

**HD** Georgia on his mind

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John Wurdeman sings the praises of Georgian clay vessels and amber wines, writes Huon Hooke.

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Eat, drink, merry - John Wurdeman fell in love with a culture; Pheasant's Tears' cellar, right.

**B** lame the traditional winemakers of Georgia, the former USSR state. They're behind the trend towards fermenting white **wine** on its skins in clay amphorae, concrete eggs and other strange vessels. It's loosely known as "orange" **wine**, and it's part of the "natural" **wine** movement that's taking root in many wineries, across Australia and the world. The Georgians call their clay vessels qvevri (pronounced kwevri) and they're hardly new. According to a Georgian winemaker who attended the recent Rootstock Sydney **wine** festival, John Wurdeman of Pheasant's Tears winery, the qvevri is the only vessel used in Georgia. They've been used there for 8000 to 9000 years. "The qvevri is lined with acacia wax and buried in the earth," he explains. "It breathes like a barrel but imparts no flavour or tannin to the **wine**." Today, qvevri are so fashionable throughout the winemaking world that even the Georgians must join a long queue to **buy** new ones. Wurdeman, whose Pheasant's Tears wines have recently become available in Australia through importer Vinous Solutions, isn't a native Georgian: he's United States-born. An artist, he went to Moscow to study painting and, while there, learnt Russian. Then he discovered Georgia, fell in love with Georgian polyphony, a unique kind of choral part- singing, and went to live there. Then he fell in love with Georgian **wine**, and resolved to make his own. In 2007, he established a **wine**-producing **business** with eighth-generation Georgian winemaker, Gela Paliashvili. Pheasant's Tears has 12 hectares of vines in one province and seven hectares in another, and produces 38,000 bottles of **wine** a year. Its vines are managed according to biodynamic principles and have an organic certification. Orange wines are fashionable in a fringe kind of way, and you'll find them on many smart restaurant **wine** lists. Wurdeman prefers the term amber **wine**, rather than orange. "They're not white and they're not red, but in between," he says. They're amber because they've been fermented with their skins: Pheasant's Tears' amber wines spend between one and six months on skins. This is unusual and much longer than the reds, which have a 10 days to four weeks' skin maceration. Not surprisingly, amber wines are quite tannic because, Wurdeman says, they're meant to go with food. The 2011 Kisi was formidably grippy and a little charmless. It was my least favourite white without food, but with

food it suddenly became my favourite. It was transformed. And the rkatsiteli, which had been my favourite without food, did not satisfy at all with food. It lacked the structure to accompany food. My preferences were reversed. Without leading the witness, Wurdeman had made his point. Pheasant's Tears produces **wine** from six varieties, all vitis vinifera and all indigenous to Georgia. The wines are quite confronting, although not as difficult to taste as I had feared. I would have to say that most drinkers accustomed to modern white wines might find the amber wines taste slightly oxidised, but not detrimentally. Wurdeman believes in giving his wines a little sulphur dioxide before bottling. Pheasant's Tears Dry unfiltered amber wines **Chinuri** 2011 \$56 One month on skins. Full amber hue, gingerbread aroma, soft light tannins. Mtsvane 2011 (not available in Australia) Three months on skins. Full orange- amber hue, vaguely citrusy, orange-peel and fruit compote aromas. Quite tannic. Kisi 2011 \$56 Dried apricot, cooked fruit and crushed- seashell aromas. Very grippy tannins. This makes a statement. Rkatsiteli 2009 \$56 Full orange-amber hue, spicy stone-fruit aromas, almost as spicy as traminer. Fruity, soft, round and balanced; low tannin. Unfiltered red wines Takveri 2012 \$56 (due late April) Ten days on skins. Clear, bright, deep red- purple; clean spicy and ironstone aromas. Light-bodied, soft and spicy taste, with gentle structure.

Saperavi 2007 \$56 (due late April) Four weeks on skins; two years in qvevri. Dark colour; intense black fruits, licorice and spice aromas; savoury, with ample but smooth tannins and good length.

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