



# The birthplace of wine?

Where were grapes first crushed in an concerted effort to make wine? And which country boasted the first actual winery? Caroline Gilby MW looks at the archaeological and scientific evidence, and finds a number of claimants

IT'S INCREASINGLY CLEAR that almost as soon as humans formed something resembling society, our ancestors started looking for ways to escape again by getting drunk. In his book *Uncorking The Past*, Patrick McGovern (the Indiana Jones of ancient wine) says 'alcoholic beverages are unique among all the drugs that humans and our hominid ancestors have exploited for more than four million years. Their pre-eminence and universal allure make them significant in understanding the development of our species and its cultures.'

It's easy to imagine how the first wine might have started: a pile of wild grapes stored in a jar would have started to ferment within a day or two, and the rest is history. But whose history, exactly? Who can lay claim to the first example of bona fide winemaking? More than that, who can claim to have moved on to establish the first fully functioning winery? There are several contenders to the title... For winemaking to become more than the

occasional piece of serendipity, several factors needed to come together. First, there had to be a stable human population spending time in one place, plus the invention of pottery or clay vessels for storage, along with the existence of wild grapevines. So far, the earliest evidence has been found around Shulaveri in southeastern Georgia, a site with Neolithic settlements dating back 8,000 years. Fragments of pottery from this era have been found with traces of red residues suggesting wine, and vines are still found in this area of the Caucasus. The oldest known grape pips are from here too, and bear resemblance to domesticated grape pips.

*'Transcaucasia, covering modern Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, parts of Turkey and Iran, has strong claims to being the birthplace of wine'*

Photograph: Caroline Gilby. Map: Maggie Nelson

*'I'm hopeful that more finds like the Areni cave in Armenia – but even earlier – will be made in other areas, including Georgia, Iran and Turkey'* Patrick McGovern

apparently used for fermentation, along with remnants of grape seeds and vine twigs. Chemical analyses have detected malvidin, a pigment only found in grapes and pomegranates, and the morphology of the pips suggest they look like *Vitis vinifera*, not wild *Vitis sylvestris*. Carbon dating of a vine twig from the cave dates the find to about 6,000 years ago, at least 1,000 years older than the next comparable discovery (in the tomb of the ancient Egyptian king Scorpion I, where excavations found pips, skins, dried pulp and jars with a yellow residue chemically consistent with wine). The fermentation jar at Areni-1 – remarkably similar to clay *qevvri* still used in the region – was sufficiently big that it needed organised grape growing to fill it. There are also graves very close by, suggesting a possible ceremonial role for wine in funeral rites.

It all makes for a fascinating contrast with a new project just a few kilometres away, started by Italian-Armenian expat Zorik Gharibian with consultant Alberto Antonini, best known for his work with the Antinori and Frescobaldi families. Gharibian had no idea of the momentous discovery waiting in the caves when he planted his vineyards with a local red variety called Areni. Fittingly, in his first vintage in 2010, it's the modern version fermented in clay jars that gives the best results. 'The discovery is a confirmation that I've made the right choice regarding the terroir and of course I feel proud to have a rich ancient wine history,' says Gharibian.

Another discovery just over the mountains into Iran at Hajji Firuz Tepe consists of several clay jars dating back 7,000 years with traces of tartaric acid – typical of grapes and wine. Importantly, there are also traces of resin from a local tree which may have been used as a preservative. This could be evidence of another key step in controlling wine production and stopping the fermentation heading to vinegar.

Political relations across the region remain difficult – not helped earlier this year when a 75-year-old woman in Georgia, searching for copper, chopped through a cable and cut off internet access in Armenia. For archaeologists, today's borders have little to do with the ancient landscape. Turkey also has claims to a role in origin of wine, and the newly formed Wines of Turkey group uses the message 'Discover the Roots' as its slogan. In Christian legend, Noah's Ark came to rest on Mount Ararat (believed to be in eastern Turkey, though there's a Mount Ararat on the Armenian border too) and Noah's first crop was the grapevine. Wild vines still grow in these areas and around the river valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates, as well as in the Caucasus range and the Zagros Mountains of Iran. It's interesting to note that wild vines are most

Far left: excavations at Areni-1 cave in Armenia show the oldest evidence of large-scale winemaking

Above: Zorik Gharibian's young vineyards not far from Areni-1 today, planted with the Areni grape

Map, left: Transcaucasia, covering Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and including parts of Turkey and Iran, is widely believed to have the greatest claim to the origins of wine

It's widely believed that Transcaucasia, covering modern Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and on down into the Near East (including parts of Turkey and Iran) has strong claims to being the birthplace of wine culture. Plant cultivation, for most of our major agricultural crops, began in the Near East around 10,000 years ago, but there's still much debate around exactly which country was first with wine and, more importantly, where and how winemaking moved beyond the occasional lucky accident. Wild grapes are small and sour, and crops are unreliable as most wild vines need a cross pollinator. The challenge for early man was finding a self-fertile plant, and then breeding it to give regular crops and tastier, sweeter berries.

## Looking at the evidence

Recent archaeological discoveries in Armenia have shed more light on this. Earlier this year, I visited the oldest winery so far discovered, in Areni-1 cave near Armenia's southern border with Iran. Project director Boris Gasparyan (of the Gfoeller Foundation and University of Armenia) says, 'This is the first evidence of winemaking on an industrial scale.' Inside the cave, researchers uncovered a rudimentary wine press and a large clay vat

*'The earliest evidence of winemaking has been found at Shulaveri in southeastern Georgia, a site dating back 8,000 years'*



'Armenia's Areni-1 cave is the first evidence of winemaking on an industrial scale' **Boris Gasparyan**

genetically diverse in this region and, in addition, there are also vast numbers of distinct cultivated vines in all these countries – more than 600 in Turkey, over 500 in Georgia and 200-plus in Armenia. This indicates early domestication and thus a longer time for all these cultivars to arise.

The story continues

None of these claims and counter-claims are likely to be the end of the story as researchers keep digging for more clues. Author Patrick McGovern says, 'I am hopeful that more finds like the Areni cave in Armenia – but even earlier – will be made in other mountainous areas, including Georgia, northwestern Iran and southwest Turkey. The dating of the Areni cave is still unclear.' Gasparyan counters: 'He [McGovern] has never seen the site himself, which is out of my imagination, because he is an expert in that field.' He adds, 'The dating of Areni is very clear. The dates were taken from plastered vessels, as you have seen.'

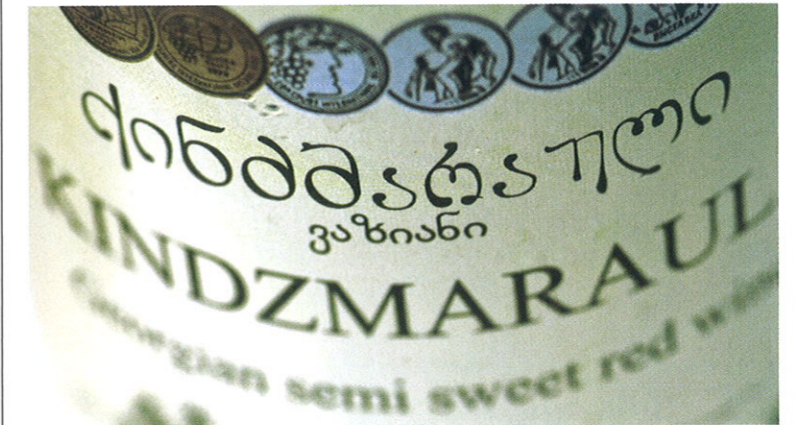
Gasparyan says while Georgia is 'not so happy' with finds from Areni, 'there is no need for this kind of a championship – who is the oldest or first. I consider not only modern Armenia, but also the territory of what is today called Turkey and Georgia and Iran as the birthplace of winemaking. It's another question when some unscientific scientists are using such things for political reason.'

In the end it seems that it's the whole region that counts, and country borders and the people who live here now bear little resemblance to Neolithic times. For wine drinkers today, whoever the first winemakers were, we have a lot to thank them for. **D**

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Above: clay wine amphorae uncovered at the Areni-1 cave excavation during the 1940s



Georgia: progress and potential

WINE IS EMBEDDED in Georgian life – even the flag symbolises a cross made from grapevine branches, while the western words for wine are believed to originate with the Georgian *gvino*. Everyone here drinks wine, usually homemade and white, accompanied by fulsome toasts.

Red wine is seen as the women's drink, while the men prefer to stick to white. This may be because Georgian whites are traditionally seriously full-bodied, particularly those made in the traditional *qvevri*. These large clay jars are buried underground in a *marani* and loaded with grapes, complete with skins and often stems.

Several weeks, or up to several months later, the wine that emerges is rich, glowing amber and densely structured, almost like red wine, with definite tannic grip. At their best, these are complex, intriguing wines that are great with Georgia's unique and flavoursome cuisine.

Plethora of grapes

Rkatsiteli is often the backbone of white wines. It's not very aromatic but always has vivid, steely acidity, and is therefore often blended with zesty Mtsvane. More expressive whites such as Kisi and Tsolikouri are also coming back into favour.

Georgia has 525 grape varieties on its national register (and few international interlopers), but only a dozen are widespread. Saperavi is

**Above: Kindzmarauli, one of Georgia's many popular semi-sweet red wines**

the red star – notable for its cherry fruit, vibrant acidity and firm but fine tannins. Its potential for serious, dry reds can be seen in controlled appellation zones such as Mukuzani and Napareuli. Saperavi also makes juicy rosés and semi-sweet reds like

*'These are complex, intriguing wines that are great with Georgia's unique and flavoursome cuisine'*

Kindzmarauli, though Khvanchkara, the most famous of all, is a blend of Alexandrouli and Mujuretuli. These are made by chilling the wine to stop fermentation,

retaining natural grape sweetness.

Focus on quality

Today producers realise what a treasure trove they have to rediscover and there are many new investments in vineyard projects and small estates. These have been emerging as the industry adjusts to the ban on Georgian wines in the unfussy Russian market, imposed back in 2006 following (unproven) claims of contamination with pesticides and heavy metals. Producers lost a market worth more than 60 million bottles but, in hindsight, many producers believe it was no bad thing – forcing the industry to restructure and focus on quality instead of volume. It also helped the country rid itself of the burden of fraudulent 'imitation' Georgian wines that had been widespread in Russia.