



The Cuisine of Georgia — the One in Eastern Europe

March 4, 2025 Jeffrey Spear

It was ten years ago when I first set foot in Georgia. Bleary after 24 hours in transit and a late-night arrival, the roads were empty, and the city was quiet. However, a number of historical buildings were lit in a variety of colors, creating a sense that this place would be special. Over the years, I've visited all but the most far-reaching corners of the country, and that original impression has borne out: Georgia is a truly magical place.

This Alluring Black Sea Destination has a Considerable History and Exquisite Food

Based on an ever-expanding interest in global cuisines, the country of Georgia continues to attract considerable attention as an enchanted destination. However, its location remains somewhat unknown and is frequently confused with the State of Georgia in the American South. Its territory is unfamiliar to most Westerners: From a bird's eye view, the country is contained by the Black Sea to its west, Russia and the Caucasus mountains to the north, Azerbaijan on its eastern border, and Armenia and Turkey to the south.

Due to its location, the country enjoys a centuries-old reputation as the crossroads of civilizations, founded on a history that includes meaningful encounters with visitors (and sometimes conquerors) from lands throughout Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Although these groups carried their own distinctive culinary practices and shared them as they passed through, Georgia has protected its cuisine as part of an overarching national identity.

The Variety of Georgian Foodways

A visit to Georgia reveals foodways that feature fresh fruits, berries, and vegetables, as well as poultry, beef, pork, and mutton. There's also plenty of domestically produced cheese, many based on longstanding, multi-generational cheesemaking practices. While the most popular varieties are imeruli and sulguni (similar to feta and mozzarella respectively), there are numerous regional specialties including Tushuri guda (not to be confused with gouda), produced exclusively in the Tusheti region of northeast Georgia, and tenili, an unparalleled cheese made in the Meskheta region of southern Georgia.



Georgia is home to several regionally produced cheeses that are unique to their specific point of origin. This Tushuri Guda, produced exclusively in the Tusheti region of northeast Georgia, is one of the country's most popular domestic cheeses.

© Jeffrey Spear

Georgian cuisine is also defined by an abundance of nuts, especially walnuts, that are part of their most iconic dishes, along with flavor-forward herbs and spices. A few of these are blue fenugreek (*utsho suneli*), *ajika* (spicy, available in wet and dry configurations, used as a

condiment or spice), French marigold (*Imeretian saffron* or *zafrana*) and traditional spice blends including *Svanetian salt* (used in place of table salt) and *khmeli suneli* (Georgian five spice powder) that are ethnic specialties.

Georgia: The Cradle of Wine

Of course, no discussion of Georgian foodways is complete without including their wines. Considering that Georgia has produced the stuff for over 8,000 years, their reputation as the “cradle of wine” makes perfect sense. Upon further inspection, you’ll find 10 distinctive wine-producing regions across the country and more than 525 acknowledged indigenous varieties. Of these, there are about 10 popular whites and an equal number of reds. Rkatsiteli (white) and Saperavi (red) are the two most common varieties.

It’s also important to acknowledge Georgia’s unique *qvevry* winemaking practice that, using a large, egg-shaped clay vessel buried underground for aging and storage, produces some of this country’s most distinctive and sought-after wines. Unlike European “barrique” winemaking that relies on filtered grape juice prior to barreling, *qvevry* winemaking includes the skins and stems as part of the aging process, influencing the color and character of the wines. This is most visible in *qvevry* white wines that take on a rich amber color, frequently called “orange” wines.



Khachapuri (bread stuffed with cheese), available in nearly 50 regional varieties throughout the country, is available from street vendors, bakeries, and restaurants. When paired with a nice glass of Georgian wine, you’ll enjoy an exemplary Georgian experience. © Jeffrey Spear

Seek Out These Iconic Georgian Dishes

Although the assortment of truly remarkable Georgian foods and wines are far too numerous to count, a few of the more iconic dishes served throughout the country (as well as in truly authentic Georgian restaurants here in the U.S.) include *khachapuri* – a cheese bread with nearly 50 regional variations; *khinkali* – soup dumplings filled with cheese, meat or vegetables; *kharcho* – a stew made with beef or chicken in a rich walnut sauce (recipe for Chicken Kharcho appears below); *pkhali* – a flavorful vegetable tapenade, typically made with walnut paste combined with either beets, leeks, spinach, or cabbage; and *churchkhela* – a confection made with nuts threaded onto a string and subsequently dipped in thickened grape juice. Depending on where you encounter these dishes, you'll find either traditional, regional, or chef-inspired variations.



Churchkhela is a chewy, crunchy, and highly popular Georgian confection made with nuts threaded onto strings, then dipped into a thickened grape juice and allowed to dry. Colloquially referred to as Georgian “Snickers.” © Jeffrey Spear

Georgian Cuisine Gains Traction at U.S. Restaurants

The good news is that Georgian cuisine has been attracting increased attention among chefs and food enthusiasts in the U.S. for a few years. Unfortunately, the number of truly authentic restaurants is small, found mostly in larger cities that are home to sizable numbers of the Eastern European and Russian diaspora. Still, this provides good opportunities for foodie travelers to sample Georgian food and hospitality.

Chicago is Home to Several Georgian Restaurants

In Chicago, one of the largest centers for Eastern European diaspora, there are a number of highly regarded Georgian restaurants scattered around town. In the city center, the [Chicago Diplomat Cafe](#) is especially popular. According to the restaurant's owner, Asal Ahmadi, "Our restaurant serves authentic Georgian foods, giving our community from Georgia, as well as other Eastern European countries, a place where they can feel right at home."



An assortment of spinach, beet, and leek pkhali (vegetable tapenades made with walnut paste) alongside nigvziani badrijani (rolled eggplant with walnut paste), all classic Georgian dishes served at [Chicago Diplomat Cafe](#). © Jeffrey Spear

Other restaurants, including [Pirosmani](#), [Oda](#), and [Stumara](#), located in the city's suburbs, are equally well-received for exceptional Georgian cuisine. Undoubtedly, foods from Georgia are becoming increasingly popular among a broader range of guests best described as "culinary curious."

Other Large Cities with Georgian Restaurants...

The same can be said for [Supra](#) in Washington, D.C. While there are not as many Eastern Europeans in the city, there are lots of people who have lived, worked, or studied in and around Georgia who crave these foods. It also helps that Supra appears in the Washington, D.C. Michelin Guide. When asked about the popularity of Georgian cuisine, owner Jonathan Nelms says, "We still get a lot of guests who are new to Georgian food. That said, Supra is going on eight years, so we have a lot of returning guests."

In response to the considerable Russian and Eastern European populations in South Florida, you'll find several Georgian restaurants and numerous specialty markets. In particular, Kavkaz Restaurant, a casual venue in Miami, and Askeneli, a more elegant destination in Fort Lauderdale, serve up excellent examples of Georgian cuisine. If you prefer a shopping adventure, a visit to Euroland in Deerfield Beach, Florida's largest Eastern European market, will introduce you to an amazing selection of imported and freshly prepared foods and an on-premises restaurant.

They're in New York and Boston, too!

In New York, there are a surprising number of Georgian restaurants across town, including [Chama Mama](#), [Old Tbilisi Garden](#), [Oda House](#), and [Ubani](#). Each has menus that feature all the traditional dishes you'd expect along with some intriguing, more contemporary variations on the theme. Since I've yet to indulge, I'm planning a food crawl across Manhattan, providing ample time to sample, compare, and contrast them all. It should be a fun day.

Due to its size, I had expected Boston to have at least one Georgian restaurant. The closest I could find was [Ilona](#), a beautifully appointed destination in the city's trendy South End neighborhood. While their menu features dishes from countries stretching from the eastern Mediterranean to the shores of the Black Sea, it was their Georgian breads – *Imeruli khachapuri* (stuffed with cheese) and *Osuri mkhlovani* (stuffed with kale, Swiss chard, mushroom, garlic, cheese) – as well as several Georgian wines, that caught my attention.



Khinkali, a steamed soup dumpling filled with either meat or vegetables, is one of Georgia's most iconic foods. Served at [Keipi](#), these dumplings are filled with meat, onions, and Georgian spices.

Photo Courtesy of Keipi, Greenville, SC

A Bit of Georgia in Greenville, South Carolina

While not home to many Eastern Europeans, Greenville, S.C. is gaining a surprising amount of attention for [Keipi](#), a Georgian restaurant seeing a steady flow of inquisitive diners. Evan DeBiasse, the restaurant's General Manager, states, "Our menu caters to both purists and enthusiasts alike. While many of our dishes may not be truly authentic, our guests enjoy our interpretation of Georgian hospitality. They're also eager to experience our 'supra,' a lively Georgian feast that we organize around a communal table."

So Many Choices, Not Enough Time

After numerous visits over nine years, I still haven't had enough of Georgia or Georgian cuisine—not by a long shot. I'll certainly keep abreast of new Georgian restaurants opening in the U.S. In addition, should another opportunity to travel overseas come up, you can be sure I'll find time to visit Georgia and seek out even more of its enchanting culinary delights.

If You Go

- Plenty of international airlines maintain regular schedules into Tbilisi, Kutaisi, and Batumi. If this is your first visit, I recommend Tbilisi, the capital city, as your point of arrival.
- A valid passport is all you need to visit Georgia. However, inoculations for Hepatitis A and pre-exposure rabies are recommended. Ask your doctor.
- Georgia has a history of being one of the safest countries in the world for visitors. However, the current political climate is tense, and violent demonstrations have become increasingly frequent in city centers. Talk with your tour operator, airline, or hotel for updates. The U.S. State Department (travel.state.gov) may also provide helpful insights.
- There's a lot to see and do in Georgia, with plenty of tour and hotel operators to help you plan your stay. The [Georgian National Tourism Administration](#) and the government-sponsored Georgia Travel may be helpful. Look at the National Wine Agency if you are especially eager to experience Georgian wines.



Kharcho — Georgian Chicken with Walnut Sauce



You may not be able to travel to Georgia or visit a Georgian restaurant any time soon, but you can taste this wonderful Eastern European food at home. This recipe is easy to prepare, incorporates spices characteristic of Georgian cuisine, and is one of the country's more popular stews. While dairy-free, the walnuts are transformed into a wonderfully rich and creamy sauce that's sure to impress. (Serves 8)

Ingredients

- 2 cups walnuts, toasted, divided
- 2 cups chicken stock, divided
- 1 cup cilantro, roughly chopped, divided
- 1 cup onion, finely chopped, divided
- 10 cloves garlic, finely chopped, divided
- 2 birdseye chilis, coarsely chopped
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon pepper
- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 2 lb. chicken breasts, cut into 1/4-inch slices
- 3 teaspoons sweet paprika
- 1 teaspoon coriander
- 1 teaspoon fenugreek
- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar

Directions

Place 1 1/2 cups of the toasted walnuts and 1 cup of the stock in a blender, then puree until very smooth. Add half the cilantro, onion, and garlic, followed by all the chilis, salt, and pepper. Puree again until the sauce is completely smooth. Set aside.

Heat the oil in a Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Then add the remaining garlic and onion and sauté until soft. Add the chicken, cooking as needed until no longer pink, about 8 minutes. Finally, add the paprika, coriander, and fenugreek and cook until fragrant, about one minute. Pour in the walnut sauce, along with the remaining stock, and bring to a boil. Once boiling, reduce the heat to simmer, stirring occasionally, until the chicken is tender and the sauce has thickened. Before serving, stir in the vinegar and add salt and pepper to taste.

To serve, spoon the chicken into small bowls, then garnish with a sprinkle of the remaining cilantro and walnuts. This dish is always good when accompanied by rice.

