

DISCOVER ARMENIA'S GASTRO SCENE

Armenian cuisine is rich and varied — but it's the country's wine, with its time-honoured traditions and distinct flavour, that sets the destination apart



Offering everything from meat-topped flatbreads to flavoursome cheese, Armenia's diverse and exciting cuisine deserves a place on the on the global gastronomic map. This country draws on culinary influences from all over Europe, the Middle East and the Levant to serve up a menu of mouth-watering dishes — think harissa, a savoury chicken porridge; manti, a delicious baked dumpling; or ghapama, a pumpkin stuffed with boiled rice, dried fruits and nuts. A nation of food-lovers, Armenians attach great value to ancestral recipes and home cooking, so travellers should make sure to come with open minds and empty stomachs.

What truly confirms the country's place on the world culinary stage is its wine. In 2007, archaeologists uncovered a 6,100-year-old winery (the oldest ever discovered) in a cave nestled in the Armenian village of Areni — the same place where the world's oldest leather shoe was discovered. Here, visitors can still see the remains of storage jars, fermentation vats and a press where winemakers crushed grapes with their feet. But winemaking in Armenia is not only about the past: with a new generation of winemakers eager to show off their country, the local industry is making a comeback.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Armenian delicacies around the table; vineyard in Armenia with Mount Ararat in the distance; dolma; collecting grapes for wine production in a vineyard in Armenia



IMAGES: TOURISM COMMITTEE OF ARMENIA, GETTY

Armenia's wine production may be relatively small in size, but what it lacks in quantity, it makes up for in quality. There are three key grape varieties: Areni, a red that's referred to as Armenia's Pinot Noir; Voskehat, an aromatic white; and Khndoghni, a red that pairs well with meat. Areni is considered the best of the bunch — it's extremely resistant to disease, yet elegant in the glass.

Armenia's wine scene is vibrant and waiting to be discovered. Wine lovers can venture to several viticultural regions, including Aragatsotn, Tavush, Armavir and Ararat. Aside from being viticultural centres,

these regions are developing a reputation as wine-tourism destinations and offering wine-tour opportunities. Travellers should also be sure to tick off Vayots Dzor, the winemaking centre that includes the Areni Cave complex.

Alternatively, soak up Armenian wine culture by attending a wine event. Options include Yerevan Wine Days, a two-day street festival held at the beginning of May; Voskevaz Wine Festival in August; and Areni Wine Festival in October. Blending winemaking demonstrations with traditional song and dance, plenty of cheese and, of course, lots of drinking, these jolly events are a great way to see a different side to Armenia.



THREE TO TRY

Dolma: Parcels of rice and minced meat are wrapped in grape or cabbage leaves. Vegan-friendly fillings like lentils, aubergine and spices can also be used. Dolma are eaten in homes and restaurants year-round.

Khorovats: These are skewers of barbecued or grilled meats such as lamb or pork. The meat might be served with sliced onion, salad and lavash flatbread. The annual khorovats festival is held in August in Lori province.

Lavash: Featured on the UNESCO List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, lavash is the country's signature dish — a thin, wheat flour bread made in a tonir (traditional oven). The dough made of flour, eggs, water and butter is rolled and slapped against the oven wall.

Essentials

Getting there: Aeroflot flies from Heathrow to Yerevan via Moscow. aeroflot.com.

Average flight time: 7h 20m.

Getting around: Hiring a car or taking a day trip from the capital is the best way to visit Armenia's wine regions. May to October is a good time to visit.

