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A Taste of Tbilisi

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Introduction

Tbilisi, the beating heart of Georgia, is a city where centuries-old alleyways wind into lively boulevards, and the aromas of baking bread and simmering spices spill from every corner. Straddling the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Tbilisi boasts a character shaped by its rich past and its vibrant present—a metropolis where tradition and innovation exist side by side, and where guests are still honored with the same heartfelt hospitality as they were centuries ago. In recent years, the world has turned its gaze toward Georgia's capital, discovering a destination both deeply rooted and exhilaratingly fresh, a place where the old is cherished, and the new is enthusiastically embraced.

'A Taste of Tbilisi' invites you on an immersive journey through this captivating city, exploring not only its celebrated cuisine but the culture, artistry, and spirit that make Tbilisi one of Eastern Europe's most enchanting capitals. This book is designed to be both an evocative cultural portrait and a practical companion, equally suited to armchair travelers, enthusiastic foodies, and intrepid explorers planning their own Georgian adventure. Featuring a tapestry of vibrant storytelling, firsthand encounters, and detailed research, each chapter offers a window into the layered, exuberant world of Tbilisi.

Here, you will discover the proud traditions at the heart of Georgian identity: the legendary supra, or feast, with its symphony of toasts and dishes; the ancient craft of winemaking that has blessed the region for more than 8,000 years; and the sense of welcome that makes every visitor feel like part of the family. Tbilisi's cuisine—rich, diverse, and vibrant—is more than just food; it's a celebration of life, of togetherness, and of the land's bounty. Through profiles of iconic dishes, interviews with chefs, and tips for savoring market delights, this book brings the flavors of Tbilisi to your table, whether you're cooking at home or wandering city streets.

Cultural exploration in Tbilisi is a feast for the senses. Wander through atmospheric neighborhoods, where medieval fortresses rise above Ottoman, Art Nouveau, and Soviet facades. Listen for the strains of polyphonic singing drifting from a hidden courtyard; watch as artists and designers reshape the city's creative scene; immerse yourself in festivals, parades, and the everyday rituals of hospitality that define Georgian society. At every turn, Tbilisi tells stories—stories of resilience, reinvention, and the joy found in simple moments shared over food, music, and laughter.

Practical advice weaves throughout, from understanding vital etiquette to finding hidden gems not listed on any map. Voices of locals, craftspeople, and storytellers animate the city's portrait, enriching your understanding and offering inspiration,

whether you plan to wander Tbilisi's lanes or simply recreate its flavors in your own kitchen. With tips for travel, cultural insights, and resources to stay connected beyond these pages, 'A Taste of Tbilisi' ensures your encounter with Georgia's vibrant capital is as rewarding as it is unforgettable.

Above all, this book is a celebration: of a city where every street holds a secret, every meal is an invitation, and every guest is, truly, a gift. Welcome to Tbilisi—may your journey be as delicious, spirited, and enriching as the city itself.

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CHAPTER ONE: Khachapuri: The Cheese-Filled Heart of Georgia

To speak of Georgian cuisine is to begin with khachapuri. This iconic dish, a warm embrace of dough and molten cheese, isn't just food; it is a profound symbol of Georgian identity, hospitality, and the country's rich culinary heritage. Indeed, its significance is such that the tradition of making khachapuri has been granted the status of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Georgia. It's a staple at every Georgian feast, an everyday comfort food, and even a popular street snack. The very name, "khachapuri," meaning "cheese curd bread" in Georgian, perfectly encapsulates its essence.

Like a beloved national anthem, khachapuri has many verses, each sung with a regional dialect of flavor and form. There are over 50 varieties, showcasing the diverse culinary traditions across Georgia. While the fundamental elements remain the same—leavened dough and a cheese filling—the shapes, preparation methods, and specific cheeses used vary dramatically from one region to the next, offering a delicious journey through the country's gastronomic landscape.

Perhaps the most famous, and certainly the most visually dramatic, is the Adjarian khachapuri. Hailing from the southwestern region of Adjara on the Black Sea coast, this khachapuri is instantly recognizable by its distinctive boat shape. The lore behind its design suggests it symbolizes the boats that sail the Black Sea, with the golden egg yolk representing the sun and the rich, melted cheese the vast expanse of water.

The Adjarian version arrives at your table piping hot, its yeasted bread crust forming a protective vessel for a generous lake of bubbling cheese. Before serving, a raw egg yolk is dropped into the center, and a substantial knob of butter is placed alongside. The ritual of eating Adjarian khachapuri involves mixing the egg and butter into the hot cheese, transforming it into a rich, creamy, almost soup-like concoction. Then, you tear off pieces of the fluffy bread crust, dipping them into the luscious, gooey center, ensuring every bite is a perfect blend of bread and cheese. It's an indulgent, satisfying experience, often shared as an appetizer, though it is hearty enough to be a meal in itself.

Moving inland, to the central region of Imereti, you encounter the Imeretian khachapuri, or *Imeruli*. This is arguably the most common and widely consumed type of khachapuri in Georgia, a humble yet profoundly comforting round, flat bread with the cheese baked entirely inside. Its beauty lies in its simplicity: a perfectly thin, delicate dough encasing a generous disc of tangy, salty Imeretian cheese. Often

referred to as the "mother of khachapuri," the Imeruli is an indispensable part of any Georgian supra, a testament to its universal appeal. It's often cooked on a *ketsi*, a traditional clay pan, which imparts a subtle smoky flavor and a delightful texture.

Similar in appearance to the Imeretian but with an added flourish is the Megrelian khachapuri, or *Megruli*. Originating from the Samegrelo region, this variety is also round, with the cheese filling baked inside, but it distinguishes itself by having an additional layer of cheese, typically *sulguni*, melted on top. This extra cheesy crown provides an even more pronounced salty and tangy kick, creating a delightful contrast between the soft interior and the slightly crisp, browned topping. The history of Megrelian khachapuri can be traced back to the 17th century, a testament to its long-standing place in Georgian culinary tradition.

Beyond these three titans, the world of khachapuri expands into a fascinating array of regional specialties. From Abkhazia comes *Achma*, a layered khachapuri that some compare to a sauceless lasagna, featuring multiple sheets of boiled dough with cheese in between. It's a dense, rich, and intensely cheesy offering, often found in Western Georgia, particularly in Tbilisi. From Ossetia, we have *Khabizgini*, which resembles the Imeretian khachapuri but boasts a filling of cheese mixed with potato, a hearty and satisfying variation. This one is especially popular in Eastern Georgia, in regions like Kazbegi or Kartli.

Then there's the Gurian khachapuri, sometimes called a "Christmas pie" because of its traditional preparation for Orthodox Christmas. This crescent-shaped pastry is filled with cheese and, uniquely, chopped boiled eggs. Meanwhile, *Lobiani*, though technically a bean-filled pastry, is often discussed in the same breath as khachapuri due to its similar dough and form, particularly the *rachuli lobiani* from the Racha region, known for its seasoned bean filling.

The puff pastry variety, *penovani khachapuri*, offers a flaky, layered texture, often folded into a rectangle or triangle, making it a convenient and popular choice for a quick bite. It's brushed with an egg and milk mixture before baking, creating a golden, airy crust. Another intriguing variation is the Meskhetian khachapuri, or "turban khachapuri," which is characterized by its incredibly thin dough worked with fat, wrapped around the hand to form a turban shape, and filled with a soft, fresh cheese.

What truly unifies all these diverse iterations of khachapuri is the quality and character of the cheese. Georgian cheeses, particularly Imeretian and *Sulguni*, are the soul of the dish. Imeretian cheese is a brined, spongy cheese with a slightly salty-sour flavor, while *Sulguni* is renowned for its stretchy, meltable qualities. The combination of these, often locally produced, cheeses creates the unique flavor and texture that defines authentic khachapuri.

Making khachapuri is an art form, a blend of patience, skill, and affection that has

been passed down through generations. The dough is paramount, requiring careful preparation to achieve that perfect balance of softness and chewiness. The cheese filling, whether a single type or a carefully blended mixture, is seasoned to perfection, then lovingly encased in the dough. Even the act of folding and shaping the dough, while seemingly simple, is a craft in itself, connecting the baker to a culinary lineage stretching back centuries.

In Tbilisi, khachapuri is everywhere. You'll find it sizzling in traditional bakeries, served elegantly in upscale restaurants, and offered as a quick, satisfying street food. Its ubiquity and affordability have even led to the creation of the "khachapuri index," developed by the International School of Economics at Tbilisi State University, which uses the price of making khachapuri as a measure of inflation in different Georgian cities. This humble cheese bread is not merely sustenance; it is a vital part of the Georgian economy and a culinary barometer of the nation.

For visitors, discovering khachapuri is often a revelation. It's the ultimate comfort food, a warm, cheesy hug that embodies the generous spirit of Georgia. Whether you're tearing into a steaming Adjarian boat, savoring a classic Imeruli, or exploring one of the countless other regional treasures, khachapuri offers a delicious and immediate connection to the heart and soul of Georgian cuisine. It's a dish that proves, unequivocally, that in Georgia, every meal is a celebration, and every bite tells a story of tradition, warmth, and irresistible flavor.

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