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Whole Foods, local distributors import Georgian wines to the Northwest

Puget Sound Business Journal (Seattle) - by [Heidi Dietrich](#) Staff Writer

Until now, wines from the nation of Georgia hid in Russian markets and specialty shops, bearing hard-to-decipher labels.

No longer.

A local wine distributor, an importer and Whole Foods Market have teamed up to bring Georgian wines to 11 Whole Foods stores in the Northwest this month, including four large stores in Washington and seven smaller stores in Oregon.

The partnership includes Redmond-based Exclusive Brand Imports and Seattle-based Click Wholesale Fine Wine and Beer Distributing.

The initial shipment of 1,000 cases arrives at Whole Foods next week. If the wine sells, the grocer plans to continue stocking it.

“Whole Foods is very adventurous and interested in where products come from,” said Rick Steckler, general manager of Click Wholesale.

Wine aficionados are especially enthusiastic about Georgian wine because archeological evidence indicates that the country began making wine earlier than anywhere else.

Also, since Georgian wine has been relatively obscure, wine lovers consider the product somewhat undiscovered. The deal will bring several Georgian varieties to the U.S., including

Saperavi, Katsiteli and Kisi.

“We think Saperavi is the next Argentine Malbec,” said Keith Johnsen, president of Exclusive Brand Imports.

The partnership to bring Georgian wine to the Northwest began when economic and humanitarian group US AID arranged a trip to the country for Johnsen, Steckler, and Whole Foods Northwest wine buyer Erez Klein. Due to an embargo implemented by Russia in 2006, many Georgian winemakers who once almost exclusively sold their product to Russia were struggling, and US AID saw an opportunity to help them.

With the help of a Woodinville consultant — Jim Krigbaum, president of 2020DC — the local group worked with US AID to arrange a four-day trip to Georgian wine country. Klein, a longtime enthusiast of Eastern European wine, didn’t need to be asked twice.

“I was like, I get to go to Georgia to play with wine? I don’t even need details! I’m in!” Klein said.

The group left Georgia with an agreement to import three different wines from Mildiani, a family-owned winery. Priced from \$8.99 to \$11.99, the three wines — Katsiteli and two Saperavis — are currently featured in Whole Foods displays that will last until early September. The reasonable price point and high quality make the wines right for Whole Foods, Klein said.

“We need to keep the wines priced at the level where people are willing to try something new,” Klein said.

In addition, the group secured a deal with a small artisan winery called Vinoterra. The winery makes wines by an ancient method using fermentation in earthenware vessels called amphora. The five Vinoterra wines are more expensive, with price tags between \$14.99 to \$19.99.

Through the arrangement, Johnsen’s Exclusive Brand Imports paid the wineries upfront for the initial shipment of 1,000 cases of wine. Click then bought the wine from Exclusive Brand Imports, and in turn sold the product to Whole Foods.

Since the wine’s labels were written entirely in the Georgian alphabet, Johnsen worked with the wineries to develop new, English language designs.

Following the first 1,000 cases, a second shipment of the same size is scheduled to arrive here in mid-September. The lengthy journey includes a cargo ship through the Black Sea and Atlantic Ocean, freight train to Chicago, and a truck to Seattle.

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