

# ALL FOR AMPHORAE

THE LATEST WINEMAKING FASHION ISN'T NEW AT ALL. IN FACT, IT GOES BACK SOME 8,000 YEARS. **DARREN SMITH** TAKES A LOOK AT THE GROWING TREND TO FERMENT IN POTS, JARS AND ALL THINGS CLAY

In the beginning was the grape. The grape grew wild on sprawling vines that wrapped themselves round any supporting vegetation they could find. Homo sapiens, as yet probably still quite hairy and entirely unfamiliar with the new features of the iPhone 6, found the grape to be good and collected berries to enjoy later, storing them in containers of increasing sophistication.

One blessed day, some of the berries in one such container burst, releasing juice which the yeasts living on the skins of the berries began to feed on, creating wine. And there was much rejoicing.

Then, around 8,000 years ago, somewhere in the Transcaucasus, wine-loving humans started to get organised. They began cultivating grapes rather than foraging them and fashioned clay pots, which they filled with grapes and buried in the ground to maintain the temperature, and in which, over several months, the magic of winemaking happened.

Over the next eight millennia came many innovations: glass bottles, oak barrels, reverse osmosis machines, cryoextraction, micro-oxygenation and then – back to clay pots. Eight thousand years of rationalisation and innovation, then back to a technique favoured by a people still struggling with the concept of the wheel. Who'd have thought?

With London having had its first ever exclusively clay vessel wine tasting this year, it looks like these wines are

becoming more than merely wine list exotica. But are they the stroke of original vinicultural genius revived by a knowing few, or just another fad designed to titillate natural wine geeks? By way of an answer, let's start with a bit of history...

## Georgian heritage

The first evidence of domestic winemaking is from Georgia. In 1965, archaeologists uncovered an ancient settlement 50km south of Tbilisi where they unearthed grape pips of *vitis vinifera sativa* DC (the forebear of modern cultivated grapes) dating back to 5,000-7,000 BC.

This Neolithic winemaking was made possible by the invention of clay pots.

**'AMPHORA WINE IS THE PUREST EXAMPLE OF WALKING WITH NATURE'**  
EDOUARD SOUCHAL

*qvevris* in Georgian. Crushed grape bunches would be packed into the *qvevris* (skin, pips and stems), which would be sealed and buried underground (Neolithic temperature control) for several months, during which fermentation, filtration and maturation would happen naturally.

'Qvevris and wine have always been sacred for Georgia,' says Iago Bitarishvili, a *qvevri* winemaker from the Kartli

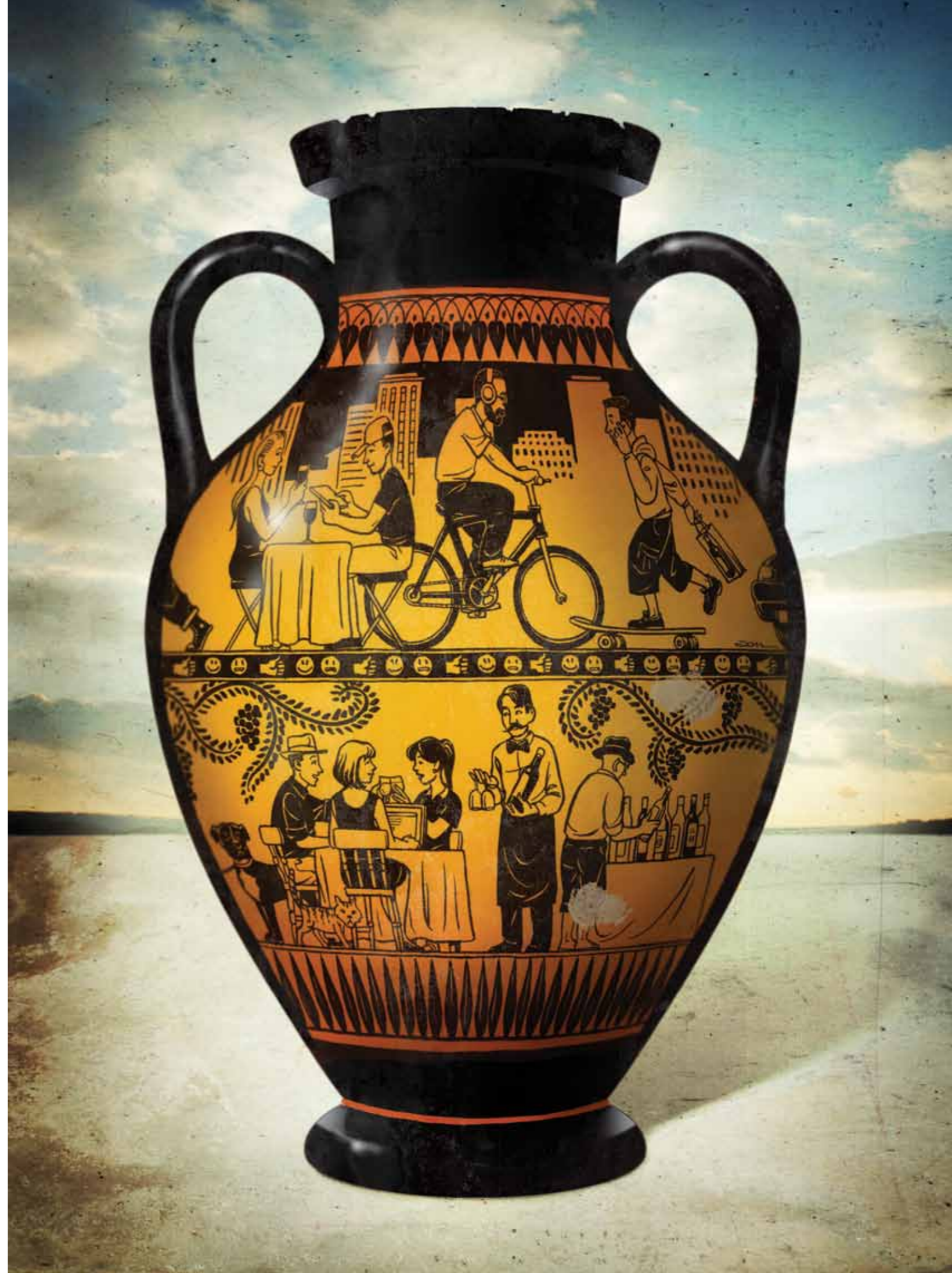
region of the country. 'If you see our old churches, starting from the fourth century, all of them have ornaments with vines and grapes. Even the Georgian Christian cross is made from grape branches.'

We have a 1991 Russian trade embargo to thank for the spread west of clay vessel winemaking. Russia used to be Georgia's main wine importer. Then, when things turned sour, Georgia looked west. Qvevri wines started to make an impression on experimental winemakers in Europe.

One of the first was Josko Gravner in Friuli. Gravner's pioneering way of fermenting in stainless steel and new oak barrels earned him the nickname of the King of Wine in Italy. Where he trod, others followed. Driven by a goal 'to simplify things', Gravner took to *qvevris* in a big way, commissioning 46 of these huge, cumbersome beasts (these were between 1,300l and 2,400l capacity) to be sent over from Georgia.

Italy has since become the locus of clay vessel winemaking in Europe. Some of the most respected names in natural winemaking – Paolo Vodopivec (also in Friuli), Elisabetta Foradori (Trentino), Frank Cornelissen and Giusto Occhipinti (Sicily) – have followed Gravner's lead. The movement has spread to France (even to the oak-barrel bastion of Bordeaux, where Château Pontet-Canet does some *élevage* in amphorae), Spain, Switzerland, Austria and Portugal. >>

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A totally separate tradition of clay vessel winemaking has been revived in South America, (where they're known as *tiñajas*) by the De Martino estate. It is Chile's second-largest organic wine estate and has invested in 172 amphorae of various shapes and sizes – so if people think clay vessel winemaking is and will always be super-niche, De Martino should make them think again. There are also clay wines popping up in the New World – South Africa, Australia and the US.

**Tools of the trade**

Are qvevris and amphorae different names for the same thing? Not quite. The key difference is that a qvevri is designed to be buried in the earth, whereas an amphora is not. There are also differences in size, shape, where the vessels are from and how they're used – some winemakers only use them for part of the vinification process, others bottle straight from the clay.

'Qvevris are quite big in capacity compared with amphorae,' Bitarishvili explains, 'because in qvevris not only wine juice but skins and stems are kept for fermentation. [So] you could not have small qvevris for fermentation. Also, in small vessels circulation of must and natural filtration is not possible.'

Qvevri, amphora, tiñaja – whatever the name, what all clay vessels have in common is that they combine the porosity of oak (which helps to micro-oxygenate the maturing wine) and the flavour neutrality of steel. In most cases, there are also the internal dynamics created

by the clay vessel's inverted egg shape: when the wine inside is fermenting and maturing, it is in constant motion, as the different temperatures on the inside and the outside of the vessel, combined with the activity of the yeasts, keep the juice moving around, slowly encouraging flavour and textural development.

It's interesting to hear winemakers talk about clay vessels. For some the history and the naturalness of the material take on an almost religious significance. Gravner is all for the symbolism – the clay vessel is the 'mother's womb' that nurtures the soul of the wine – and he insists on all his wines being made in them. Similarly Foradori emphasises the four elements of nature – earth (clay), air, water and fire –

**'PEOPLE HAVE STOPPED USING THEIR BRAINS IN TERMS OF WHAT A VESSEL DOES AND DOES NOT DO' FRANK CORNELISSEN**

and how they come together harmoniously in the making of clay vessel wine.

Etna natural winemaker Cornelissen might be expected to be in the same camp, but not so. For him they are a cellar tool and he is just as likely to use fibreglass containers as clay. In fact, he thinks the ideological stuff can be detrimental.

'Anforas [sic] are fashion,' he says. 'This

does not mean that they do not work as a vessel but people have stopped using their brains in terms of what a vessel does and does not do. We are talking about a container and not philosophy here.'

It's an important point. This is a niche sector of wine which has quickly become trendy. While the results can be stunning when clay vessels are used expertly with the best quality grapes, the fact is some wouldn't even pass muster were it not for the cachet of an ancient tradition.

Richard Bray is an assistant winemaker at Coume del Mas and Mas Cristine in the

Roussillon. He also works as a buyer and private client adviser at Swig. 'My main frustration,' he says, 'is the number of winemakers who think skin contact and amphorae are all that's needed – once the grapes are picked the clay and phenolics will take care of the rest. They don't understand that within that *élevage*, balance still must

be achieved. The wine should be monitored – there has to be eavesdropping on the conversation between the skin and juice.'

'Some people do it brilliantly – Texier in the Northern Rhône, Escoda-Sanahuja in Catalunya, Cos in Sicily – but too many winemakers are cashing in on a trend and selling some dreadful muck for too much money, because they can get away with it.'

**On the menu**

So how do somms go about introducing clay wines to the customer? In a world where most customers still think Chablis is a grape, is amphora wine destined to remain super-niche? Many would say its fortunes are tied to those of natural wine – and customer appetite for the latter is doing nothing if not growing.

'I think it's the extra step,' says Edouard Souchal, sommelier at Brett Redman restaurant The Richmond, in Hackney.

'Once [customers] reach natural wine, you say, okay, now let me treat you to the amphora. It gives you such a highlight on your wine list. When you think of organic wine and biodynamic wine, it's basically walking with nature and I think amphora [wine] is the purest example of that.'

'Purity', 'aliveness', – these are words that repeatedly come up when people talk about clay vessel wine. And they do keep talking about it. As the popularity of natural/minimal intervention wine grows, curiosity in clay vessels should grow too.

Clay vessel wines are no longer the endangered thing they were a year or two ago. Georgia now has UNESCO protection for its qvevri tradition. There is also a project to found a qvevri-making school. Meanwhile, artisans around the winemaking world are beginning to take an interest in their manufacture.

As Bray says, the results aren't always perfect, but in the right hands, perfection is not too far from the truth – and it doesn't do any harm to know that it was all there written into the formula 8,000 years ago. 🍷

**TOP 5 AMPHORA SUPERSTARS AND THEIR WINES**

**Gabrio Bini: Serragghia Bianco 2013, Sicily, Italy**

Made on the island of Pantelleria, a volcanic mass 100km south west of Sicily, from old Zibibbo (aka Muscat) vines, this spends three months on skins in amphorae before being bottled unfiltered and with zero added sulphur. It's just unique. A hypnotising nose of strawberries, orchard fruit, cinnamon and about a hundred other mercurial aromas. It's expensive, but unforgettably good. £29.50, *Tutto Wines*, 07518 858 989

**Paolo Vodopivec: Vodopivec Vitovska 2010, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Italy**

Extended skin-contact whites can end up tasting samey, with characters of apricots, nuts and flat Lucozade. Not this. Made from the Vitovska grape, it's aged on the skins for six months in the qvevri method (ie underground), then matured for two years in Slavonian oak. It emerges so fresh, so well-defined, with creamy pear, peach and orange blossom, a hint of wax, yet with firm acidity, minerality and tannic grip – it's a masterpiece. £27.85, *Les Caves de Pyrène*, 01483 538820

**Eko Glonti: Lagvini Tsitska 2013, Georgia**

Tsitska is an indigenous white Georgian grape – one of around 450 – primarily grown in Western Georgia. It ripens late and is not especially productive, but it is highly regarded by locals. The wine has a deep amber colour. Bone dry, slightly salty and with chalky tannin, combined with delicate aromas that improve with some decanting, this also shows nice freshness and balance. £26.70 RRP, *Hedonism Wines*, 020 7290 7870

**Elisabetta Foradori: Foradori Teroldego 2012, Vigneti delle Dolomiti, Italy**

Almost singlehandedly, Foradori has rescued the ancient native Trentino grape Teroldego from vanishing obscurity and restored it to its former glory. She gets her amphorae from Toledo in Spain, like the Sicilian winery Cos. This is a red of great finesse. £22.25, *Les Caves de Pyrène*, 01483 538820

**Giusto Occhipinti: Cos Pithos Rosso 2013, Sicily, Italy**

Some of the best-known and best-loved amphorae wines are made by Cos in Vittoria, Sicily. The Pithos is a blend of Nero d'Avola and Frapatto. Aged in buried amphorae of 250l and 400l for seven months, it's supple and refreshing, with raspberry, pomegranate, dried herb and earthy notes. £16.60, *Les Caves de Pyrène*, 01483 538820

