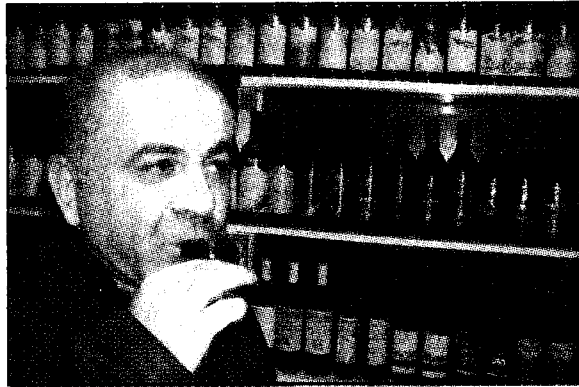


Taste

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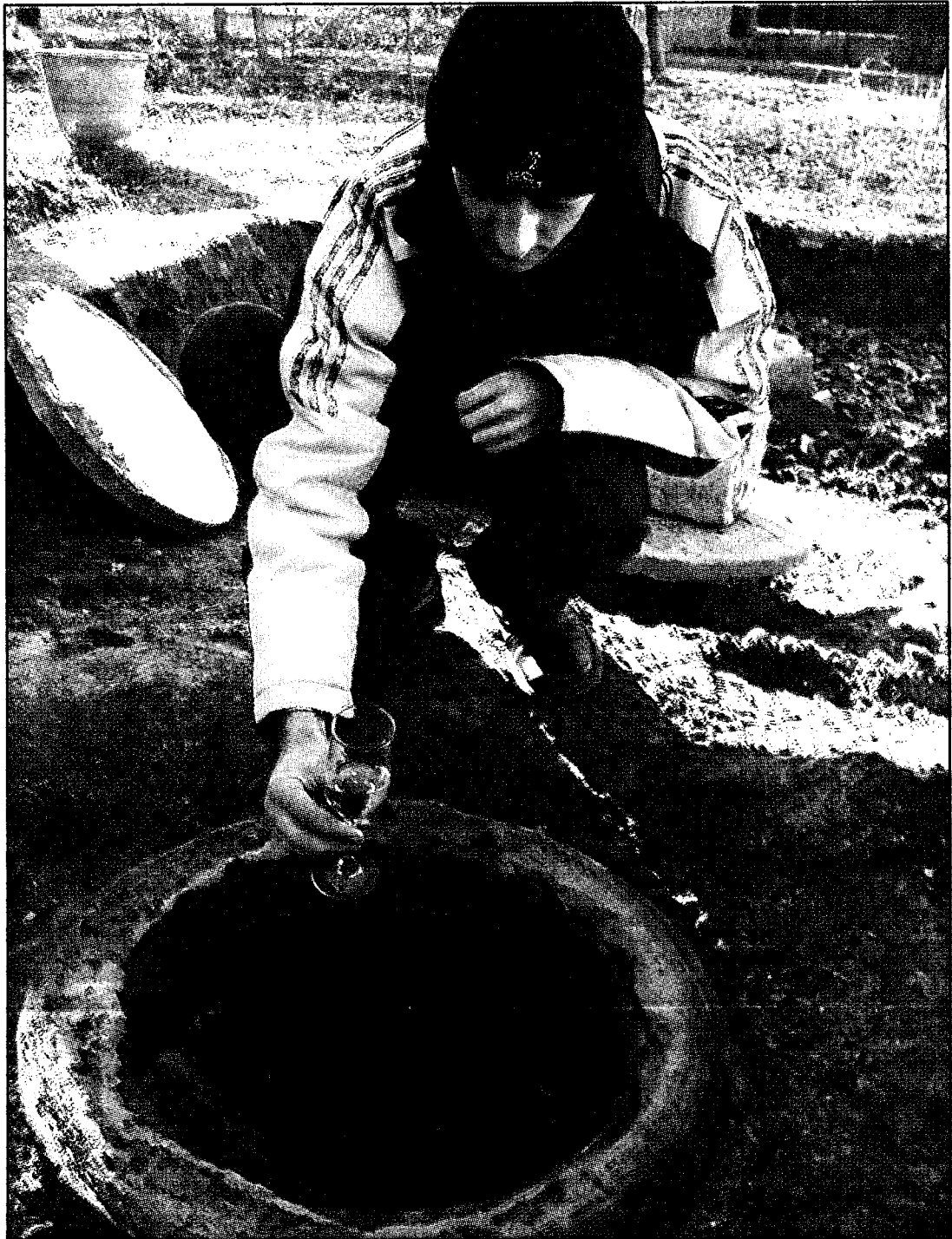
More than
wines from
regions with
featured:
"Around the
in 80 Wine

**Winemaker
Tsikhistavi
Teimuraz
samples his
14-year-old
Eniseli
brandy at
Vaziani
Winery near
Tbilisi,
Georgia.**



"Grapes were
given to us by
God. You can't
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— Tsikhistavi Teimuraz,
Georgian winemaker



**Kakha
Chotiashvili,
vat
manager at
Vazi Winery,
inspects
the Kakhuri
variety
wine being
stored in
sunken clay
pots. The
winery is
located in
the ancient
Georgian
capital of
Mtskheta
near Tbilisi.**

MOTHERLAND OF THE GRAPE

IN NATION OF GEORGIA, VINTNERS STRUGGLE TO RECOVER IN 'CRADLE OF WINE'

By **ALEX FRIEDRICH**
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TBILISI, Georgia

They call this troubled sweep of earth the "Cradle of Wine."

Tucked into the volatile southern Caucasus, it's where viticulture supposedly was born. It's where Georgians still stomp grapes with their bare feet after thousands of years, and every other home proudly

ferments its own juice.

But history has been harsh on the Caucasus and its vineyards. The vines have been decimated over the last 20 years, victims first of Soviet teetotalers and then the chaos of the Soviet Union's collapse. And bootleggers are pumping the market full of counterfeit wines.

Now Georgian vintners are struggling to recover. They're nudging up production, buying new equipment and

exploring markets outside their old Soviet hunting grounds, hoping for a rebirth of their favorite drink.

"Grapes were given to us by God," exclaimed winemaker Tsikhistavi Teimuraz. "You can't take that away."

That's the kind of gusto Georgians exhibit when they proclaim their country the motherland of the grape. The grape

Please see Georgia page D3

Georgia

From page D4

symbol is on many Georgian buildings, and Georgians say their ancient word "ghvino" is the root of all other expressions for wine.

Their claims got a boost last month when a dig led by University of Pennsylvania Museum professor Patrick McGovern reportedly unearthed the oldest traces of wine. Its residue was on the shards of 8,000-year-old ceramic jars in Shulaveri, Georgia.

Georgia is home to about 500 varieties of grapes — such as Rkatsiteli, Mgaloblishvili and Tavkveri. The Napa Valley of Georgia, a region called Kakheti, lies east of Tbilisi, the capital.

Here, men drink white wine. They prefer it to red, because they can, frankly, drink more of it. That's crucial when a guy has to down several bottles at a supra, a traditional Georgian meal that can last hours and can include dozens of elaborate toasts.

No brie and dainty crackers here. One Christmas supra served dish after peasant-sized dish of cheese pastries, fresh fruit, boiled slabs of bacon, pig joints and raw onions.

The Soviets respected such a wine culture, and their planned economy made Georgia and the republic of Moldova vineyard to the nation.

For years, Georgian winemakers happily received their yearly quota from Moscow and sent their cases of wine to a central distribution agency.

Trouble began in the mid-1980s, when Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev grew fed up with Russian boozing. He implemented anti-alcohol laws that sharply curtailed drinking and alcohol production. The champagne even stopped flowing at embassy receptions.

The laws earned him the resentment of countless citizens and nearly wiped out Georgia's wine industry.

Chichinadze Nugzar's Vaziani Winery was only 4 years old when Moscow's orders came to shrink production. Vaziani still could produce its wines and brandy, but only in tiny souvenir bottles.

Propaganda officials soon came around, slapping such slogans as "We are for the sober life!" onto the sides of brandy tanks.

Growers ripped up their grapevines and planted watermelon instead.

"It was really shocking," Nugzar recalled.

But worse was yet to come: the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Almost overnight, the



ALEX FRIEDRICH/The Herald

Lali Matiashvili prepares ceramic jugs that will hold Vazi wine made in the style of the Kakheti region.



Bachana Khalvashi tastes some of his Kakhuri-variety wine, a dry white made using Rkatsiteli grapes, from Georgia's Kakheti region.

bureaucrats who arranged the connections among grape growers, winemakers, distributors and retailers were gone. Winemakers accustomed to Soviet central planning had to figure out how to do business and with whom.

Vineyard land lay unused, and production plunged.

Civil war between Georgia and two breakaway republics in the early 1990s forced winemakers to hide their supplies from looters.

By the time the Vaziani Winery managed to be privatized in 1992, it was wheezing by on an annual production of about 800,000 bottles, only 10 percent of its

output a decade before.

And that plunge for Vaziani, a large winery by Georgian standards, was about on par with the national average.

But the winery is on the rebound. Production is up to 2 million bottles this year. And Vaziani is hustling to win back its old fans from the former Soviet republics, which buy 80 percent of what it exports.

Vaziani is luring Russian expatriates in America with its Zolotoye, a gold-colored sparkling wine that was a staple at countless Soviet New Year's Eve parties.

"Some shop owners say that when immigrants saw Zolotoye in the U.S., they clutched it and cried," boasted Teimuraz, Vaziani's wine master. "It's a memory of the sweet times."

New winemakers are hoping to get those times back.

Bachana Khalvashi, a 43-year-old former artist and theater director, heads one of the dozens of Georgian wineries that started up in the 1990s. His small Vazi Winery, in the ancient capital of Mtskheta, makes red and white wines, many in the traditional way of the Kakheti region.

There, winemakers keep the juice and skins together longer than European winemakers do. That gives the wine a strong taste that Georgians say "dries the throat."

Like many home vintners, Khalvashi stores some of his wine in clay vats sunk 6 feet into the ground. The tops are about the size of manhole covers.

Keeping with tradition, he bottles about half his wine in beautiful hand-decorated clay

jugs that hold about 1 to 3 quarts.

His line of "upper end" wines is one most Georgians can't afford. Khalvashi exports his 60,000-bottle stock to Russia, Armenia and the Ukraine, though he's also dabbling in Germany and the Czech Republic.

Georgia "will never have the production of Spain," he said. "But we can have the quality."

Georgian winemakers say they need investment in new equipment, new techniques and the cultivation of a larger market. They also must cultivate more vineyards. Half their vineyards have been lost since 1981.

Commercial vintners have to produce wine good enough to tempt the locals, many of whom take pride in making their own at home.

"A Georgian family without its wine is dead," proclaimed Vakhtang Bliadze, a 48-year-old engineer and home vintner.

Sounds about right to Giorgi Sukhishvili, a 32-year-old unemployed economist who lives in the village of Mukhrani.

He stomps his own grapes in a huge brick tub, like his father and grandfather before him. He stores the red Aladasturi and white Tsolikouri and Chinuri wines in the family storeroom, either in a sunken clay vat or in big blue barrels.

It's one way to combat the growing counterfeit wine business. Bootleggers churn out impressive counterfeit labels of established brands, quickly brew their own cheap stuff and slap on the labels, which often are indistinguishable from the real thing.