Each chapter blends story, travelogue, food anthropology, and practical recipe, drawing from conversations with village bakers, Tbilisi's bold young chefs, legendary winemakers in Kakheti, and home cooks safeguarding family traditions in wooden mountain houses. Along the way, you'll find practical tips for recreating Georgian flavors at home, as well as recommendations for the most

memorable tables—from bustling city eateries to secluded countryside feasts.

Whether you are a seasoned traveler, an adventurous eater, or an armchair culinary explorer, I invite you to pull up a chair at Georgia's table. Let us journey together through its flavors, traditions, and stories—and discover how, in this singular land, food remains both a celebration of place and the beating heart of connection.

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CHAPTER ONE: Tbilisi: The Melting Pot of Flavors

Tbilisi, Georgia's vibrant capital, pulses with an energy that is immediately apparent to any newcomer. Its ancient cobblestone streets, ornate balconies, and thermal bathhouses speak of a long and layered history, one that has profoundly shaped its culinary landscape. Situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Tbilisi has, for centuries, absorbed influences from the Silk Road, as well as from the Persians, Turks, Mongols, and Russians who, at various times, left their mark on the city. This rich tapestry of cultures is nowhere more evident than in its food.

Stepping into Tbilisi's culinary scene is like embarking on a treasure hunt, with discoveries around every corner. The air itself seems seasoned, carrying the enticing aromas of freshly baked bread from a *tone* oven, the sharp tang of ripening cheeses, and the earthy fragrance of spices. This is a city where food is not merely sustenance but a profound expression of identity and a catalyst for connection. Locals often say that the true essence of Georgian hospitality, the *supra*, finds its most elaborate expression here, where every meal is an invitation to share stories, laughter, and an abundance of dishes.

One of the best ways to grasp Tbilisi's culinary soul is to dive headfirst into its bustling markets. The Dezerter Bazaar, a sprawling expanse near Station Square Metro, is a sensory explosion. Here, amidst the lively chaos, vendors proudly display pyramids of vibrant produce—sun-ripened tomatoes and crisp cucumbers that are the backbone of many Georgian salads, alongside mountains of aromatic herbs like cilantro, dill, and tarragon. It's a place where you can find fresh local cheeses, cured meats, and an astonishing array of spices, often piled high in colorful mounds. The sheer variety tells a tale of Georgia's fertile lands and its deep connection to agriculture.

Beyond the fresh ingredients, the Dezerter Bazaar is also a fantastic spot to sample prepared foods. You'll see strings of *churchkhela* hanging like colorful candles, a traditional sweet made from nuts dipped in concentrated grape juice, a delicious and nutritious snack. Bakeries dotted throughout the market, and indeed across the city, offer piping hot *khachapuri* and *lobiani*, perfect for a quick bite on the go. The market is a true fusion of Asian bazaar and European food market styles, reflecting Tbilisi's unique position.

The ubiquity of *khachapuri* in Tbilisi is undeniable. This cheese-filled bread is perhaps the most famous Georgian dish, with countless regional variations, and Tbilisi offers a taste of many of them. While you might find the boat-shaped, egg-topped Adjarian *khachapuri* more associated with the Black Sea coast, Tbilisi bakeries and restaurants readily serve the simpler, round Imeretian version, stuffed with a tangy, salty cheese.

There's also Megrelian *khachapuri*, which adds a layer of cheese on top, and the layered puff pastry *penovani khachapuri*, often considered a fast food staple. Each bite of warm, cheesy bread is a testament to Georgia's love affair with dairy and dough.

Another iconic dish that defines Tbilisi's culinary identity is *khinkali*, the beloved Georgian dumplings. While originating from the mountainous regions, *khinkali* have firmly taken root in the capital, with numerous "sakhinkles" or dumpling houses scattered throughout the city. These juicy parcels are typically filled with seasoned meat, a mixture of pork and beef being common in Tbilisi, along with herbs like cilantro and onion, creating a savory broth inside. The art of eating *khinkali* involves a careful technique: holding the doughy "knob" at the top, biting a small hole to slurp out the flavorful broth, and then eating the rest, often leaving the knot behind. Beyond meat, you'll also find vegetarian options with fillings like mushrooms, potatoes, or various cheeses.

Tbilisi's culinary offerings extend far beyond these two staples. *Pkhali*, vibrant cold appetizers made from finely ground vegetables like spinach, beetroot, or eggplant, are mixed with walnuts, garlic, and herbs, then often shaped into small buns and garnished with pomegranate seeds. These colorful dishes showcase Georgia's abundant fresh produce and the ubiquitous use of walnuts in its cuisine. Another popular vegetarian option is *lobio*, a hearty kidney bean stew. Served in a clay pot, *lobio* is often accompanied by *mchadi*, a traditional Georgian cornbread, and an assortment of pickles.

The city's grill masters also play a significant role in its food scene. *Mtsvadi*, Georgian barbecue, typically features large chunks of pork or beef grilled over hot coals. While Kakheti is renowned for its *mtsvadi*, Tbilisi offers excellent versions, sometimes grilled on vine twigs which impart a unique smoky aroma. This simple yet flavorful dish is a testament to Georgia's love for grilled meats.

For those seeking a taste of Tbilisi's distinct local dishes, *Ajapsandali* is a must-try. This vibrant vegetable stew, often described as Georgian ratatouille, is a staple during the warmer months, with its aroma wafting through many districts. Made with eggplants, tomatoes, bell peppers, onions, and various herbs and spices, *Ajapsandali* can be enjoyed as a vegetarian dish or sometimes with meat. Another unique Tbilisi specialty is *Kababi*, a soft, aromatic, and juicy grilled meat dish, often made with a blend of pork and beef and seasoned with special Georgian spices.

The blend of Eastern and Western Georgian culinary traditions is palpable in Tbilisi. While Western regions like Adjara and Samegrelo show Turkish influence with a preference for poultry and cornbread, Eastern Georgian cuisine, influenced by Iran, leans towards beef and lamb with wheat bread. Tbilisi, as the capital, seamlessly integrates both, offering a comprehensive representation of the country's diverse food heritage.

Beyond traditional eateries, Tbilisi's culinary scene is dynamic and evolving. While preserving ancient recipes and cooking methods, modern chefs are also pushing boundaries, introducing contemporary twists and fusion elements. Restaurants like Barbarestan pay homage to historical Georgian cookbooks, offering refined interpretations of classic dishes. Others, such as Culinarium Khasheria, experiment with new approaches while remaining rooted in Georgian flavors, even offering "hangover soups" after a night of Georgian revelry.

The city also boasts a burgeoning street food culture, moving beyond traditional *shawarma* and *chebureki* to offer more uniquely Georgian quick bites. Bazari Orbeliani, a beautifully restored covered market, has become a hub for Georgian street food, where you can find everything from seasoned vegetable salads to *mchadi* and dishes with green *ajika*. Some vendors are even offering modern interpretations like *sulguni* balls or *chvishtari* sticks, catering to both locals and international visitors.

A walk through Tbilisi's streets often leads to unexpected culinary encounters. Small, unassuming bakeries, often tucked into basements or "holes in the wall," sell freshly baked *puri* – traditional Georgian bread baked in a *tone* oven, a cylindrical clay oven that gives the bread its distinctive crisp exterior and soft interior. The sheer variety and the irresistible aroma make it clear that bread is a sacred part of Georgian meals.

Tbilisi's markets are also where you can find unique ingredients that are essential to Georgian cooking. Beyond the fresh herbs, look for blue fenugreek, dried marigold petals, and the famous *Khmeli Suneli* spice blend, a cornerstone of many Georgian stews and grilled meats. You might also discover *Svanetian salt*, a fragrant and flavorful salt mixture from the Svaneti region, or various types of pickled vegetables, including green tomatoes and garlic heads.

The history of Tbilisi's restaurants themselves is a testament to its evolving food culture. From humble taverns serving hearty, traditional fare to upscale establishments redefining Georgian cuisine, the city's dining scene reflects its journey through time. Whether you choose a classic spot like Pasanauri, known for its khinkali, or a more contemporary restaurant like Shavi Lomi, offering a modern twist on traditional dishes, you are guaranteed a memorable culinary experience rooted in Georgian hospitality.

Tbilisi is not just about eating, but about learning and experiencing. Cooking classes in family wine cellars offer an immersive way to understand Georgian traditions firsthand. These experiences reveal not only the techniques behind iconic dishes but also the stories and cultural significance woven into every meal. From the casual street vendor to the elegant dining room, Tbilisi's food scene is an open invitation to explore, to savor, and to connect with the heart of Georgia.

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