

A CHEF IN LOVE [1997]

by

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While traveling through remote (pre-Soviet) Georgia in the first decade of the 20th century, Pascal Ichac (Pierre Richard), a French chef, meets a beautiful Georgian Princess, Cecilia (Nino Kirtadze). They instantly fall deeply in love. He finds Georgia a gastronomic treasure-trove and decides to stay and open a French restaurant in its capital, Tbilisi. Through a series of adventures, each involving his culinary skills – like foiling an assassination attempt against the President through his heightened sense of smell – he becomes famous. He also makes a life-long enemy of Zigmund Gogoladze (Tiemour Kahmhadze), a bogus chef who becomes a Party functionary. The Communist Revolution intrudes on his culinary and amorous paradise. Both his restaurant and his lover are taken from him by Zigmund. He dies unfulfilled, but still a proud and dignified man. All this is revealed through his son Anton's (Jean-Yves Gautier) discovery of his mother's writings in contemporary Paris. (Rated PG-13).

There are considerable pleasures in *A Chef in Love* (Georgia's entry into the foreign film category for the Academy Awards), but unfortunately its pleasures are in its details, not in the larger arch of its structure. It seems that the filmmakers have devoted great attention to tiny pieces of the movie, perhaps hoping they will add up to something greater than its parts. Unfortunately, in this case, no matter how many small pieces one has, they alone can never add up to structure. And this is the great flaw of *A Chef in Love*, it gives an eye-ful and a mindful while watching the film, however, little remains afterward – and this is a sure sign of lack of structure.

Two examples (from near the end of the film) of the complexity and intelligence of the details will suffice – mercury and bees. After the Red Army has taken over Georgia, Zigmund, the young Communist, quickly realizes that no matter what he does, he can never defeat Pascal. Cecilie will always be in love with Pascal no matter what Zigmund does. And Pascal will not be broken, he will always be passionate, not only about food, but about music, art, sex – life. In desperation, Zigmund plots murder. Being too much of a coward to use his pistol, he takes his cue from *Hamlet* and decides to poison his rival. He has apparently read Act 1, Scene 5:

My custom always of the afternoon,
Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole,
With juice of cursed hebenon in a vial,
And in the porches of my ears did pour
The leperous distilment; whose effect

Holds such an enmity with blood of man
That swift as quicksilver it courses through
The natural gates and alleys of the body. . .

Misreading or misunderstanding the lines, Zigmund commands Cecilia, who he forced to marry him, to gather mercury which he then plans to pour into Pascal's ear. This ploy has wonderful resonances in the context of the film. First of all, Cecilia breaks all the thermometers around the house in order to make a small pool of mercury. Without thermometers, of course, the "heat" of their passion cannot be measured. Similarly, Zigmund's disease can no longer be detected.

Furthermore, the reference to *Hamlet* is interesting mainly for Zigmund's misunderstanding of the quote he uses as the basis of his plot. Hamlet's father was not poisoned by having mercury poured into his ear. It was an herbal preparation. Zigmund opts for a single, pure, metallic element in contrast to the complex "distilment" of an herb. Zigmund's attitude is that of the Communists – purity, metal, simplicity, directness (and misreading). The organic is chef Pascal's domain into which Zigmund cannot enter. He cannot brew, combine, or blend as the chef does when he is preparing a meal of nourishment. Zigmund can only break instruments of healing and use the unalloyed product as a means of death. A clear metaphor for the Georgian's opinions of the Communism of the day.

And still further, it is obvious the Communist oafs can't even get Shakespeare right. Hamlet's uncle used hebenon – the mention of mercury (quicksilver) is only a simile. According to the film it must be typical of the Communists, mistaking a simile for reality. Anyway, Zigmund and his boorish fellows probably slept through most of the play, or the language went right over their collective Neanderthal brows.

Another wonderful detail is Zigmund's failure to kill Pascal. He goes to pour the mercury in his ear only to find that Pascal has committed suicide, thus cheating Zigmund of his pleasure. As Zigmund approaches, a large bee flies from Pascal's mouth, attacks Zigmund, who tries unsuccessfully (and hilariously) to down it with his pistol. The bee symbolism resonates far longer than Zigmund's gunshots.

Bees have an amazing symbolic meaning and history. As producers of honey, they are associated with nourishment. Thus, for a bee to settle in Pascal's mouth so soon after his death clearly indicates that Pascal was the site of true nourishment – not just as a chef, but as a human being. Zigmund is the opposite of nourishment, and the bee attacks him for wanting to destroy this epitome of humanity.

But bees have other meanings. In ancient Egypt, the hieroglyph of the bee was always associated with royalty (in the kingdom of Lower Egypt the king was known as "he who belongs to the bees") because the bee's wax was used in the mummification of the kings and queens. (Honey is also one of the oldest known food preservatives.) The bee is therefore also associated with infinite life. This echoes Pascal's comment about Communism: Marxism will pass away, he observes, but great cuisine will live forever.

On the other hand, in folklore from all over the world, bees are identified with mortality. If a bee left its hive, the hive's owner would soon die. (This is in addition to the symbolism of the soul leaving the body on its way to Heaven, in the same way that doves were used in Renaissance paintings.) It is not Pascal here that is the bee's owner, but he himself is the hive and it is Zigmund, in his overreaching hubris who thinks he can own another person. Thus, the bee leaving the hive is a sign that Zigmund's rule, and thus the Communists,' is destined to be relatively short.

The chef and his food are carefully constructed positive metaphors for civilization. He is French and therefore the ultimate gastronome. And since he is looking for exciting new gastronomic ideas in the back woods of Georgia, this relatively unknown place must be superior even to France. Everywhere he goes he finds gastronomic wonders. Furthermore, the Georgians themselves are appreciative of civilization – they flock in great numbers to the French restaurant he opens in remote Tbilisi.

When the fledgling Communist revolution comes to Georgia, all this changes. The Communists are everything the Georgians are not. And this is expressed both through food and in how they treat Pascal. They are mostly unappreciative boors. They order him to fry the fish in an aquarium, a dish so awful that even a dog won't eat it (literally). They close his restaurant and forbid him to create his wonders.

Pascal and Cecilia's love affair suffers under the Communist, too. Zigmund rapes Cecilia and forces her to marry him. Finally, unable to break either the spirit of each of them or the love that exists between them, Zigmund murders Cecilia in jealous rage before her son's eyes.

Few of the characters develop beyond our first impressions. The chef is quickly established as super-human. From a morsel of food, he can not only identify the ingredients with stunning accuracy, but even the type of animal that contributed its liver to the stuffing (a bear). This is wonderful. But then the film does it again and again. At a ballet, his keen sense of smell detects a bomb about to blow up the President of Georgia. Still later, he analyzes and criticizes another chef's recipes by simply sniffing the aromas wafting from her kitchen up to his aerie prison. The same is true of their love affair – it begins passionate beyond normal reason (she's beautiful/he's ugly, she's young/he's old, she's a Princess/he's a cook, etc.) and remains that way. True, it is tested, but it doesn't grow. Since it is complete in the first few moments of the film, it really has nowhere to go. (All this is similar to the problem mythological characters like Superman present to writers: since he's perfect and invulnerable, it is very difficult to imagine a story in which he would develop and grow.)

It is not bad enough that the central character doesn't develop, but neither does Anton, the chef's son, our door into the story. At the beginning of the film, the son is involved in an exhibition in an art gallery, he then learns many marvelous things about

his father – not only as a person, but as a historical character – and then goes back to his mundane life in the art gallery. End of film. The film would have been far more meaningful had the son changed as a result of his revelations about his father, if these disclosures and discoveries has somehow affected his life.

So much for the details of *A Chef in Love*. Another area where the film breaks down is in its bottom line. Basically, it sets up Pascal as a symbol of civilization, Zigmund as a symbol of Communism (which Soviet Georgia has only recently rid itself of), and lets them go at it. The result is no surprise given the origins of the film. Of course, Communism is bad, especially as perceived by those recently freed from it. If this is a surprise to you, you might enjoy *A Chef in Love* in a deep and complex way. However, if, like most of us, this is neither new nor shocking, you will probably find the film an attractive and charming exercise of surfaces, but with little depth. Unlike Pascal's wonderful food, it quickly becomes rather bland upon leaving the theater, the next day it is little more than a memory like watered milk, quickly become transparent and on the verge of disappearance.

This film builds a wonderful character in Pascal only to throw him away on a rather mundane rehash of recent cultural history. After all, there are few of us who would say that the Communists who occupied Georgia were good people – doubly so for the Stalinist period.

In the details, *A Chef in Love* is delightful (and often delicious), but in its overall dramatic structure it is a little underdone. The sole message of the film is to compare the Georgian paradise to the Communist evil. Again, do the film makers really expect us to be surprised?

A Chef in Love. Directed by Nana Dzhordzhadse Written by Irikli Kvirikadze and Andre Grall. Distributed by Sony Picture, 1997.