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Mama's Bakery Offers a Taste of Home Cooking

By Evan Haddad

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A cafe by a metro station in the outskirts of the city has become a home away from home for migrant workers.

In downtown Moscow, mom-and-pop eateries haven't fared well against fast food and overpriced restaurant chains. True Eastern European cuisine, cheap, hot, hearty and served by a bent-over grandma out of her kitchen, seems more like an old stereotype exiled from the capital to the canteen of a Siberian labor camp. Fortunately for gourmands, that is not the case. If you're looking for an adventure through time and a throwback culinary experience, Mama's Bakery in the seedy northern neighborhood of Bibirevo deserves your attention.

Sharing a door with a discount sportswear shop on a street corner, you could call Mama's a hole in the wall. At lunchtime, many of the restaurant's loyal patrons sipping tea from melting plastic cups look as if though they have just donned fresh tracksuits from the shop upstairs; when they're clad in worn leather coats, you might not want to meet them

on the Bibirevo streets at night. But here a common love soothes the souls of all: white-haired Mama, her daughter Tatyana and their home-cooked Georgian food.

And it's cheap. The menu is glued onto the counter, with pictures of the food and prices scribbled in black marker. Just 230 rubles ($3.50) buys a feast: a steaming bowl of meaty red stew called *chashushuli* and fat stuffed cabbages slathered in sour cream and chopped chives. Half a crispy lavash costs 15 rubles, less than the price of a ketchup packet at KFC.

Cook Well, Eat Well

Mama's menu includes classic Russian fare like borshch and pelmeni, but the real gems are the Georgian dishes with their wonderfully unpronounceable names: *khinkali, khachapuri, chakapuri. Kharcho*, a stewy soup thickened with peeled tomatoes and rice, goes for 120 rubles. Its spicy broth blinks with orange "eyelets of oil," as Chekov once wrote. There's a chunk of beef shank somewhere in it tender enough to be cut with a spoon. Some Russians like to eat this after a night of drinking because the garlic cloves and coriander mask boozy breath.

If you're looking for meat, try a lamb *luliya* kebab for 80 rubles. It's served up on an immaculate white plate and sprinkled with dill, sliced onions and a dollop of tomato paste. Like all the dishes at Mama's, a proper luliya demands time. The lamb must be chopped from the bone and minced, shaped onto a skewer and frozen before being roasted over open flame on the *mangal*, a Middle Eastern grill. The kebab is a personal favorite of Mama and she sculpts them into generous portions with her own hands.

When asked where she learned her recipes, Mama, a tired, stoic-looking woman, rolls her eyes and turns to her daughter, a woman in her 30s in the back kitchen clambering over the pots and pans. It's clear they've been asked this question before.

"Georgians love good food and drink," she says. "And if you want to eat well, you have to cook well, naturally."

Mama doesn't only cook; she also distills her own *chacha*, a pomace brandy often referred to as Georgian vodka. It's a Caucasian tradition found in varying forms throughout the mountainous lands of Russia's south.

Community Anchor

Mama's Bakery opened 10 years ago and has been serving the Bibirevo community ever since. Her customers are mostly single, middle-aged men and foreign street workers. They see Mama and her daughter as stand-in wives, serving up hot meals and listening to their banter after a long day.

On a busy Friday night, one street cleaner named Azbek chats up Tatyana from across the room while slurping away at a bowl of *sherpa*, an improvised soup of Central Asian origin properly named for it's pastoral ingredients: lamb, barley, chickpeas and potatoes. Azbek says he eats at the restaurant several times a week because the food is so cheap.

"It's so nice to have a hot, home-cooked meal,' he says. 'I'm not married and I don't have

a girlfriend, so I have to make my own dinner. Eating here is just so much nicer — not to mention cheap."

But the good, cheap food lures other characters from the Bibirevo streets, Tatyana says. She often works the day shift alone and has had some uncomfortable moments with customers. During one visit to the cafe, Tatyana recalls how a man under the influence of narcotics fell asleep standing in line with cash in one hand, shawarma in the other.

"More often than not, it's drunks who cause problems, though," Tatyana says, laughing. "But the neighborhood used to be a lot worse. We can't complain"

Mother and daughter run a tight ship. The little restaurant is minimalistic and neat. There is no wait staff, so customers have to clean up after themselves — and they do. So do even the harder drinking regulars who congregate till the 11 p.m. closing time, guzzling beer that Mama sells more cheaply than the supermarket across the street. And just like at home, according to Russian tradition, these burly men with borshch-colored faces somehow place their empty bottles neatly on the ground in the corner next to the rubbish bin before stumbling out the door.

Come On In

If you're planning a dining experience at Mama's, there are a few things to keep in mind: nobody knows a lick of English; Russian is the lingua franca of the diverse blend of ethnicities found at the place.

And stick to the right side of the counter where the pictures of hot food are. Even though it's a bakery, the baked goods leave much to be desired. The left side of the counter features some of Mama's deformed creations like *zavtrak*, a greasy Frankenstein pastry called "breakfast" that has an over-easy egg for a cyclops eye and a strip of ham for a crude mustache. Although if you're looking for a *kharcho* hangover cure, it probably won't matter what you have.

Mama's Bakery. 23a Ulitsa Prishvina. Metro Bibirevo. Open daily 10 a.m. to 11 p.m.

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