

Bon Appetit

If You have the stomach for it

Chris Garnet

2023

a review of

The Menu. Dir: Mark Mylod (2022)

Judging from *The Menu's* trailer and promotional images, it seemed as though it was going to literally be an Eat the Rich story. While a movie with a cannibal revenge plot would have been entertaining, there was some welcomed nuance and style within the film that made up for some of its disappointments.

The film is a satirical story about class divide which seems in vogue right now in Hollywood. Perhaps a response to the success of *Parasite*, the brutal 2019 Korean movie on the same theme? The basic setup is a small group of very wealthy and well-connected people go to an exclusive island to enjoy a tasting menu from a highly regarded and exclusive chef. The guests chosen to come to the island represent several different caricatures of wealth, such as tech bros and old money. These diners unknowingly are walking into a spectacle that involves more than just eating food few can afford. They won't be able to simply give a credit card at the end of this meal.

The Menu will stir up many feelings for food service workers past or present. From smiling at rude entitled guests, to working with a megalomaniac executive chef; many of the stressors and anxieties of restaurant work are present here. Hong Chau, who plays the host Elsa, gives an excellent performance seething with resentment just below the surface. It's impossible for service workers to not have a visceral reaction when they hear, "Yes, chef!" shouted in unison to the kitchen's authoritarian Chef Julian Slowik (Ralph Fiennes).

The central focus of the film revolves around Margot (Anya Taylor Joy), and Chef Slowik. Slowik sees that Margot is a sex worker providing a service not unlike that delivered by the kitchen. Margot has ended up on the island because she was hired to be there by one of the other diners. Slowik realizes she is not part of the rich class and constantly presses her to decide where she will sit. "I need to know where to seat you, with us or with them. Do you want to die with those who give or those who take?"

Before each dish in the multi-course tasting menu, Slowik waxes poetic about the significance of each item served. This includes a bit of dialogue where he discusses the history of bread and how it was the food of the common, but because the diners "are not the common man," he serves them a breadless bread plate with only dipping sauces. A figurative middle finger to the diners that is both hostile and funny.

The culture surrounding these decadent dishes is also skewered within *The Menu*. The obnoxious foodie Tyler (Nicholas Houk) is easy to laugh at and be disgusted by. Especially considering 23 percent of households in the United States have experienced food insecurity since the corona virus pandemic hit according to researchers at Northwestern University. Restaurant prices are also increasing around the United States. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, wholesale food costs have gone up 17 percent from March 2021 to March 2022. It's simply more expensive for everyone to eat these days, so when Tyler is slurping up a \$1,250 meal, the viewer can't help but loathe him.

The strength of *The Menu* resides in its subtlety. Margot sees an old client with his wife in the dining room who remarks how much Margot looks like their daughter, which the husband denies. It's succinct and well executed without bludgeoning you over the head with what's being shared.

Lillian, a snobbish food critic, played by Janet McTeer, comments during one of the courses that "we're eating the ocean" which is darkly true metaphorically and literally. Commercial trawler nets are literally destroying our oceans so people can eat seafood.

Without spoiling the movie, it feels as though *The Menu* is saying class war is futile. It begs the question, was there an earlier draft of the script where this wasn't the case? A movie where the rich get their just desserts and the workers live and succeed in some way may have been too dangerous for a subsidiary of Walt Disney to produce and stream on HBO.

What is portrayed honestly in this film is abusive power dynamics that exist in workplaces. Slowik is a tyrant who humiliates and denigrates his staff. It comes out that in the past that exists before the movie, Slowik made a sexual advance towards one of his sous chefs, and was shut down twice. He then ignored her for eight months and wouldn't even make eye contact. Despite this, the staff still reveres, respects, and appears to love Chef Slowik. This ends up with the staff looking more like a cult than *Eat the Rich* revolutionaries who want revenge on the wealthy.

Sadly though, many workers have to ignore their instincts and not leave abusive working conditions. Money dictates that people often stay in unsafe and uncomfortable situations to feed and house themselves. This harassment is unfortunately all too familiar for many restaurant workers. A 2021 study by One Fair Wage found that 70 percent of women restaurant workers have been sexually harassed and 44 percent of those women were harassed by an owner or boss.

The Menu can seem a bit nihilistic since it points to a problem without illuminating a way forward. Slowik's motivations can, in brief moments, feel political and revolutionary, but ultimately his actions are personal in nature. It is because of this that the message of the movie feels like its teeth were filed down.

Even though *The Menu* falls short in some ways, it is still an overall funny, well-acted, and enjoyable watch that has the ability to spark discussion and ideas. A world without restaurants staffed by wage workers and run by authoritarian chefs and bosses would be wonderful, and the food, made through love instead of through coercion, would certainly taste better.

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