



# Tenili

An original cheese from the  
Meskhetian region of  
Georgia



# WHAT IS TENILI?

Tenili is a stretched-curd cheese that originated in Georgia, more precisely in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region. It is manufactured from at least 50% cow's milk, with the addition of sheep or goat's milk occasionally. Families have historically made it once a year in September since the milk is typically fattier and the weather cools down, making it possible to keep it without the need for refrigeration equipment.

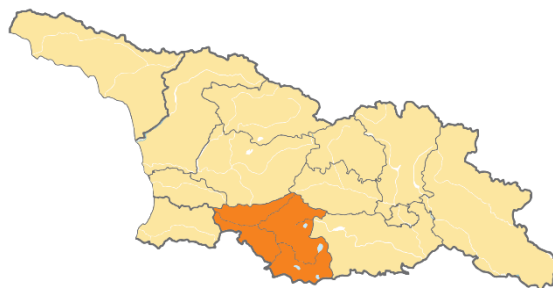
To make it easier to drain the curds and dry the strands, the milk is first skimmed in traditional manufacture. After being manually manipulated into a fairly pliable mass, the curdled milk is sliced and submerged in water that has been cooked over a wood fire. The dough is stretched and formed after it reaches the proper temperature. The cheese is submerged in cold salted water and allowed to stretch into extremely thin strands. After the extra liquid has been manually pushed out, the strands are hung on a pole to dry.

Meanwhile, the cream boils continuously over low heat before being added back to the curds. Then, the cheese and cream are kneaded by hand and pressed into clay pots covered with a cloth. This pressing technique gives the cheese its name — tenili means "pressed" in Georgian.

Then, the pots are stored upside down on a layer of ash in a cool place. This absorbs any remaining liquid to sanitize the cheese. The pots can be stored this way for up to 12 months.



# THE HISTORY OF TENILI.



In the past, almost all Meskhetian families produced Tenili cheese. Originally, Tenili was a stringy, dried cheese, which made it very light to transport. Thus, when enemy invasions forced villagers to flee their homes for safety, they could take this dried cheese with them. To eat it, Tenili was soaked in water to make it swell up, providing food for the whole family.

Later, the villagers invented a new recipe, reincorporating cream and storing everything in a clay pot called a "kochobi." These clay pots, turned upside down on ashes, allowed the cheese to be preserved and enjoyed on special occasions or for honored guests.

During the Soviet period, the government promoted the mass production of Sulguni and Imeruli, which excluded Tenili from the formal market. During this period, only a few families preserved the expertise inherited from previous generations of producers. However, Tenili cheese receives little attention in culinary and popular literature.

Tenili production is difficult and laborious because it is done entirely by hand. Stretching, kneading, and pressing require a lot of time and effort.

Tenili was registered as a geographical indication with Sakpatenti (the Georgian Intellectual Property Institute) in 2012. In 2013, its production was designated an intangible cultural heritage monument of Georgia.

In 2024, a group of Tenili producers, supported by the regional farmers' association Ertoba and the GBDC technical team, decided to create precise specifications for this cheese.



# SPECIFICATIONS

## CURRENTLY BEING REGISTERED

Tenili has been listed in the Georgian Geographical Indications Register since 2012. However, the previous specifications were quite brief and did not highlight this cheese's specific characteristics.

In 2024, a group of Tenili producers came together to propose new specifications inspired by their collaborative efforts to share practices.

In these specifications, a few key points are worth highlighting:

- Exclusive grazing of animals for at least 6 months per year, in grazing areas located at an altitude of over 1,000 meters (meadows with diverse flora)
- In the barn, at least 70% of the animals' feed must consist of hay from the appellation area. Silage and premixed feed are prohibited.
- Cows, sheep, or goats that are recognized as local breeds adapted to mountain conditions
- Use whole milk, at least 50% of which must be cow's milk
- Manufacturing process that follows the key steps of traditional production: heating temperature, curdling, stretching, salting, drying.

The registration process is still ongoing. It will allow producers to protect and promote their original know-how.



# PRODUCER'S SPEAKS

## INTERVIEW WITH NATIA ZEDGINIDZE, FARMER AND PRODUCER OF TENILI IN THE VILLAGE OF CHOBARETI

### *Can you introduce yourself?*

My name is Natia Zedginidze, I am 35 years old and I live in the village of Chobareti. I am a member of the Samtskhe-Javakheti Farmers' Association "Ertoba". I own a small livestock farm and process the milk to produce Tenili, among other products.

### *Can you tell us about the Tenili? What is the history of this cheese?*

Tenili is a traditional cheese from our region that has been passed down through the generations. The process of making it is very interesting and time-consuming. Its amazing taste, texture, and storage properties make it unique in the world.

Originally, Tenili was a dried cheese in the form of fine threads that could be stored for a long time. During enemy invasions, people could easily take it with them because it was very light. Before eating it, people poured water over the cheese to soften it and increase its mass. If the threads got wet during the journey, they could spread them out to dry and restore their original appearance.

Then, to make it tastier, these cheese threads were dipped in cream, but it couldn't be stored for long. They were therefore put in clay pots and placed on the ashes to remove the excess liquid and not spoil. This technique was preserved and led to today's cheese, which is named "Tenili" in reference to this pressing step.



### *Why is there currently an interest in increasing production?*

The Tenili is special and unique. Its manufacturing process arouses people's curiosity. Most importantly, it's delicious.

In the past, due to the difficulty of making it, we only prepared Tenili for family consumption on various festive occasions. At that time, this cheese was neither communicated nor promoted, and no one bought it.

**There was a danger that he would be forgotten.**

Then, in partnership with the Ertoba association, the GBDC team of technicians, and the French organization Fert, a small group of producers who were still making tenili in the traditional way came together. We recognized the importance of establishing a place of origin and geographical indication for our unique product. This increased interest in its production. Tenili's popularity has also increased through participation in various festivals and master classes. Many people have been affected, and the price has increased, so we produce more than before.

### *What do you expect from the geographical indication?*

With the geographical indication, our cheese will become better known. It is important to promote it. Many people enjoy the taste of authentic Tenili cheese and appreciate the effort that goes into making it. Interest among young people will increase, which is important because currently, mainly the elderly are involved in this work.



The geographical indication will also protect the taste and quality of this cheese, which are linked to a particular know-how and territory. This cheese originated in this region and developed its current appearance there. Everything affects this cheese: the climate, the grass and flowers, and the animals that eat them. All of these factors contribute to the unique characteristics of this cheese. If others try to produce it in different regions, the cheese will not have the same qualities.

The geographical indication will protect us against falsification, mass production, and industrial production. Due to its high market price, it has become profitable to produce, but not all producers follow the traditional method. There is a risk that the Tenili will lose its unique taste, quality, and shape. It would no longer have its authentic, unique, and traditional character, of which we are proud.

### *What are the next steps?*

First, at the farm level, it is important that producers in the area adhere to quality and hygiene standards to ensure good milk production. It is also necessary to monitor the health of the livestock. Finally, we must follow the steps of the common recipe that we producers have shared and formalized in the specifications.

In my opinion, the most important step is to form a group of farmers who produce Tenili cheese. We have been working together for several years on this cheese to develop specifications and build an autonomous control mechanism, both internal and external.

Progress is noticeable. We are moving forward step by step, and I think the specifications will soon be registered. This will allow us to protect our product and increase its value.



Interview conducted by Sophio GELASHVILI, GBDC Communications Officer, in May 2025



## Tenili – An original cheese from the Meskhetian region of Georgia

*Fert compiled this document from various works, documents, and notes produced over several years on Tenili, particularly in conjunction with the GBDC technical team and the Ertoba farmers' association.*

*Recently, the Swiss-Georgian GESIP (Georgian-Swiss Intellectual Property Project) program has supported Tenili producers in their reflection on the geographical indication.*

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