stepping from the stuffy Soviet-era train to the snow-dusted platform below, I fill my chest with a welcome breath of mountain air laced with frost and cigarette smoke. The white caps of the Caucasus rise into a dusky gray sky. Swarthy men in fur caps offer their hands to kerchiefed women disembarking from the train. For a moment I imagine myself the heroine of a pre-revolutionary Russian adventure novel, here at the edge of the empire for the first time. “Come on,” Yulia shakes me abruptly out of my reverie, pulling both me and her suitcase toward the station. “We’re going to be late for dinner!”

New Year’s Eve is just a few days away, and Yulia has invited me to accompany her for a weekend of celebratory feasting at her late father’s childhood home in Vladikavkaz, capital of the southwestern Russian province of North Ossetia. The region occupies a tiny swatch of rumpled land in the middle of the Caucasus Mountains, which span Russia’s southwestern border from the Black Sea eastward to the Caspian. Just across the border lie the Republic of Georgia and its disputed territory of South Ossetia, which has been occupied by Russian troops since a days-long war in August 2008.

Yulia grew up about three hundred miles northwest of here in a city of about a million people called Krasnodar, located a two-hour drive inland from the Black Sea coast. I met her at the local university there, where I was studying on a fellowship and she was finishing her undergraduate degree in English and German translation. She lives with her Ukrainian-born mother on the outskirts of the city, in a small apartment on the top floor of a five-story walk-up. Years ago, before he died of an illness I never asked much about, her father lived there, too. The rest of his family stayed in Vladikavkaz, and now Yulia travels there from time to time (to “Vladik,” as she calls it affectionately) to visit her Ossetian relatives and to connect with a part of herself and her heritage that she can’t find in Krasnodar.

The mountains over Vladikavkaz provide a magnificent backdrop to what might otherwise be a drab-looking city, with its blocky concrete hallmarks of Soviet officialdom and self-built homes hidden from view by solid metal gates that line the side streets. Yet the name of the town bespeaks a different past: it means “to rule the Caucasus” in Russian, and reflects its founding as the first fortress from which the Imperial army launched raids to subjugate nearby highland peoples under tsarist rule. For the rest of Russia, the North Caucasus exudes a complex mystique, at once alluring and frightening. Legend has it that the mountain to which Prometheus was chained for eternity as punishment for stealing fire from the gods lies tucked among these peaks. Titans of nineteenth-century Russian literature painted a lasting portrait of an untamed land populated by proud warriors and silent, black-haired beauties, an image that continues to inform the popular imagination today. Graphic evening news reports documenting the multiple violent conflicts that have erupted in the region since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 have done little to combat stereotypes. The deadly 2004 siege of a school in Beslan by militants claiming ties to Chechen rebel leaders took place less than twenty miles from Vladikavkaz: you can see the gutted school from the train as it rolls past. Periodic suicide bombings at public markets and other isolated acts of violence continue to punctuate the relative calm.

For Yulia, though, this place represents something entirely different: the memory of her father, the warmth of an extended family she doesn’t have in Krasnodar, and the allure of cultural traditions that her mother doesn’t share. “Visiting Vladik feels like coming home,” she tells me, though she’s never actually lived here. I sense her connection to the place immediately: As her uncle’s driver Marat weaves us through the snowy streets lined with naked poplars, she peppers him with questions about his two teenage daughters. She points out statues of local heroes and government buildings to me with the bright eyes of someone who doesn’t have to look at them every day. She squeals with anticipation as we turn onto the quiet lane where generations of her relatives have resided for over a century.

The Ossetians, descended from an Iranian people who settled in these mountains as early as the eighth century AD,
take palpable pride in their historical and cultural identity. Their ancestors upheld a powerful kingdom that benefited handsomely from trade links with China through Silk Road merchants. Most Ossetians are Russian Orthodox Christians, setting them apart from most other North Caucasian peoples, who consider themselves Muslims (at least in name if not in practice). Along with Russian, they speak an Iranian language unrelated to those of their neighbors. Still, as throughout the region, the concepts of personal honor, male authority, and respect for elders order Ossetian society in more or less predictable ways, and custom largely dictates the flow of everyday life. Though their homeland was absorbed into the Russian empire at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Ossetians continue to maintain their own language, literary canon, and, of course, culinary traditions.

As we tumble across the threshold into the Mamsurovs’ newly renovated entryway, we are greeted by a host of beaming family members and the welcoming bustle of a kitchen gearing into action. Everyone seems to know his or her place: Yulia sets to piling fragrant heaps of fresh cilantro and dill on a platter while her cousin Kazik ducks in and out bringing jars of homemade grape juice, pickled vegetables, and berry preserves from the ground cellar outside. Kazik’s older brother Gika heats a carafe-full of araka (a potent spirit distilled from corn) over the stove to raise it to room temperature, and three-year-old Artur runs around at everyone’s feet, making a joyful ruckus.

While doing my best to be helpful, I’m struck by the contrast between the relative luxury of this house, with its American-sized everything, new appliances, yard and garden, and the cramped Soviet-style apartment that Yulia and her mother share back in Krasnodar. Yulia’s uncle Alek, the bespectacled, mustachioed patriarch of the family, takes me aside to recount a bit of the history of the Mamsurov lineage, which I gather has some cachet around here. Their men have been decorated military veterans, respected government servants, and prominent figures in the community. The kind of people you visit to get things done. I wonder whether this, too, makes Yulia feel like she’s missing out on something that ought to be hers.

Soon the table is filled with a tantalizing array of hot and cold dishes, so many that they must be piled on top of one another. Still we cannot sit down: we must wait for the arrival of the three savory pies that form the center of any Ossetian feast and define its cuisine for the rest of Russia. As Gika explains, each one of the trio represents a different realm: the earth, the sun, and the sky. Only funeral tables are set with two pies, the “sun” symbolically absent. Each over a foot in diameter, the pies may be stuffed with any number of fillings, from cheese to potatoes to fresh herbs and greens. It’s a mad dash to the table when Yulia’s aunt Zhanna rushes in with a steaming stack of them from the local bakery.

Here and throughout the Caucasus, tradition dictates that guests receive royal treatment, and I, as the person who has traveled the farthest to sit here, am given a place directly to the right of the head of the table. That seat is reserved for Uncle Alek, who opens the meal with a ritualized call-and-response prayer, spoken – almost chanted – in guttural, consonant-rich Ossetian. (Table conversation takes place in Russian for Yulia’s and my benefit – her father never spoke Ossetian with her or her mother.) The men and boys rise from their seats to stand, replying in chorus to the murmured words at measured intervals, the volume rising with each repetition. When they have finished, we clink glasses with our first celebratory shot of araka and dig in.

In contrast to the Scandinavian Christmas dinners my family sits down to every year, where we form an orderly buffet line and monitor fair apportioning of Swedish meatballs, this is a free-for-all, and it’s way more fun. Heaping portions of various dishes appear on my plate while I’m chewing and cannot object, then second and third helpings of...
them. My shot glass always seems to get refilled when I’m not looking, and just when I’m sure I’ve finally managed to try everything, I spot a dish of untraversed gastronomic territory beckoning me from the other end of the table.

The meal melds a surprising array of flavors, hinting at influences from Turkish and Persian cuisines, in addition to Russian and pan-Caucasus traditions. Zhanna has preserved chunks of last harvest’s eggplants in a delicate tomato sauce tinged with garlic, and we scoop it up with hunks of chewy flatbread and slices of mild cheese. Sweet beetroot and green peas play foil to the tangy crunch of dill pickles and sauerkraut in a Russian *vinegret* salad. We chase araka with home-grown pickled tomatoes, their vinegary juices bursting from beneath taut, scarlet skins. I even venture my first taste of a Russian New Year’s tradition: jellied pigs’ feet in aspic spiced with a horseradish cream sauce.

We devour the three pies in wedges like pizza: peppery ground beef in one, fresh cheese in another, and grated pumpkin in the third. “My mom and I have tried to make these in Krasnodar,” Yulia tells me as she finishes one slice and reaches for another, “but they never come out right. The dough isn’t soft enough, and the cheese isn’t the same.” Now I take a second slice, too, and savor each bite just a little bit more, knowing I may never eat another quite like it.

To cleanse our palates, we munch sprigs of raw cilantro, dill, and green onions, making me feel like summer has come again. By the time dessert appears I’m thoroughly stuffed, but who can resist the lure of Caucasian *pakhlava*, sweet walnut paste slathered between layers of flaky sour cream dough, baked to a honey-brown blush.

While Yulia’s seventeen-year-old half-brother Borik fulfills his duty as the youngest male at the table by keeping our shot glasses brimming, Alek fulfills his as the oldest by keeping us tipsy, draining each refill in quick succession with toasts to our elders, who have experienced much in their lives; to our children, who have much left to experience; and to the New Year, just around the corner, with all of the challenges and surprises it will bring. I listen closely as Alek intones the Ossetian prayers that follow each toast, mesmerized by the lilts and cadences of a tongue whose speakers number only about half a million people worldwide. There is one word that stands out, for he repeats it again and again. The word is “khadzar,” which, Gika whispers, means “home.”

“How fitting,” I think, savoring the last bite of a piece of pumpkin pie that Yulia had snuck onto my plate while I was
turned. However far its flavor might be from the ginger and cinnamon-spiked confection that crowns my family’s holiday table, it nevertheless serves as a welcome reminder that home, as defined on a dinner plate, translates seamlessly in any language.

NOTES
1. During the Soviet period, secular New Year’s replaced Christmas as the major midwinter holiday after state policies prohibited the public expression of religious belief. This tradition has carried on since the collapse of the USSR, though many families celebrate both. The Russian Orthodox Church follows the Julian calendar, which runs approximately two weeks behind the Gregorian (Western) calendar that governs Catholic and Protestant religious celebrations and the civil affairs of most countries. Russian Orthodox Christians thus observe Christmas on January 7, when it falls according to the Julian calendar. In the spirit of keeping the celebrations going, some Russians also mark “Old New Year,” or New Year according to the Julian calendar, which falls on January 15–14. The events described here took place just before December 31.
2. Russia annexed the territory of North Ossetia as the result of a treaty with the Ottoman Empire in 1774. Unlike many neighboring peoples, the North Ossetians, most of whom had adopted Orthodox Christianity by this time, accepted Russian rule fairly peacefully.