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## FILM REVIEW

*A Chef in Love. (1001 retsept iz meniu vliublennogo povara).* Georgia/France, 1996. Director, Nana Dzhordzhadze. Cinematography, Georgi Beridze. Written by Andre Grail and Irakli Kvirikadze.

Well received at festivals, movies made in the region of the former Soviet Union are considered hard sells at film markets. They rarely end up in Western distribution, and only a few are seen by more than a handful of people. A recent exception is *A Chef in Love*, playing at arthouse theaters around North America and soon to come out on video.

On a train in the Caucasus circa 1920, a young Georgian socialite of independent means, Princess Cecilia Abashidze (Nino Kirtadze) comes across a much older French bonvivant, Pascal Ichak (Pierre Richard, of *The Tall Blond Man with One Red Shoe*). She first admired him years ago when he worked as a dancer at a Nile River cruise and she was a little girl. Now, as a grownup, she gets a first-hand chance to taste his charms. Besides other things, Pascal also turns out to be greatly endowed in *affaires culinaires*, and soon his culinary concoctions—French with a Georgian twist—are offered out of a restaurant in Tbilisi. The young Princess Abashidze is the jewel of this fine establishment. She entertains the guests by playing the piano while Pascal exercises his cooking genius in the adjacent kitchen. The clientele consists mostly of well-to-do members of the independent Georgian government who are especially indebted to Pascal for tipping them on several occasions when rebel groups have been plotting to blow them up.

The restaurant idyll, however, is brutally interrupted by the arrival of these same rebels, a motley bunch of swindlers who now violently flux into this temple of good taste. They ruin the restaurant, exile the chef to the attic, take the princess, and force her to marry the inferiority complex-ridden Zigmunt Gogoladze, who will eventually kill her out of jealousy. Besides all other awful traits the rebels display, they have absolutely no taste in food. They hire some slovenly peasant woman to cook their meals. The heartbroken Pascal cannot tolerate this and decides to share his recipes. He writes them down and sends them to the cook, but the cook does not know how to read, so the recipes end up with Princess Cecilia, who later on publishes them in a book.

This very cookbook triggers the whole account of the story which is told in flashbacks by Cecilia's son. He is a Georgian art curator who now gradually recounts the relationship between his mother and her French lover and is relieved to realize that he actually may be an offspring of the cook rather than of his despotic Communist father.

Director Nana Dzhordzhadze, best known for her film *My English Grandfather* (1986), has been wondering how to make a commercially successful film and has come up with a concoction of her own, a "chakhokhbili." The recipe: take a charismatic star in the company of a sexy newcomer, make them enjoy life amidst gourmet sophistication, mix in slapstick situations on account of dimwitted commies, add bits and pieces of majestic mountainous landscape, sprinkle with Pirosmeni paintings, Georgian church architecture, and wine-making rituals, and spice up with music by Goran Bregovic. Output: an innocuous marketable piece, which, indeed, is picked up by distributors (who would never even care to consider other Georgian-French works, such as Iosseliani's, for example).

Many films out of the former Soviet Union lately have made the effort to show how bad the Communists were. In Alexander Rogozhkin's *Chekists* (1992) they were mainly preoccupied with cleaning up piles of dead naked bodies, and in Sergey Livnev's *Hammer and Sickle* (1994) they were involved in performing forced sex-change operations. Looking at the Caucasus, their moral degradation was analyzed in Abuladze's *Repentance*. And in Yuri Kara's *The Feasts of Balthazar*, Stalin was identified as a former bandit.

*A Chef in Love* rests on a different presumption—the Communists were bad because they did not have taste in refined cuisine. Kamo, their leader, ate shit for nine years, they admit in the film. The whole message of *A Chef in Love* is more or less charging with the plebeian sin of not knowing how to eat well.

**Dina Iordanova, Leicester University**