



A Georgian Feast

An intimate gathering of fellow foodies celebrates the exotic appeal of Georgia's soulful cuisine

By ANGELI DE RIVERA
Photography by JCI NOCIAN

GEORGIA ON MY MIND (Clockwise from left) Freshly cooked shakmeruli waiting to be devoured by hungry guests; Georgian wines; Mike Zulueta cooking his chicken dish



PREP WORK (Clockwise from left) Honorary Consul Cunanan checks on the dishes; JJ Yulo tries to make dumplings for khinkali (next photo); Gina Mapua seasons the finely-coated dumplings with ground pepper; Roasting chicken for the shakmeruli; Consul Annette Ablan checks her recipe for satsivi



Rich bold aromas floated in the air as I entered the premises where that evening's dinner would be held. "Is this what a Georgian kitchen smells like?" I wondered. It was a delight to be invited to this special dinner-cum-cooking session. The idea of trying a strange cuisine was exciting, and the appetite-inducing aroma of herbs and spices dancing all over our noses promised delicious things to come. Organized by Honorary Consul of Georgia Thelmo Luis "Buddy"

Cunanan Jr. together with JJ Yulo of Pinoy Eats World fame, the gathering started with several of the invitees cooking their designated Georgian dishes for the dinner. "Consider this the first official Georgian dinner in the country," announced Consul Cunanan. I for one felt honored to be part of this momentous meal.

Georgia the bountiful
To experience Georgia is a privilege. After all, hardly any Filipino gets to visit this remote nation surrounded by

Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia and the Black Sea. A small nation about the same size as Austria, this former territory of the Soviet Union boasts panoramic views of magnificent castles, churches and old settlements set against immaculate snow-capped mountains. It is a destination to be discovered, still unmarred by Western commercialization and where the old traditions are kept alive. But for us who know next to nothing about Georgia, perhaps the best way to be introduced

to its culture and history is through its cuisine. One would assume that Georgian cooking is heavily influenced by nearby Russia. On the contrary, the local fare is as colorful and exotic as its magnificent scenery. At the crossroads of European and Central Asian cultures, Georgian cuisine is a cauldron of influences from Turkey, Iran and Russia. Thanks to its cool climate and fertile soil, fruit orchards, vineyards and tea plantations abound. Livestock is also a big

industry with cattle farms, piggeries and poultry farms scattered all over the state. A Georgian pantry usually consists of Mediterranean and Central Asian-sourced ingredients—walnuts, corn, assorted grains, vegetables like tomatoes, garlic, onions, coriander, cucumber, berries as well as fine-quality butter, cream and artisanal cheese. Wine is an integral part of the nation's identity with archaeological evidence that winemaking originated in Georgia, estimated around 8,000 years ago.

Wine is widely consumed not just for celebrations but with everyday meals. This winemaking tradition is still carried on today in centuries-old wineries that make their own artisanal wines using native grapes like the Rkatsiteli, Mtsvani and Saperavi grown in the region.

A collective cooking session
While we didn't have the privilege of a Georgian national to guide the cooks, they did have cookbooks on

GEORGIA AT A GLANCE

- Capital:** Tbilisi
- Patron saint and namesake:** St. George
- Date of independence from Soviet Union:** December 25, 1991
- Population:** Approximately 5 million
- Currency:** Georgian Lari
- Religion:** Christian Orthodox
- How to get there:** Qatar Airways flies daily from Manila to Doha then to Tbilisi with a short stopover in Baku, Azerbaijan. Emirates Airways also flies daily from Manila to Dubai then to Turkey. From there, Turkish Airways flies to Tbilisi.

For more information about Georgia, visit www.georgiaconsulphil.com.



DINNER HIGHLIGHTS
(from top left) *kubdari* or flat bread with meat filling; appetizing *badrigiani*; after dinner espresso for everyone; *satsivi* garnished with fresh coriander



Eastern Mediterranean and Georgian cuisines as reference. Also, Consul Cunanan and friend Mike Zulueta had visited the country previously and were familiar with Georgian flavors.

Even before settling into our seats around the dining table, we were already filling ourselves with Georgian food culture. Cookbook enthusiast and expert cook Gina Mapua was busy kneading dough for her Khinkali or Georgian

dumplings to be filled with cumin-infused minced beef—imagine a bigger and spicier *xiao long bao*. Belarus Honorary Consul Annette Ablan prepared Satsivi, a traditional chicken dish in walnut sauce that went well with the Kubdari or meat-stuffed bread made by Gina. Consul Cunanan served several bottles of Georgian wine, not available locally, which he brought back from a recent trip. Soon we were enjoying sips of the fine

wine as we waited for the last dish to cook.

A supra to remember

According to Georgian custom, a *supra* is a special feast characterized by overflowing food and marathon drinking sessions. Consul Cunanan shared with us that a *supra* also features poetic tributes and long orations made by a *tamada* or toastmaster. While our dinner omitted the drunken revelry and orations, we

made sure that the food remained abundant, cooked with the same gusto and pride just like in a traditional *supra*. There was Badrigiani, an *hors d'oeuvre* of walnuts and eggplant rolls and Pkali a spinach paté also prepared by Gina. Consul Cunanan made Chakhokbili, a rich chicken stew of tomatoes, coriander, dill and red peppers. But the favorite dish of the evening had to be Mike Zulueta's Shkmeruli, a rich and creamy chicken dish infused with lots of garlic. The Filipino in me was so tempted to eat it with rice.

I asked Consul Cunanan why our dinner didn't feature a Georgian dessert. He explained that Georgians really don't do dessert. Funnily enough, meals in Georgia are always so abundant that there's usually no more room for dessert. Thankfully, we had delicious non-Georgian sans rival and espresso as our meal ender.

The bottles may have been emptied and the dishes cleared out, but my first experience of Georgian cuisine was unforgettable and hopefully won't be my last. **📖**



**KHINKALI
GEORGIAN DUMPLINGS**

Recipe by Gina Mapua adapted from *The Cooking of the Eastern Mediterranean*
Makes about 24 dumplings

2 cups flour, plus extra for rolling
1 1/2 teaspoons salt
1 1/4 cups warm water, plus extra if needed
beef filling (recipe below)

1. Stir together flour and salt in a bowl. Add water and mix until dough forms.
2. Transfer to a work surface and knead until smooth, about 6 minutes. Let the dough rest for 30 minutes while making the beef filling (recipe below).
3. To form the *khinkali*, divide the dough into 4 equal balls. Work with 1 ball at a time, keeping the rest of the dough covered in a bowl. Roll the ball into a sausage and cut into 6 equal parts. With a rolling pin, roll each little ball into a 5-inch circle.
4. Put about 2 tablespoons filling in the center of the dough and pleat the dough to close, forming an elongated knot. With scissors, cut off the tip of the knot, leaving a neat edge. Be sure to leave enough of the knot as a handle for diners to pick up the *khinkali*. Push formed *khinkali* bottom into flour and place on a plate. As you continue to form more *khinkali*, make sure they don't touch each other.
5. Fill a large pot 3/4 full with water. When the water boils, generously salt the water and bring to a boil again. Lower the heat so the water simmers. Gently drop in *khinkali*, but do not fill the pot. Leave enough room for the *khinkali* to move about. Do not let water boil violently or the *khinkali* may break up. Continue to cook the *khinkali* for 3 extra minutes

after they rise to the surface. Check the dough to see if it is done. If not, continue to cook until done.

6. Retrieve cooked *khinkali* with a slotted spoon, allow to drain and put on a serving platter. Add more *khinkali* to the pot to cook. Serve the *khinkali*, dusted generously with freshly ground black pepper. To eat, diners pick up the *khinkali* by the knot, raise it overhead and lower it into their mouths to catch all the juices. The knot of dough is not eaten.

BEEF FILLING:

3/4 kilo ground beef, preferably with 10% fat only
1/2 cup finely minced onions
1/2 teaspoon ground cumin
3/4 teaspoon salt
ground black pepper, plus more for serving
1/2 cup very cold water

1. Mix the beef with the onions, cumin, salt and ground black pepper.
2. Gradually add water to the beef mixture by the tablespoon, making sure the water is absorbed before adding more. The mixture should be soft and almost soupy.

CHAKHOKHBILI

Recipe by Thelmo Cunanan, Jr.
Serves 6

1 whole chicken
1/2 kilo tomatoes
2 tablespoons olive oil
2 onions, finely chopped
3 bunches coriander, chopped
3 tablespoons tomato paste
2 sweet red peppers, skins removed
1/3 cup + 1 tablespoon white wine
salt and pepper, to taste
1 bunch dill, chopped
2 cloves garlic

1. Clean, rinse and cut chicken into pieces.
2. Parboil the tomatoes, peel and chop finely.
3. Heat olive oil in a saucepan. Sauté onions with chicken pieces and chopped coriander.
4. Add tomatoes, tomato paste and sweet peppers to the sautéed chicken. When the mixture thickens, add the wine.
5. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Boil for 30 minutes.
6. Once cooked, sprinkle remaining coriander, dill and garlic. Mix well.

SHKMERULI

Recipe by Thelmo Cunanan, Jr.
Serves 6

1 whole chicken, cut into pieces salt, to taste
2 tablespoons butter
2 cups fresh milk
1 bulb garlic, peeled and crushed or pressed in a garlic press

1. Sprinkle the chopped chicken with salt. Sauté in butter. Put the chicken pieces into a shallow clay ovenproof bowl or casserole.
2. Pour the milk into a saucepan and reduce over medium low heat to about 1 1/3 cups + 1 tablespoon. Then add the pressed garlic, salt and the oil left over from frying the chicken.
3. Pour the milk-garlic mixture over the chicken pieces in the clay bowl or casserole.
4. Place the bowl in a preheated 375°F oven. Cook the chicken, letting the sauce boil for 10 to 15 minutes.