

Georgian Wine Could Be Allowed by Spring, Onishchenko Says

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Journalists sampling the goods at a winery in the Georgian city of Telavi. **Shakh Aivazov**

Georgian wine and mineral water could return to Russian store shelves as early as this spring, Russia's chief sanitary official said Monday.

Moscow will send teams of sanitary inspectors to facilities in Georgia, Gennady Onishchenko told reporters. If they approve local quality levels, producers can register in Russia and resume imports, he said in comments carried by Interfax.

Onishchenko was speaking after talks with Georgian officials in Moscow. Speaking at a joint news conference, the head of Georgia's national wine agency, Levan Davitashvili, said he hoped that imports could resume by the end of spring. Onishchenko added that this was realistic. "Maybe even earlier," he was quoted as saying.

Moscow imposed a wide-ranging ban on food imports from Georgia in 2006. The ban was

officially explained as having to do with quality concerns but was widely believed to be political.

Its lifting would mark a major breakthrough amid the recent thaw between Moscow and Tbilisi that followed the defeat of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement in parliamentary elections last October. Georgia's new prime minister, Bidzina Ivanishvili, has pledged to improve ties severed after the 2008 war over Georgia's breakaway province of South Ossetia.

Experts have also said Moscow would be forced to lift the ban anyway because it joined the World Trade Organization last year. When the ban was originally imposed, it was seen as a reaction to Tbilisi's demand during WTO talks over Russia's accession that Moscow open customs checkpoints in South Ossetia and fellow breakaway region Abkhazia.

Davitashvili said that both sides had agreed on how to lift the ban for wine and water and that talks about fruit would follow.

Analysts say Georgian wine producers might face an uphill struggle if they were to return after an eight-year absence, because imports from regions like Latin American have made massive inroads during that time.

But Mikhail Khubutia, president of the Union of Georgians in Russia, said Georgian products would not need much promotion upon returning to the Russian market. "Russian consumers are still in love. They have been waiting patiently," he told The Moscow Times. Khubutia said wines from Georgia would also profit from quality improvements made during the past few years.

Such improvements were "forced upon them because they had to focus on exporting to Western markets," he explained.

However, Khubutia was cautious in estimating future market share. He said Georgian wines would probably first capture 2 percent of the Russian market.

Georgian wine and mineral water, popular in Russia since the Soviet era, made up almost a third of total Georgian exports before the ban.

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