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TRENDS > NEW RESTAURANT CONCEPTS

The cuisine of the other Georgia gains a foothold in the United States

The cheesy breads, dumplings, and meat dishes of the former Soviet republic are being enjoyed by a wider audience.

Jeffrey Spear | Jul 10, 2024

Many assume a conversation about Georgian cuisine references the southeastern American state and dishes such as chicken & dumplings, boiled peanuts, and peach cobbler. But increasingly the food of the former Soviet republic of Georgia is getting attention in the United States.

Bordered by the Black Sea, Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkey, Georgia's noteworthy cuisine stems from local production of poultry, beef, pork, and mutton, a remarkable assortment of regional cheeses, lots of fresh fruits and vegetables, an abundance of nuts, herbs, and spices, an ancient winemaking tradition, and centuries of culinary tradition.

Georgia's distinctive cuisine is also the result of its strategic location along the "Silk Road," the caravan route

that linked European, Central Asian, Middle Eastern, and Chinese markets. From a culinary perspective, those pathways have brought Ottomans, Turks, Persians, Tatars, Arabs, Greeks, Romans, and Russians to Georgia, all introducing their own flavors, ingredients, and foodways to those already in place.



Some of Georgian cuisine's notable ingredients include blue fenugreek, a spice blend called khmeli suneli, a spicy condiment called ajika, French marigold, herb scented Svanetian salt, and tkemali, a zesty, somewhat sour condiment made from locally grown plums.

Walnuts and walnut sauces frequently appear in Georgian cuisine, including in a chicken dish called satsivi, vegetable pâté called pkhali, the stewed beef dish kharcho, and an eggplant roll by the name of nigvziani badrijani.

Khachapuri, a category of cheese-stuffed breads, is making inroads in the United States, and other popular dishes include dumplings called khinkali and a traditional candle-shaped confectionary known as churchkhela.

Although awareness about Georgia, a small country of around 3.7 million people, remains limited among Americans, there is a growing number of restaurants specializing in its cuisine, especially in larger cities where populations include considerable numbers of Georgians, Russians, and Ukrainians. Of course, the demand for new and exciting culinary experiences, especially among Millennials and Gen Z, is adding to the appeal of these establishments.

Alex Rubinsky, a Russian immigrant who opened Kavkaz, a Georgian restaurant in North Miami Beach, Fla., in 2016, explained the cuisine's appeal.



"A lot of Russians, like me, prefer Georgian food. Plus, when you look at some of Georgia's most popular dishes like khachapuri, made with dough and cheese, or kebabs, which are simply meat on the grill, this cuisine is familiar and easy to embrace. What's not to like?"

After 8 years, Rubinsky admits that there are still plenty of people who are not familiar with Georgia or its cuisine. That being said, business is good enough for his plans to expand. From a promotional perspective, he said, "We've found advertising and a lot of promotional activity has been a waste of money. Social media and word-of-mouth have been the most effective. Plus, we will be promoting happy hour specials to attract people living and working nearby, giving them a relatively low-risk opportunity to explore Georgian cuisine."

Similar dynamics existed when Chicago Diplomat Cafe opened its doors in 2017.

"Our family is from Georgia. When we opened, we wanted to serve authentic Georgian cuisine and provide the level of hospitality we all experienced back home," said manager Asal Ahmadi. "While we've been popular among Georgians, lots of people from Russia, Ukraine, Poland, and other Slavic origins [as well as Armenians] have been attracted to our place for the same reasons."

In the early days, advertising on the radio and in ethnic newspapers helped attract customers. Today, favorable reviews, especially being included in a number of "Chicago's Best" lists, coupled with an active social media

presence, is doing more of the heavy lifting. With trends favoring unique global flavors, a growing number of guests with no connection to Georgia or its neighbors are attracted to the restaurant simply to experience the cuisine for the first time.



Jonathan Nelms developed his appreciation for Georgian food while studying and working in Russia, frequenting Georgian restaurants that were as commonplace as Mexican restaurants are in the United States. When he returned home to Washington, D.C., recognizing that the only way to enjoy Georgian food was to visit New York City, where restaurateurs catered to a large Russian community in certain neighborhoods, he decided to open a place of his own. Today, as co-owner of both Supra and Tabla restaurants, he caters to the Georgian and Russian diaspora, individuals who work in D.C.'s international community, and adventurous diners. In all cases, they can enjoy both traditional Georgian dishes as well as more contemporary interpretations.

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A conversation about Georgian cuisine would not be complete without mentioning the "supra." Typically, a large gathering featuring an abundance of food, wine, and heartfelt toasts, the supra is an important element of Georgian foodways and part of the experience that Keipi restaurant in Greenville, S.C., offers.

"We strive to be faithful to the premise of a Georgian supra, the shared experience and generous hospitality," Keipi general manager Evan DeBiasse said. "The best part of a dinner at Keipi is the shared experience," he

added. "While our menu includes both authentic and elevated Georgia dishes, the toasts, the camaraderie among our guests, and the unparalleled level of enjoyment is what makes an evening with us special."

He said the unique experience has piqued the interest of visitors.

"What's amazing is how far people will drive based on what they've read or heard," he said.

While awareness of Georgia remains limited in the United States, the growing number of Georgian restaurants opening around the country is a clear indication that its cuisine is an exciting new dining opportunity that Americans are eager to embrace.

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