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A Taste of Tbilisi

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Introduction

Tbilisi, Georgia's enchanting capital, is a city alive with contrasts and convergences. At once ancient and irrepressibly modern, this city weaves together Layer upon Layer of cultural influences, bearing witness to its long history at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. From the winding alleys of the old town to sprawling squares lined with vibrant cafes, Tbilisi is a tapestry of colors, sounds, and most evocatively, aromas—each hinting at stories of endurance, creativity, and renowned hospitality.

Food in Tbilisi is far more than sustenance: it is the language of love and welcome, of family and community, of tradition and innovation. Nowhere is this more apparent than at the Georgian “supra”—the legendary feast that is equal parts ceremony and celebration, an orchestra of shared plates, melodic toasts, and laughter echoing late into the evening. Here, strangers are quickly transformed into friends, guided by the steady hand of the “tamada” (toastmaster), who ensures each toast carries the warmth and poetry that defines Georgian culture.

Wandering Tbilisi's streets, you'll find that every corner offers a microcosm of the city's layered influences. Persian minarets stand beside Orthodox churches; the aroma of freshly baked tonis puri mingles with the scent of spicy adjika sauce; artisans sell sour cherry tklapli and sweet churchkhela at market stalls as electronic music pulses from hidden basement bars. The city's food reflects this exuberant mix—a cuisine shaped by centuries of trade, invasion, migration, and celebration, but always retaining a distinctly Georgian soul.

This book is an invitation to taste Tbilisi in all its dimensions. Each chapter guides you through its bustling markets and tranquil courtyards, introduces the cooks, winemakers, and artisans who keep ancient traditions alive while embracing innovation, and, of course, shares recipes from home kitchens, legendary restaurants, and street-corner vendors alike. Along the way, you'll discover stories of resilience and revival—of families safeguarding recipes for khinkali and chakhokhbili, of new generations honoring ancient qvevri winemaking, of young chefs blending nostalgia and creativity on every plate.

Whether you are planning your first journey to Georgia, hosting a Georgian feast in your own home, or simply savouring an armchair adventure into the heart of the Caucasus, “A Taste of Tbilisi” offers practical guidance, evocative anecdotes, and insights guaranteed to delight the senses. From classic khachapuri to inventive fusion dishes, from the gleam of brass at the Dezerter Bazaar to the glow of candles at an urbane café, you'll find the city's spirit in every recipe and every story.

Most of all, this book is a celebration of hospitality—a virtue so deeply embedded in the Georgian psyche that its embrace is nearly impossible to resist. I invite you to fill your table, raise your glass, and lose yourself in the flavors, music, and warmth that have made Tbilisi a singular destination for centuries. Welcome to the table. Welcome to Tbilisi.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Crossroads: Tbilisi's Geographic and Cultural Mosaic

Tbilisi's story begins not just with its founding, but with its very location, a geographical embrace that has shaped its destiny and its distinct character. Nestled in the South Caucasus, the city lies on both banks of the Mtkvari (Kura) River, which carves its way through a landscape of mountains and plains. This dramatic setting, an amphitheater of sorts surrounded by the Saguramo Range to the north and the Trialeti Range to the south and west, positioned Tbilisi as a strategic stronghold from its earliest days.

The very name "Tbilisi" whispers of its origins, deriving from the Old Georgian word "Tpili," meaning "warm." Legend has it that in the 5th century AD, King Vakhtang I Gorgasali of Iberia (an ancient precursor to modern-day eastern Georgia) was hunting with his falcon when both birds fell into a hot spring and died from burns. Impressed by the discovery, the king decreed a city be built around these thermal waters. While archeological evidence suggests human settlement in the area as early as the 4th millennium BC, and a fortified city existed by the 4th century AD, the warm sulfuric springs remain a defining feature and a popular draw for public baths in the Abanotubani district to this day.

Tbilisi's unique position at the literal crossroads of Europe and Asia meant that throughout its long history, it became a coveted prize for various empires. This prime location along lucrative East-West trade routes, particularly the historic Silk Road, ensured its ongoing importance as a transit hub for goods, ideas, and cultures. The city's architecture, a fascinating blend of medieval, classical, and Soviet structures, stands as a testament to these layered influences.

For centuries, the Silk Road was more than just a trade route; it was a conduit for the exchange of knowledge, art, and even religious and philosophical ideas, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. As a key stop, Tbilisi absorbed these diverse cultural currents, weaving them into its own unique fabric. Control of Tbilisi often meant control of the entire Caucasus region, making it a constant target for rival powers.

Indeed, Tbilisi has been captured and sacked around forty times throughout its history, falling under the sway of various masters including the Persians, Byzantine Empire, Arabs, Mongols, Ottomans, and Russians. Each conqueror left an indelible mark, contributing to the cosmopolitan character that still defines the city. This constant influx of different peoples and traditions fostered a remarkable open-mindedness and

tolerance that is deeply ingrained in the Georgian psyche.

The city's cultural mosaic is vividly reflected in its demographics. While predominantly Eastern Orthodox Christian Georgians, Tbilisi has historically been home to diverse ethnic and religious groups, including Azeris, Armenians, and Russians. This rich tapestry of backgrounds has added distinct flavors to the city's culture and, crucially, its food.

Georgian cuisine itself is a living testament to these historical influences. It is often described as a blend of Eastern European and Caucasian traditions, with notable touches from Persian and Turkish culinary practices. For instance, the name for eggplant, "badrijani," hints at its Persian origin. However, while adopting elements from ruling cultures, Georgian cuisine has always maintained its fiercely independent and unique character.

The enduring influence of the Silk Road is evident in the rich, often calorie-dense nature of Georgian gastronomy. Caravan trade brought not only exotic spices but also new ingredients and cooking techniques that were gradually incorporated. Yet, Georgian food is far from monolithic; regional variations exist, showcasing the diverse landscapes and local produce across the country.

For example, Eastern Georgian cuisine tends to feature more meat dishes, particularly pork, beef, and mutton, along with white bread and animal fat. In contrast, Western Georgia incorporates more poultry, corn flour, nuts, and a wider array of vegetables and sauces. This regional diversity contributes to the overall richness and complexity of the national cuisine.

Even the iconic Georgian dishes, though deeply rooted in tradition, have evolved over time, influenced by these historical tides. Khinkali, the beloved dumplings, are thought to have been brought westward by the Mongol horde as *manti* before being adapted by Georgian mountaineers. While traditionally filled with spiced meat, modern variations with cheese, potato, or mushrooms are now common, demonstrating the cuisine's dynamic nature.

The spirit of adaptation and absorption is a hallmark of Tbilisi. From the layout of its Old Town, with its narrow alleys and crooked houses built around courtyards, to the sounds of multiple languages mingling in its bustling markets, Tbilisi offers a captivating journey through time and culture. The city doesn't merely acknowledge its past; it lives and breathes it, integrating centuries of experiences into its vibrant present.

This profound interplay of geography and history has forged a city that is remarkably resilient, creative, and welcoming. Tbilisi has repeatedly risen from the ashes of invasion and conflict, each time rebuilding and reinterpreting its identity, yet always

retaining its core essence. This resilience is mirrored in its culinary traditions, which have been preserved, adapted, and celebrated through generations, often in the face of immense change.

The presence of ancient sulfur bathhouses, a tangible link to the city's mythical origins, continues to draw both locals and visitors, serving as a reminder of the "warm place" that inspired its name and its very existence. These baths are not just historical curiosities but active hubs of social life, embodying the Georgian emphasis on community and shared experiences.

The city's strategic location also meant it was a melting pot for diverse philosophical and religious ideas. While Georgia is overwhelmingly Eastern Orthodox Christian, centuries of interaction with Muslim empires, particularly Arab and Persian rule, have left their architectural and cultural imprints. The distinct architecture of the Narikala Fortress, initially built by Persians, is a prime example of this blended heritage.

Even the street names tell a story. While post-Soviet Georgia saw many Soviet-era names replaced with those commemorating Georgian kings and national heroes, older district names like Isani and Avlabari still bear Arabic etymologies, and Chughureti has Turkish roots, reflecting the long and varied history of the city's inhabitants. This linguistic legacy further underscores Tbilisi's identity as a place where cultures converged and coexisted for centuries.

The result of this constant flux and fusion is a city with an extraordinary depth of character. Tbilisi is not merely a collection of historical sites; it is a living, breathing testament to the power of cultural exchange. Its culinary landscape, in particular, showcases this dynamic heritage, offering flavors that speak of distant lands and ancient traditions, yet are undeniably, deliciously Georgian.

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