

The Story of "Chama Mama"

Respondent
Tamara Chubinidze

Interviewer
Nini Sikharulidze

Interview Date
June 7, 2023

Introduction
In the first part of the interview, Tamara Chubinidze shares her immigration story, beginning in 1996 in the United States. In the second part of the interview, Tamara tells us about the establishment of the Georgian restaurant, "Chama Mama."

Background

Nini Sikharulidze: Tell us a little bit about yourself, please. Where and when were you born? How does your story of immigration begin?
Tamara Chubinidze: I was born in Tbilisi in 1981. My immigration story begins in 1996 at the age of 15. At that time, my father was living in America, and he wanted to give me the opportunity of continuing my education in the U.S.

Nini Sikharulidze: This decision must have been difficult for you and your family.
Tamara Chubinidze: It was a difficult decision. I left behind the dark 90s in Tbilisi. The fact was that childhood and adolescence are the sweetest periods, no matter the challenges of poverty. I remember this period very vividly. I remember my school in Tbilisi. When I arrived (in the US) in 1996 there was no internet, no phones. Nowadays, everything is known for immigrants. America, for me, was only known from movies.

Nini Sikharulidze: What were your first impressions of the U.S. upon arrival?
Tamara Chubinidze: In 1996, when I arrived, I witnessed the bustling Times Square. I started crying so uncontrollably that my family immediately brought me home. Here, I was seeing how much electricity was going into advertisements while knowing that in Tbilisi, my friends couldn't watch TV or listen to music because there was no electricity. I remembered such perception of Times Square due to the poverty we went through in the 90s. However, there were a lot of positive memories as well. The handwritten letters are a sweet memory. Every day, my friends and I would write journal entries. We would wait impatiently if someone, once a year, would be travelling between Georgia and the U.S. and with a lot of begging, we would ask them to deliver the letters. It was a significant ritual – to receive letters.

Settlement in the U.S.

Nini Sikharulidze: In the U.S., where did your family first settle and is this the place where you live to this day?
Tamara Chubinidze: We settled in New York. After that, not once did my living place change.

Nini Sikharulidze: Can you remember some of the very first challenges you faced as an immigrant?
Tamara Chubinidze: I remember, almost every day, I was amazed by new experiences. I remember vividly my first day in an American high school. I was seeing countless people with various accents, each a unique one, which was a shock for me. I came to New York thinking I

knew English. It turned out, however, that I couldn't understand English well in school. Since it was not my choice to leave for the US, it always stays with me that Georgia, my homeland, will forever have a special place in my heart. My entire life, even now, this longing remains. I remember countless sweet and beautiful moments, although we faced significant challenges.

Nini Sikharulidze: What would you say was the greatest challenge of them all? I can imagine there was a lot of emotional sacrifice that you had to make.
Tamara Chubinidze: More than anything, what hurt my heart deeply was abandoning my friends in Georgia. Even today, I cherish our Georgian relationships. I miss these connections in America. In America, there is not much time left for these connections. The lack of friendships has had a significant impact on my young adulthood in America. Our open relationships are what I miss the most.

Nini Sikharulidze: You must have experienced a lot of nostalgia back then. Were you constantly contemplating when to travel back home?
Tamara Chubinidze: My life began anew each September. In June, I could not wait to go back to Tbilisi. School established a cyclical routine. After the birth of my children, I had the first one at the age of 20, the cycle persisted. We were always anticipating the summer to come to find ourselves back in Tbilisi with the children.

Nini Sikharulidze: What was your daily routine like amidst this new life you were living?
Tamara Chubinidze: Throughout these years, my daily routine has been entirely immersed in work. I expend maximum energy in my job – active living is essential for me. I start my day at 6 a.m., preparing for an 8 a.m. start of the workday. I am a morning person, and I love a loaded, fruitful day. I also love the diversity of individuals in my everyday life. I appreciate meeting different people every day. In the evening, when I return home, I occasionally reflect on how much energy I have invested, how many new stories I have heard. A fulfilling day brings great happiness to my life.

Nini Sikharulidze: Did you ever think of returning to Georgia? Was there any consideration on your end that you would finish schooling in the U.S. and then go back?
Tamara Chubinidze: I attended school in New York. After that, I decided to return to Georgia for a certain period. I thought that I would pursue university studies in Georgia. At the age of 18, I got married in Georgia, and then my spouse and I decided to return to the United States together. This brought a new twist to my life, combining studies and work, as well as being a mother. Life became filled – someone at home, someone in the kindergarten, someone at school…

Nini Sikharulidze: Are there any Georgian traditions that you transferred to your newly-formed family?
Tamara Chubinidze: Tradition is intertwined with ritual, celebration, and the preparation of food. I am very fortunate that my children are actively engaged in preserving Georgian traditions. They are in constant competition with each other which celebration falls at whose house, who prepares which Georgian dish... No matter how busy we may get and where we may be, we try our absolute best so that the days which are important in our culture are spent together.

Nini Sikharulidze: Do your children speak Georgian?
Tamara Chubinidze: My children freely converse in Georgian. They freely read. This is, of course, a result of our hard-work so that the Georgian language is just as native to my children as it was for me. This is to be credited to the grandparents, uncles, and aunts who lovingly introduced the richness of the Georgian language, literature, and culture to our children during summers. Such a thing cannot only be done by a parent. This results from great enthusiasm of extended family and children themselves. They have acquired this deep love for their homeland and their native language.

"Chama Mama"

Nini Sikharulidze: I want to hear everything about "Chama Mama." Please, tell us how the idea emerged and what motivated it.
Tamara Chubinidze: I always say that "Chama Mama" is my love letter to the motherland. And it truly is. If there is a way to glorify your homeland, it's all encapsulated in "Chama Mama." It represents what I anticipated throughout my life, bringing together the story of my migration, my emotions, and the essence of my entire existence.

Nini Sikharulidze: When and how did the desire to create such a space emerge?
Tamara Chubinidze: Since 1996, I have been living in America. When people found out that I was Georgian, they couldn't understand who I was. I always needed to prove where Georgia was and who the Georgians were. This was very painful. The most significant aspect for me was the testimony that we were not Russians. I desperately wanted to have a place where I could show these people my country, where I could demonstrate who we are, the Georgians. Such a space was not available during my immigration. Later, some restaurants opened, but I had my own vision which I wanted to see come to life.

Nini Sikharulidze: Did you go into the project with prior experience on hospitality industry?
Tamara Chubinidze: I decided to change my career completely. I had no experience in the hospitality industry. Mainly, I was working in the financial sector. I thought I could do a Master's degree in the subject, or work in organizations that would allow me to get hospitality industry experience. I chose practical experience over an academic path. Not only that, I found an Italian brand, Le Pain Quotidien, where I worked as a manager for two years. After a certain time, I realized that this was my calling. The idea was born that I should create my own Georgian concept. This is still unfolding. You start remembering flavors, the dishes of your childhood… These tastes generated a lot of nostalgia. From here, "Chama Mama" was born.

Nini Sikharulidze: How did it feel when you achieved your dream?
Tamara Chubinidze: I will never forget the waiting line outside "Chama Mama" ten days after its opening. I felt this acute responsibility, the responsibility of introducing and popularizing my homeland. Our Georgian wisdom that the guest is holy and the gift of God poured into my restaurant.
Tamara Chubinidze: "Chama Mama" has become our community. None of my team members are just employees; we recognize that we have a great responsibility and a Georgian objective. This resonates with all of us. Everything begins with "Language, Homeland, Faith."

Nini Sikharulidze: Can you take us through the procedural details of "Chama Mama"'s operation?
Tamara Chubinidze: Language is the beginning of everything. Many do not know that we have our own linguistic community, that we, Georgians, have the most beautiful script, that we have three alphabets. We do not serve the guest only food; this task becomes a mission of conveying a message to our guest. The alphabet is a necessity. I wanted Americans to know that the Georgian language exists. We put a Georgian alphabet on the wall. This is the most important thing in our restaurant. Nobody will walk past it without asking about the wall. The whole philosophy is in conveying those nuances in such an aesthetic manner that the guests have a chance of digging deeper. It's a huge pleasure – being able to transfer this knowledge.
Tamara Chubinidze: From the beginning, before "Chama Mama" became a space, we created 100 facts about Georgia. In the restaurant, after guests order dishes and desserts and the payment time comes, it is a significant moment that gives us another chance for one more contact with the guests for informational purposes. During the payment, we offer our guests postcards with beautiful illustrations containing facts about Georgia: who was King Tamar [1],

[1] Tamar the Great (1184 – 1213) reigned during the apex of the Georgian Golden Age. In Georgian, she is referred to as King Tamar (*თამარ მეფე*) to commemorate her vast influence on the sociopolitical development of the country. King Tamar is deeply loved in Georgia, and she is considered as a Saint by the Georgian Orthodox Church.

who was Pirosmani [2], who was Vakhtang Gorgasali [3], what does Barbaroba [4] entail... This is another opportunity for a subtle farewell and a chance to share knowledge.

Nini Sikharulidze: I know that the atmosphere and space in "Chama Mama" is also very aesthetically and artistically pleasing.
Tamara Chubinidze: Our artistic design was choreographed by Georgian artists. We have many souvenirs. The crockery for the restaurant is made in Georgia in order to popularize Georgian designs, ceramics and craft. Ketsi [5] and other Georgian crockery is showcased in the restaurant to portray the Georgian history of ceramic craft. We have a great selection of wines – all of our wines are Georgian.

Nini Sikharulidze: How would you describe the thinking that goes into the creation of a menu that is authentically representative of the Georgian culture?
Tamara Chubinidze: We try to convey a story each season. For example, we have a Guruli Ghvezeli [6] that is only prepared during Kalandoba [7]. We explain to the guests what Kalandoba means. We also have a Chichilaki [8], which is always met with great amazement by the guests, since everywhere in the world aside from Georgia it's the Christmas tree that is displayed. This is a significant part of our culture. We also offer Lobiani [9] to guests uniquely during Barbaroba. We try to convey that Chakapuli is a spring dish and should not be a constant part of the menu. Furthermore, we emphasize that Chakapuli [10] is associated with Easter, and we educate people on the Georgian tradition of Easter. This is an immense opportunity to give honor to those individuals who participated in our upbringing, in the formation of cultural heritage and the transmission of the Georgian history.

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[2] Pirosmani (1862 – 1918), Niko Pirosmanishvili, was a Georgian painter, who rose to recognition posthumously. He is one of the most known and appreciated painters in Georgia of all time. His art constitutes a major part of the Georgian culture and self-presentation.
[3] Vakhtang I Gorgasali ruled Iberia in the second half of 5th and the beginning of the 6th centuries. A legend associates the discovery and founding of the Georgian now-capital Tiflis (Tbilisi) with Gorgasali. He is one of the most loved Kings in the Georgian history, and is considered as a Saint by the Georgian Orthodox church.
[4] Barbaroba is a Georgian holiday to celebrate and commemorate Saint Barbare on December 17th (December 4-6 on Georgian Old calendar).
[5] Ketsi is a Georgian clay and stone pan.
[6] Guruli Gvezeli is specific to Guria, a region in Georgia. Guruli Gvezeli is a pie with cheese and boiled eggs inside. It is only made during Georgian Christmas by the female head of the household. It is a tradition that each person in the family only receives one per feast.
[7] Kalandoba is a New Year celebratory day in Guria.
[8] Chichilaki is a Georgian Christmas tree that is an indispensable part of each family's New Year's celebration. It is peculiar in that it is made up of dried hazelnut or walnut branches, uniquely specific to the Georgian culture and tradition.
[9] Lobiani is a Georgian red bean bread.
[10] Chakapuli is the most famous Georgian stew. It is only made for the Georgian Orthodox Easter and is specific to spring celebration.

"Chama Mama" Today

Nini Sikharulidze: Tell us a little bit about the name "Chama Mama." For Georgians, this name sounds quite funny. How did you and your team come up with it?
Tamara Chubinidze: The name "Chama Mama" was born while working with the branding company. This name, in Georgian, sounds funny. This is the name that is humorous while retaining immense cultural meaning. "Chama" signifies the rich cultural heritage that Georgians are proud of through our gastronomy. "Mama" is an international word that carries the meaning of motherhood. It is unique in Georgian, as it does not signify the mother. The name of the restaurant was created from this idea. It is precisely these two words: the association of the feast with mother. Firstly, it's the mother that feeds you, and then, the mother of the mother. It's always someone's mother who provides food. The act of feasting is inseparable from the phenomenon of a mother.

Nini Sikharulidze: This was a big launch for immense goals towards the popularization of Georgia. I would imagine that it would not have been possible without a group of people who stood by your side throughout the process of its creation.
Tamara Chubinidze: The team of "Chama Mama" is exceptional. If we had to win the most cold-bloodied war, individuals who win such a war would probably be the team of "Chama Mama." I say this with absolute happiness and pride. It is very rare that you stand next to such people. These are people who do not spare their energy and time, not only for this great Georgian cause, but also for the guest who comes to the restaurant. The team of "Chama Mama" is open-hearted, harmonically singing, "Mravalzhamieri." We strengthen each other. Who else supports one another as we Georgians do?! We are strong. We have energy, talent and determination for that.

Nini Sikharulidze: As you may also agree, projects with such objectives also come with the responsibility of collaboration with other like-minded organizations and individuals. Tell us a little bit about how "Chama Mama" self-associates with other entities with similar objectives.
Tamara Chubinidze: A very important period is unfolding for Georgia today. It's the Renaissance period when everyone celebrates Georgian culture. It's astonishing that for 8,000 years, we've been producing wine in Georgia. This is a feeling of immense pride that the world is finally discovering the cultural reality in which you were brought up. The Pét-Nat method, which individuals just discovered: at home, we call it Matchari. You realize that all we were brought up on is today a trend. It is the interest of bringing back to life the old and representing it into the modern period that drives us.
Tamara Chubinidze: This is an important period to create a big wave with like-minded people to promote our country. During the Saperavi festival in up-state New York, there were no unnecessary questions: when, where and we will be there. Whatever we can, we try to do it to

our maximum capacity.

Nini Sikharulidze: Can you describe your first experience of visiting the Saperavi Festival "Saperica" in NYC, so far away from the home of these native Georgian species of grape?
Tamara Chubinidze: I call the Finger Lakes, New York's Kakheti. During the Second World War, a Ukrainian, Konstantin Frank, who took the grape seeds from Georgia, came to Finger Lakes and planted them there. Nobody had any idea about this. When I visited the Finger Lakes, I cried at the sight of Saperavi and Rkatsiteli. It's such a big history. Many grape varieties were brought to the U.S., but only Saperavi and Rkatsiketi had the ability to withstand the temperatures to honor us. As we, Georgians, say, "wine is our blood."
Tamara Chubinidze: Georgian soldiers who participated in the war in Georgia used to place vine shoots in their chest pockets, so that a vineyard would grow out of their place of death. To witness the growth of Georgian wine in the Finger Lakes is a great joy. Lasha Tsatava and his partner Erika Frey initiated the Finger Lakes festival, "Saperica," dedicated to Georgian wine, gastronomy, and the popularization of Georgian culture. Americans are crazy about it. It's a great happiness to know that they are knowledgeable about Georgian wine. For two years, the "Chama Mama" team has been going to the Finger Lakes, trying to introduce and popularize the Georgian cuisine.
Tamara Chubinidze: This year, we held a feast for 170 people. The correct presentation of Georgian food is at a table, through a feast. Georgian cuisine is not street food. Our culture is not eating on the go. While planning for this year's celebration, we decided to set a whole table. This is what is authentic, since the Georgian people serve their guests at a table.

Keeping Georgian Culture

Nini Sikharulidze: Do you experience nostalgia for your homeland to this day? Or do you foresee going back and living in Georgia in the coming future?
Tamara Chubinidze: Even today, I miss my loved ones the most. Missing these relationships and people is the most precious thing to me. I will gladly return to Georgia to spend my years there when I have less to do here in America. It must be an authentic Georgia that we Georgians want – free and independent.
Tamara Chubinidze: At the age of 15, I came to America under arranged, prepared conditions. My father greeted me with everything in order.

Nini Sikharulidze: As you may know, the reality is quite harsher for the newly-arrived Georgians in the U.S. today. From the experience of your self-actualization, do you have any advice to those who newly immigrated to the U.S. on how to create a better life for themselves?
Tamara Chubinidze: Today I hear stories about the sacrifice Georgian immigrants make. I

have a lot of respect for these people. Firstly, I would encourage all the people who come to America that everything will work out. This is the country where if you don't stop working, your dreams will definitely come true. I would like to encourage each Georgian immigrant to persevere. I wish them the ability to maintain their willpower as long as to make their dreams come true.

Nini Sikharulidze: Lastly, as you know, Georgia hasn't had the easiest past, its challenges with Russia's War in 2008 and the ongoing occupation by Russia present a huge brake on Georgian people's liberty. From your perspective, as an immigrant, what type of future do you wish upon Georgia?

Tamara Chubinidze: To my motherland, I always call it "my motherland," I wish true Georgianness, united Georgia with the hospitality, prosperity, and joy, as we know it. I am hopeful for the generation that never witnessed the Soviet Union. I am hopeful for these children since in their minds, no Soviet mentality exists. This is a complete kind of freedom. I will be by the side of all the people whose mission it is to make Georgia united again. This is fighting ability. That what is truly Georgian is what the whole team of "Chama Mama" advocates for. This is exactly the important wave that we, the Georgian immigrants, are joining from afar, but wholeheartedly. I would like a cheerful, happy, authentic and Georgian Georgia for me, for my children and for the children of every Georgian.