The Story of "Saami Somi" and

its Tribute to the Legacy of Post-Soviet Culinary Experience

Respondents

Michael Kolodesh and Donna Kolodesh

Interviewers

Nini Sikharulidze and Cole Davis



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Introduction

In the first part of the interview, Michael and Donna Kolodesh share the immigration story of their family from Georgia to Philadelphia in 1993. In the second part of the interview, the Kolodesh siblings speak about the establishment of their restaurant, "Saami Somi," which honors the ex-Soviet Diasporic space and its unique culinary scene in Philadelphia.







Interviewer 1: Thank you so much again for being here with us today. We would like to start with your migration story in general. Could you tell us your name, when and where were you born?

Michael Kolodesh: Sure. My name is Michael Kolodesh. It's actually Mikhail Kolodesh on my birth certificate, and Daniela Kolodesh. So, speaking for myself, I was born in 1988 in Tbilisi. And I could just say Donna was born in Philadelphia in '93. Yeah, that's, that's kind of our background.

Interviewer 1: Did you grow up in Tbilisi?

Michael Kolodesh: I was born in '88 and we immigrated in '93, so I turned five in Philadelphia, like a couple days after we actually arrived in Philadelphia. I only spent four, like almost five years there [Tbilisi]. I grew up in Philadelphia, basically, and around Philadelphia, between the city and the suburbs, essentially. My upbringing was definitely a mixture, or I guess our upbringing since Donna was born here, you know. Both of our upbringings were very much a unique cultural experience between American-US experiences, Philadelphia-specific experiences, and then at home and within the ex-Soviet Diaspora, kind of ex-Soviet experiences in general, and occasionally, specifically Georgian, and I can give you more information on that.

Interviewer 1: That makes sense. You mentioned that your whole family immigrated to the US?

Michael Kolodesh: Donna, my parents, myself and our grandma on our mom's side. Unfortunately, our grandfather, at that point, had passed away,

Donna Kolodesh: And our uncle as well.

Michael Kolodesh: And our uncle, yes, our mom's brother, who are Yakobashvili. So they have the -shvili last name, and yeah, and some family had stayed in Georgia, and enough later, but that was like basically a core family.

Interviewer 1: From my understanding, you know, you mentioned that the 80s was quite a difficult time in Georgia. Was it the economic reasons that were the main factors of immigration, or were there any other factors, like political or social involved?

Michael Kolodesh: Well, '88 is like right around when the wall came down and the Soviet Union collapsed. I forget exactly the exact dates, but it was right around that time. And so, there was kind of a fight for the future of Georgia, whether it would be more Russia, close to Russia, close to Europe? There was essentially a civil war that broke out between factions and from what I understand from my parents telling us the story, slash googling it a little bit, is that there was a pro or Russia-backed government that was trying to take control, and then, a Georgia for Georgians, kind of government that was trying to take control. And they were both clashing, essentially. One of the biggest factors was how dangerous it was. I was just under a year old when the April 9 riots happened, and my parents were in the square hours before it happened, and then they experienced – this is a story referred to many times – they experienced people running down the street, bloodied past my grandma's old house. There was an incident where they got

caught in crossfire at an airport, when they were taking a friend there I think, and so the dangers started to get to a point where it became clear that for a young family, it would be safer to be somewhere else, essentially. And in addition to the fact that when, a former government collapsed and there was no government in place, obviously, the economic opportunities weren't present, which is changing, I think, hopefully, but at the time it seemed desperate. I guess the future was very unclear, and so economics were definitely part of it, part of the thought process, you know, the whole old story of a better life kind of thing. When we left and for many years later, just talking to our parents, talking to friends and family who stayed, there were constant water outages, power outages, grocery stores were empty, things like that. I think in that interim phase between changing between the Soviet Union and then becoming an independent country, basically. So, I remember there was like 5-6-7 years where that was all happening, just in my own memory. Just talking to like some of our family who managed to leave Georgia and everyone always sent money back to Georgia. And for a time, people really only managed to survive in Georgia based on people sending money back. These are things I'm telling you that I've heard from my family and friends could be different from many different people, but these are more anecdotal experiences, I think.

Interviewer 1: That makes sense, and I think a lot of our interviewees who left around the same time have answered, you know, similarly, along the mix of political and economic and social decisions. What we are also curious about is that, you know, moving with a whole family is quite a big risk. Nowadays, we see people, first moving maybe singularly, and then deciding to bring their family with them. Was there some type of connections you had in Philly as to why you decided, or your family decided to go specifically there? Was there someone who was to provide, financial support from the beginning, because it was such a big risk, all in all?

Michael Kolodesh: Right, from my understanding of the history, I have to check honestly with my parents, our uncle came first. I think he came for economic opportunity. And then when it became evident that things were getting bad, he became kind of an anchor around which there was an opportunity - he was available tfor people o come to. And you know, when we came there was classic immigrant story, like seven or eight people living in like two-bedroom apartment in Northeast Philadelphia and then settling in figuring our way around. I mean, our parents, Donna and I were barely cognizant, and they had to figure their way around and slowly build up from there, basically.

But all was an amazing kind of saving grace, and maybe a singular event that it's so like unique that I don't know if it could ever repeat in the same way, but there was a huge ex-Soviet community that really created this, like safe haven and support system for each other. They were able to, lift each other up and eventually and just like, figure their way out. And it was kind of like economy or community within a community. So, and that's kind of like, as people have become more integrated into the states, their kids are more Americanized. People have moved away. That community has dispersed and doesn't really exist as much anymore. It’s just older. But at the time it was, you know, people in their 20s and their early 30s all kind of like in the same boat, coming

over from ex-Soviet Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, yeah, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, from all over all regions – and creating this community within Philly. And that kind of became its own culture. And that's the culture that Donna and I grew up with. And it's kind of, it's not really Russian, it's not really Georgian, it's not really American, it's like just a really interesting mix of all of the above. And so that's the community that they found themselves in, and were able to, kind of, like figure things out in a large part, I think thanks to that community.

Interviewer 1: That makes sense. That's quite interesting. Because I think the way you're describing the immigrant community in Philly at the time is exactly the community maybe we have today in New York, it's quite different. Would you say that Philadelphia at the time, was the main, I guess, attraction point for a lot of Georgians, or newly independent peoples… Was it kind of in the same sense that back then, it was safe anchor, just like maybe Brooklyn and New York is today to a lot of Georgians?

Michael Kolodesh: Definitely, definitely. I don't know, like, why it started that way. Maybe because its proximity to New York. And maybe New York was the original kind of place that people think to go. So that's where they went. And then, some people splintered off into Philadelphia, down to Philadelphia, which maybe was more affordable or a little easier to live in than New York, and people found their way there, and then eventually, that's how we found our way there, and then a community got built up around that. But, you know, we live close to New York. We have really close relationship to New York. I mean, Donna lives in New York. Actually, I lived in New York for a long time. Very familiar with Chama Mama. It's really good. They do an amazing job. So, Philadelphia is a little bit of a mini version of New York in a lot of ways, interesting, including the community, the ex-Soviet community aspect of it, it's quite a big community. Now it's changed different. It's smaller in some ways, but Brighton Beach kind of culture, that's kind of happened in East Philly. It's like Northeast Philly is the Philadelphia version of that. Basically, fascinating, yeah. So, it's definitely very prevalent. There was a time when you go down certain streets, like Bustleton Avenue is a, is a main thoroughfare in northeast Philly, and the majority of signs were in Russian. Why were they Russian? Because that's people from all ethnic groups, I guess could speak Russian at the time, right? So, if you're Georgian, you could speak Russian. If you're Moldovan, you could speak Russian. If you're from Kazakhstan, you could speak Russian. So, there was a time, and you would traverse through the area, and everything was in Russian. Now that's changed. You don't see that nearly as much anymore, but that's how it was in like the 90s and early 2000s when we were growing up.

Interviewer 1: That's fascinating. And when you immigrated, you were young. You said you were about to be five years old. Did your family continue to speak in Georgian, is that correct to say within the family circle, and you were trying to learn English outside of it?

Michael Kolodesh: Well, that's the interesting thing, because people often ask us that, but we actually grew up speaking Russian, because that was the primary language when my parents grew up in Georgia under the Soviet Union. And so, when they were growing up in school, Russian was

primary and Georgian was taught as a secondary language, but everything in school was in Russian. So, we grew up speaking Russian as a primary language, and Georgian was spoken more casually, I think, or what we say oftentimes is when the elders wanted to keep something from us and keep a secret from us, sensitive conversations. So, for me, that kind of stuck a little bit. Very loosely today, if I hear very basic version conversation, I could understand it. I don't know for Donna, as much of that stuck, and now it's been like our grandma passed away a few years ago, and so the Georgian side of the language kind of fell away gradually. And I think as I became an adult, I heard less and less of it. So, it's become even harder for me to understand it, but neither Donna nor I speak it or can write it only through doing Saami Somi, I'd be reconnected a little bit with like the alphabet, just on the branding side of things, reconnected with branding, like I know how the word *khachapuri* looks in Georgia, but I couldn't, like necessarily read it, you know. So maybe eventually, if you keep doing this long enough, something but, like, it's hard, you need to speak it constantly, you know. Just from doing it for branding purposes, you can't really learn it. So unfortunately, that's one thing that Donna and I didn't get a good grasp of, is the language, but, yeah, we, we grew up speaking Russian, and generally within the community, like, if you went out to restaurants, you spoke Russian at the restaurant, generally, because there are people from all different kind of l countries. Yeah. So that's kind of our connection to the language

Interviewer 1: That makes sense. And just a curious question, your last name, has it been shortened as the US version, or is this the original last name that you and your family also held while in Georgia?

Michael Kolodesh: So that's interesting. So, our last name is our paternal last name. And on our paternal side, our family arrived to Georgia during, right before World War II, basically, so they were escaping, you know, the war, or pre-war, basically, in eastern in Ukraine, actually. I think our grandma definitely came from the outskirts of Odessa, I think, and our grandfather, who had our dad's side, who passed away before I was born, our understanding is he may have come from like Romania or Hungary. But originally, we did a deep dive because my cousins spell their name the j instead of sh, so my girlfriend curious about that and looked into it. If you spell it with a J is very popular Polish name. So at some point we were in Poland, but basically all-around Eastern Europe, and then on the on our dad's side ended up in Georgia, but our mom's side had been in Georgia for millennia.

Donna Kolodesh: So our dad was born in Georgia, but his parents were not born in Georgia.

Interviewer 1: That's super fascinating, because sometimes we do see people adapting their last names to when they come to the US. And I had somehow assumed that, because there was a -sh next year last name, maybe *-shvili* was removed because that's usually quite complicated for Americans to pronounce, but that's a fascinating family story and ancestral lines.

Michael Kolodesh: That's interesting. That, yeah, I kind of had never thought of that. You could very easily add a -shvili at the end.

Interviewer 1: That's, that was, I guess, my little bias going into this. So, you mentioned there was a huge Soviet community when you got to Philly, and I assume you grew up in the Soviet community too. Was there around this sentiment of maybe your family went to events that were specifically Georgia focused? Or was it more like mixed, just like during, you know, Soviet times, you know, post-Soviet countries, everyone hanging out together, going to specific events together?

Michael Kolodesh: Yeah, I think it was more the latter. And I think that was a beautiful thing, because everyone's culture was just intertwined. And I think that totally came out of the post-Soviet or Soviet era. I think when in the Soviet Union, all the cultures were being exchanged, that's one of the benefits maybe that happened at that time. But like, people definitely went to, for example, I forget their name, but the famous Georgian dancing group…

Interviewer 1: Sukhishvilebi?

Michael Kolodesh: Yes, yes. I don't want to butcher that. But like, they, for example, came to Philly, to Northeast Philly, several times. Everyone from the community loves them, everyone but, you know, but if there was a Ukrainian more, something more Ukrainian focused, like to me growing up, I think maybe to both of us growing up, we never really distinguished like: Oh, this is Ukrainian. We were like, oh, that's just from the old country.

Donna Kolodesh: People also didn't really distinguish, by people I mean, I guess, like, Americans didn't really distinguish us either. So growing up like, now, I think it'd be a little different. But growing up, when we were going to elementary school or middle school or high school, everyone just assumed we were Russian. And I actually remember, and they kind of anyone that was Russian speaking. There wasn't a lot of kids, but there were some kids, and they would just clump them in that, not even Soviet, just Russian. And I remember my mom telling people we were from Georgia, and they were just very confused. So, for a long time, I think we also didn't, yeah, we didn't really distinguish ourselves either just, well, I don't know about you, Mike, but maybe me, because I was born here and just grew up hearing that I was Russian all the time. And so, it wasn't until later that we kind of understood, oh, our family is specifically from Georgia, which was part of the Soviet Union, but it was not until later, you know, that we got that.

Michael Kolodesh: Yeah, that's exactly right. And there was a time when there was like impossible to explain to Americans. What Georgia even, what *Gruzia* or *Sakartvelo*, you know, what our last names? Obviously like my mom's last name was always a catastrophe because she didn't change her last name. But now, obviously, if we say that we're from Georgia, mostly people know. People mostly know the food, especially, so it's completely changed. And maybe that happened around the beginning of, like the social media era, when information and knowledge and history that before was not even something that people would think about in the States, at least from the travel lens became more prevalent. And now, people are into travel and food through social media. And so, I think that's been a big catalyst, and people understanding… and it's been long enough that the Soviet Union hasn't been around, so versus like it, literally, when we moved here, literally, was a new thing, that Georgia was its own country.

Interviewer 1: Media has definitely played a role. And also, there's, I guess, more cultural sensitivity when it comes to absolutely troubled past nowadays than there was before.

Michael Kolodesh: Absolutely.

Interviewer: Our next question is, after maybe the immigration documents were taken care of, did your family ever go back to Georgia to visit, or did you ever go back as growing up? Maybe right now, to keep in touch with Georgia specifically or has that not really happened too much?

Michael Kolodesh: Yeah, so that's kind of one of the catalysts that got us doing Saami Somi and got us into the business we're in now. But we hadn't gone, and we hadn't even thought about going for a long time, and for a long time, like into the early 2010s, it was still kind of scary to go. And then things started changing. Donna and I got older, so we started learning understanding it better.

Donna Kolodesh: Our parents were scared to go because I think they had a certain view of it, whether or not it was actually scary, we're not sure, but our parents were always really scared to go.

Michael Kolodesh: I would even say scared but there was some level of danger and not even like danger. But just like I said into the early 90s, I remember there just being power outages, water outages. So, for immigrants who, at that time, like, barely saved money, things like that, other vacations were a priority. Let's put it that way, I guess. And all of our family and friends had left. Our close family and friends had left by that point, so we didn't really have a connection left to go visit, like a mom or a grandma or something like that. But like I said, in the early 2000s, first of all, the country, kind of like, started changing and the economy started getting much stronger. Things started getting much better. Donna and I, at the same time, kind of came into our own. So we started learning more about the country and the history, like all these things were happening together. Social media came about. People became more culturally sensitive, like all these things started to coalesce around the same time period. And then, we started to get the twinge that we want to go back in the early 2000s to mid 2010s. And then our uncle started going backI think our uncle started going back because he really missed it, like he really loved it, and loves it. And he learned that the city of Tbilisi, they were renovating Aghmashenebeli Avenue, which is where our grandma's house was basically, which we still own. And when he went back, he learned that the whole street is becoming like Shardeni, basically, like pedestrian only, it's going to be like shops like, supposed to be really nice, like, kind of touristy. So, then we were like: Oh, that's cool. Like, we have property there. Let's go check it out. Let's see what's happening. And so, the house was, like, basically dilapidated at that point, and they restabilized it, they restructured it, made it livable. Basically, all we needed to do was go in and, like, do interior renovations. Donna is an architect by trade, so we were like like, let's take a look at this architecture project in our, like, heritage country, you know. And at that point, we were all already, like, kind of antsy to go to Georgia at some point. So, this was perfect. That was around like 2016, maybe, like, end of 2016. With that, that kind of like mission, and we just, like, absolutely fell in love with everything, basically. And that was our first time going back. And I guess, 25 years or so, and then we started going back.

We went back a couple more times. We were thinking about, what do we do with this apartment? Can we run a business out of it? We wanted to do something a little more special than an Airbnb, ultimately, which kind of is what everyone does, but it's just too hard to do that, whatever 6000 miles away or however far it is. So, we were like, well, we can't really run a business from Philadelphia and Tbilisi, so let's maybe bring Tbilisi to Philadelphia, and that the idea for doing a food business in Philadelphia, and we ultimately landed on… My background is in business. Donna's is an architecture neither of us are restauranteurs, necessarily, or weren't at that time, I guess.

That was a whole new world to us, and we wanted to do it in a way that's little like risk averse. So we, instead of going for like, a full blown restaurant in Center City, we decided to go with a marketplace, because it's a full, obviously full restaurant operation, but on a slightly smaller scale, to see if this is something even people would be excited about, and we had a sense that Philadelphia would love it, because Philly is an amazing food city. I lived in the city downtown for like seven, eight years. I went to Drexel University, growing up around the city. We just knew that Philly loves food, and again, with like things changing, like people being more culturally aware, people wanting a novelty and cultural food that hadn't existed before, which now Philly is just bursting at the seams with amazing food. But 2016 to like covid times, that was like starting to bubble up, and it's like exploded since, but that's kind of when we went into it, basically.

And we were right. People absolutely love it, like locals love it. But being at the terminal, a lot of people from around the country come to the convention center, and it's a tourist site, actually, from around the world, and people from all over are like, Oh my god, this is like, live in Houston before this, but we can't get it in Houston. Like, it's so cool that you're here. Utah, Chicago, like, things like that.

Some cities like Chicago might have one or two Georgian spots. Some cities like Salt Lake have zero, you know. So people are like, Oh my God, when you going to open in Salt Lake? So people, yeah, it's like this moment in time where people are discovering these amazing niche foods. And even for us, and I think even for Georgians, they're rediscovering the pre-Soviet era recipes of their great-grandmas, you know, pre-Soviet era ingredients and produce certain types of cheeses that kind of almost went extinct, grape varietals, wines, you know, that, like, almost went extinct during the Soviet Union. And so, it's not just a rediscovery for us planning, I think, but even if you're like, grew up in Georgia, people are discovering, like, amazing recipes and ingredients from the past.

Donna Kolodesh: And I think you also see that being validated by like publications, like Philadelphia publications, New York publications. Whereas when we were growing up, The Philadelphia Inquirer, Philadelphia Magazine would never even think to review a restaurant in Northeast Philly, an ex-Soviet restaurant in Northeast Philly. Now, those are some of their most popular expeditions. They're writing articles. In fact, there's a restaurant called Gamarjoba, which was rated one of the best restaurants in all of Philadelphia, top 50 restaurants. And so you are starting to see publications be interested in what's happening in Northeast Philly and just generally

like the culture and different cultures. I think that's been validating also. But I definitely think we conceptually wanted to make Saami Somi more of like about our experience more so than like a traditional Georgian experience because we didn't grow up in Georgia and we rediscovered our connection to it a little bit later in life, so it's more about our experience to the country and growing up also.

Michael Kolodesh: Exactly. And that's kind of our take on what we do at Saami Somi is it's not, I mean, you know Shakshuka, Adjaruli, which you'll know that's not quote unquote traditional. We're kind of bringing that touch of things that would be like growing up in a cross-cultural community. I mean, Chiji-Piji is a thing in Georgian, which kind of, it's basically Shakshuka, you know? So, there's this combination of things that we're doing, or for example, one of our favorite things that we do is an Adjaruli with a Borodinsky dough. Borodinsky black bread is something that was very prevalent in every northeast Philly Russian-speaking household or ex-Soviet household… you know you eat it with a pickle and mustard. That was our experience. And those things are technically Hungarian, I guess. But like everyone in a Russian-speaking household ate it. Bordinsky is Slavic – Ukrainian, Russian, Slavic. But like that was a staple in everyone's household. Salo is Slavic, Ukrainian, Russian, but that was a staple in everyone's households. I don't know if those things are still popular in Georgia, but like for us, that was as much as prevalent as Adjika or like Russian mustard, like strong Gorky mustard was like just as prevalent as that's a bell, you know? So, we're, so that was our experience and that's the experience that we know that we can be authentic to. So that's the experience that we're trying to bring to Saami Sami versus like a Gamarjoba is going to be strictly authentically Georgian. I think what makes us interesting is that very few people in the restaurant world had the experience that Donna and I had. So that's the unique thing that we can bring to the culinary industry.

Interviewer 1: And does the name of the restaurant Saami Somi reflect that cross-cultural idea?

Michael Kolodesh: We have three doughs that we started with. We have our sourdough, our Borodinsky, and our dumpling dough. What we do within the terminal specifically and we're trying to be a little bit more bakery oriented, and that's *Somi* – dough. And the idea is that it could eventually grow to other types of Khachapuri, other types of dough. But that's kind of what we started with. There's a little bit of that. But I think at the heart of it, as we are progressing and as we've been around longer, is the *tsomi*[1], really. And as you know, we kind of anglified it a little bit because it's already hard enough for some Americans, especially Sami, Saami Somi, you know. But so we'll see how things develop. But the *tsomi* is the is the heart of it, really, because we're focused on dough and bread culture.

Interviewer 2: So going forward, I'm going to ask a couple more questions, more than a couple, but the last few questions we have in our interview. And I know you've touched on a lot of these

[1] Tsomi – Georgian word for dough. The restaurant spells *tsomi* as *somi*, for the facilitation of pronunciation.

already, but just for some elaboration, what does having your own business in the USA mean to you?

Michael Kolodesh: Oh, that's a good question. I have to think about that. I guess, Donna, I can speak for myself and maybe you can speak for yourself. For me, I studied business. I went to school for business. So it's what I trained for. I had always thought about, I didn't know going to business school if I would start a business or use that experience at a company. But ultimately, I always wanted to be, I guess, entrepreneurial. And I was always on the lookout for a good, honestly, market opportunity to do that. And I think that, some of the things that I articulated earlier, of all these like cultural things coalescing kind of gave me or gave us that spark of like, oh, hey, this is a good moment for this particular business, even though everyone around us was like, what are you crazy? A food business? Like our uncle and dad actually were a classic, they worked in a lunch truck when we first immigrated. The classic experience. And they were like, oh, you're crazy. It's like backbreaking work. But obviously, we approached it as much from a cultural and a love of food point of view as much of that also with a business point of view. Right. So for me, being able to apply my education in business and my theories of business and my thoughts around business and find the thing that I'm passionate about, that is super interesting to me, that like gets me motivated every day put those two things together and like run a business is like, I mean, that's amazing. That's super cool, I think. Of course it's difficult, and good days and bad days, but if you step away, I think that's really cool for me.

Why I think entrepreneurialism was innately part of my thought process is because our parents and the community that we grew up in were doctors in the Soviet Union, they couldn't be doctors here. So they opened a restaurant. If they were lawyers in the Soviet Union, they became real estate agents selling real estate to other ex-Soviet people. You know, so almost everyone in our community was entrepreneurial. And some like our parents were business owners, and for me, I experienced that like on one hand, they are all like working 60-70 hour weeks. On the other hand, like we're with them at their office. So we weren't like latchkey kids, we were with them constantly. You know, we were in their office. We were on their commute, you know.

Even though they were working a lot, they could craft their schedule a little bit around us. So like pick us up from school, come to a ball game and then still go back to work afterwards, you know? That flexibility, but also passion for running your own business for me, I think is something that growing up in that community, I was like, oh, that's what I know. And that's how I want to live my life as an adult. I think maybe on a subconscious level, that that sunk in for me.

Interviewer 2: It sounds like a lot of exposure to business growing up. It kind of seems almost natural to be running a restaurant like that.

Michael Kolodesh: Somewhat like I said, we went to a ton of restaurants growing up that have changed hands or whatever since then. But where our parents were friends with the restaurant owners. We got to go into the kitchen. They hung out together. They talked. I can't say

that as kids, we were privy to business operations, and everything was very grassroots at the time. But certainly, I think some of that sunk in. I don't know if I'm innately a quote-unquote businessperson type, but I think just through exposure, a lot of that sunk in more from... a lifestyle point of view than like almost staunch businessman kind of point of view.

Interviewer 2: What do you think that the Georgian restaurant scene in Philadelphia was like when you founded Saami Somi versus like how it is now, and the changes that you've seen in that kind of scene around the city.

Michael Kolodesh: Donna, do you want to address that?

Donna Kolodesh: Well, when we were growing up, there were always one or two Georgian-specific restaurants. But they would always kind of, like, open and close. They were never really staples. But there were a few... I would call them Soviet because they weren't, like, necessarily... The food was Soviet, not very specific to a certain country. Restaurants that are honestly still open today since when my parents arrived 30 years ago, over 30 years ago. Those are more kind of banquet style restaurants. Never a ton of just small cafes or just family style restaurants, either bakery, produce shops and banquet halls. And so that's kind of when we arrived, what it was like. And a lot of the food was Soviet or specifically actually a lot of Uzbek food/. In the past, 10-15 years, in Northeast Philly alone, there's been probably 10 Georgian restaurants that have opened, over 10 Uzbek restaurants, and a few restaurants from Kazakhstan. Still, some of those original banquet halls, more Soviet-leaning banquet halls, survived and are thriving, honestly. And so, it's become slightly more specific for cuisine, but also... These places that are opening now, you know, you can go on a Wednesday afternoon with your family. Versus that was not always the case when we were growing up. They're more like true sit down restaurant service type of places.

That's been the past 10-15 years. In fact, you know, Bustleton, which is one of the main streets in Philadelphia, if you drive down, like, from one end to the other, you will pass at least 10-15 of those restaurants. And sometimes it smells like kebabs on the entire street. So, I think that's a good sign.

Michael Kolodesh: It smells like the countryside of Georgia.

Donna Kolodesh: Literally. We didn't have that growing up and now that's there. One our kind of goals was to actually bring more of that cuisine downtown to center city, Philadelphia. I remember going to one Georgian-specific restaurant when we were growing up in Philly, in downtown Philly, but that closed a really long time ago. Before us, there were not any Georgian-specific restaurants downtown. We wanted to be one of the first, and we were. And then since then, I think at least, two have opened in like center city Philadelphia, which is, you know, the heart of the dining scene in Philly.

And so, I think when we were opening, we had this prediction that if we weren't going to open something downtown, someone else was going to open something downtown. And it came true very quickly. In fact, I think someone else was thinking the same thing as we were thinking it, you

know, and they opened a few months after us, and so it's growing the scene is growing it's growing both in the original kind of Northeast Philly community, diaspora community but it's also growing outside of that. Same with New York. There were always like a few little shops in Brighton Beach but then you have places like Chama Mama opening three, four locations. Another place just opened that's on the Michelin Guide. And then, I would say there's probably 10 plus just other Georgian restaurants in Manhattan, not in Brighton Beach, in Manhattan. So, I think it's growing, and I think it's getting competitive.

Michael Kolodesh: There's an Uzbeki grocery store that just opened in the heart of Washington Square basically, and it's packed all the time. They were original. They have a huge location in Brighton Beach, but they just opened like above a very busy subway station. I mean that's speaking to Uzbeki culture, but they have they have *Imeruli Khachapuri* there. They have *Adjaruli* there. They have all the different types of kebabs there you know*, lyulya kebab*, *shishlik*. they have the Georgian salad, but they also have like *Shuba* which is a Slavic thing. It goes back to that it's kind of cross-cultural, but that place is super popular. And so just cuisine from all over the region is becoming very well-known, and very popular.

Interviewer 2: I think that's ultimately for the best for everyone.

Michael Kolodesh: Absolutely, yes. Everyone wants a novel flavor.

Interviewer 2: For sure. I have just a couple more questions. I know you've touched on it a little bit, but could you go into a little bit more of how you weave American and Georgian and other cultures in your restaurant's cuisine?

Michael Kolodesh: One of the primary areas where we do that, I think, are the *Adjaruli khachapuris*. You'll find anywhere from like the traditional Georgian, exactly the way that it would be done in Georgia for thousands of years to doing one with a Borodinsky-based sourdough. But what we did is instead of doing a traditional Borodinsky, we did a sourdough version. It's more airy on the inside, more crispy on the outside, and and we offer it with salo or gypsy bacon, which again are those and a pickle and a whole grain mustard, which are things that we grew up with. But instead of doing the really pungent Russian mustard, we're doing a whole grain mustard, which is a little bit of a culinary twist on it that we picked up growing up in the United States.

All the way through doing like an *Adjaruli*, honey brie *Adjaruli*, which comes from just our experience of loving charcuterie and some restaurants that we really admired growing up around Philly. And the idea that the brie would add a nice kind of like textural pop and flavor to the molten cheese of the *Adjaruli*.

When you dip that cheese or get some on a charcuterie board accidentally get some honey or you eat it with fruit, you know. Or with our *Penovani khachapuri*, for example, our *Penovani* are constantly rotating. We try to maybe source something that is Philadelphia specific, an ingredient that is Philadelphia specific. Back in the past, we used to do specials with Kennett Square mushrooms, for example. Kennett Square is the capital of mushroom farming in the United States,

and it's located right outside of Philadelphia and the farming belt of Pennsylvania, basically. These are the types of things that we try to connect with. Sometimes, if there's like a big Eagles game, maybe we'll do like a special like a buffalo chicken oriented special. Donna, maybe I'm forgetting some other things…

Donna Kolodesh: Big one is dumplings. Dumplings, or *Khinkali* are a huge dish, so we tried to do different specials. There's a big Caribbean population in Philly that has a lot of oxtail dishes. And so, you know, oxtail is just popular, I think ingredient around Philadelphia. And so, we did like an oxtail, we have an oxtail dumpling, but we kind of use it and it's gotten actually even more complex recently… There's a Georgian kind of stew called *Ostri,* and we use the *Ostri* kind of spice flavor profile to prepare the oxtail. And then, we put it in our dumpling dough. It's a combination of trying to use traditional flavor profiles in new ways, but then also creating new flavor profiles as well.

Michael Kolodesh: For example, when I was a student at Drexel during my internship site at the Reading Terminal a lot, 10 years before we opened a location at the terminal. And one of my favorite things that was novel to me at the time was getting oxtail at one of the spots at the terminal. That was the first time I had ever had oxtail, and it blew my mind. So just bringing it back to some of our experiences like that. Or we did a special, which was a *Pirozhki* bun special, red bean bun, essentially. We're located right next to Chinatown. You take one step and you're in Chinatown. And we kind of really love the little bakery shops and we see ourselves as a bakery. So, one of the things that we love are their red bean buns that are kind of sweet and savory, more on the sweet side. *Pirozhki* stuffed breads are huge across ex-Soviet cultures. One thing we do is *Lobio*. People really love *Lobio*. We grew up with that on our dinner tables all the time, our holiday celebratory tables. And we were: why don't we try *Lobio* and *Pirozhki*? And so, we kind of came up with that combination. But we're inspired by things that we saw in Chinatown. Ours is very much a savory version because Lobio is very savory. But it was really good. And it's kind of like popular for a little bit while we ran it.

We let our team experiment. We have some chefs with Italian backgrounds. They started doing *focaccia*, as part of a kind of our bakery concept. We do a lot of *focaccia* or a lot of Georgian-inspired toppings, basically, on the daily *focaccia* menu.

A lot of Svanetian salt is used on those ingredients. We created our own version of *Adjika*, sunflower oil *Adjika*. It's a good dip. *Adjika* can be used in different ways. But we grew up dipping bread into sunflower oil, not into olive oil. It's a really like strong, interesting flavor. Combining those twom and we make our own *Adjika*, you know, so that was something that we combined out of our past. We do *Shotis puri*, but for a long time, we had an everything bagel *Shotis puri*, for example, out of our love for bagels. Yeah, there's many different ways um that we've tried a lot like we've just tried a lot of different things over the time.

Interviewer 2: That level of experimentation and working with the surrounding cultures to make something truly unique is, I think, a beautiful part of the American culinary experience.

Michael Kolodesh: Absolutely.

Interviewer 2: For our very last question, can you give one small piece of advice to any Georgian immigrant or international, really from anywhere here in the USA, who want to create a business of their own?

Michael Kolodesh: I can kind of answer my version of that and Donna, maybe has other thoughts. I've thought about this because we've seen over the past few years, people opening restaurants in in Philly and having some troubles with it. On the restaurant side, if you're coming from Georgia, my recommendation would be to really study and understand American and local-specific rules and regulations around operating a business and operating a food-specific business, what that entails and how much time that takes and what kind of investment that entails. Also, doing like honestly an honest and strong kind of financial analysis around it because right now it's very popular and it could be a good business. But you have to know all of the late work that needs to go into it which is different from how you might open and operate a business anywhere else in the world, specifically around food. Before you make the decision, I would like look into understanding that deeply. And then I would also try to understand American culture and U.S. culture, at least to some degree, at least from a marketing point of view. How can we bring an authentic experience, but then translate that to people within the community that we're exporting it to? So I think on a business and like food specific side, those would be my recommendations. But honestly, these days, like I said, with social media and like information being so accessible, partly what I've seen is like, especially the younger generation, like people around our age or younger, are coming with a lot more information and with like a game plan and with like a solid like business concept, you know, whether that's food or otherwise. And they know like how important marketing is, how important social media is, those kinds of things to tell the story. So I think people are already coming here a lot more, I wouldn't say knowledgeable, but having like a very strong business plan and game plan. I have seen that more and more recently.

Donna Kolodesh: I agree. I think Mike said it all.

Michael Kolodesh: Thanks.

Interviewer 1: Thank you so much to you both for this very insightful interview. Your story is very unique, and it does pay attention to this very significant historical and social aspect of post-Soviet space, and how people can come together to form a common culture while also having individual one to themselves and how the legacy of growing up in that space transfers with immigration. And that's definitely a unique story. This reflection in the restaurant this experimentation is truly impressive.