

Eat Drink Man Woman

Begin with a slice of life. Add a strong dose of traditional father. Stir in three testy, modern daughters. Spice with a medley of assorted boyfriends. Simmer with a few neighbors, then cook slowly in a spacious home in contemporary Taipei. Garnish with equal parts delicate humor and tender poignancy. Such is the basic recipe for a delightful new Taiwanese comedy *Eat Drink Man Woman* by director Ang Lee.

Director/screenwriter Lee (born in China, formed in the U.S., now working in Taiwan) was responsible for *The Wedding Banquet*, a surprise worldwide hit in 1993 which was nominated for an Academy Award. Modest in its production, the film was very adept in its handling of actors and had a script which mixed careful cross-cultural observation (between Taiwanese and Americans) with whimsy and surprise. His new opus uses Taipei as the setting and is wholly in Chinese, but it should hardly be alien to American filmgoers. Maintaining both the wit and sense of ensemble of his earlier movie, Lee draws us, gradually but decisively, into the lives of a master chef and his willful daughters.

Widower Tao Chu (Sihung Lung, the father of *The Wedding Banquet*) prepares an elaborate Sunday dinner for his three daughters. Jia-Jen (Kuei-Mei Yang) is the eldest and an old maid, a high school chemistry teacher who buries her emotions in a fervent Christian faith. The middle daughter, Jia-Chien (Chien-Lien Wu), is the least traditional and is moving fast up the corporate ladder with an airline company. JiaNing (Yu-Wen Wang) is the youngest, still a student who also flips burgers (to her father's chagrin) at a Wendy's. These dinners, the only time the family finds time to eat together, are occasions for spectacular cuisine from Dad, some stilted table conversation, and for portentous announcements from all, the first of these being JiaChien's that she intends to move out of the house to her own apartment--the initial family break-out.

We are catching the family at a time of changes, changes in attitudes towards food ("Eat-Drink") as well as love and sex ("Man-Woman"). Chu, while still in demand at top kitchens, has found he is losing his taste for the food he prepares, and perhaps for life itself. He questions the real value of his hard-won skill; his life-long colleague is taken ill. He's losing connections with his daughters, too, and clashes especially with the headstrong Jia-Chien. She has a sometime lover, Raymond (Lester Chen), but is newly intrigued with a company negotiator in from America, Li-Kai (Winston Chao, who played the lead in *Banquet*).

Prissy Jia-Jen finds herself attracted to the new volleyball teacher at her school while at the same time she's receiving anonymous love notes. Jia-Ning, while sympathizing with her best friend's boyfriend, becomes drawn to the young man herself. All of these individual strains are intermingled with another subplot involving a divorced neighbor, Jin Rong (Sylvia Chang), her daughter and her opinionated mother, Mrs. Liang (Ah-leh Gua, the mother in *Banquet*), just back from the U.S.--looking and talking like a Chinese Joan Plowright.

The food analogies keep coming: Ang Lee is cooking up a human stir-fry with these characters as his ingredients, and his taste and touch is impeccable. The moving in and out of the four principals' lives, as pieced together by Ang Lee and his regular editor Tim Squyres, has a lovely and efficient cadence, never bogging down and keeping up a gratifying momentum. One keeps interested and amused as the daily business--and romances--of these attractive Taiwanese are played out. I was reminded of the tricky intercutting necessary to keep coherent the complexities of another set of Chinese characters in last year's *The Joy Luck Club*, but Lee has a more delicate, warmer story to tell.

That story ends, as it begun, at another family Sunday dinner, where Mr. Chu has the last--and most surprising--announcement to make. In fact, the film is full of delightful surprises, as the audience's expectations for each character keeps getting spun around. Just when you think you know where Lee and his co-screenwriters, James Schamus and Hui-Ling Wang, are headed with a character, they deliver a new twist or turn to their fate. And the ending closes a circle, tenderly and rightly.

The cast is a superb ensemble and all deserve praise. Still, Wu as Jia-Chien stands out. With the largest role requiring the greatest range, she is utterly right as the most doggedly independent child who comes to best comprehend her father. Lee understands how families often work, how the child who most resembles her parent will most readily clash with that parent. Sihung Lung, playing the parent, furnishes the other standout performance in *Eat Drink*. His weathered, often pained face lends credence to his filmic reputation as a master chef. Authentic when he is taciturn and irascible, Lung is no less persuasive when he turns enthusiastic and exults in cooking for someone--the nine-year old child of the divorcee--who truly appreciates the only gift he can keep on giving.

As important as a member of the cast is the food displayed in *Eat Drink*. You get in the mood real quick during the magnificent credit sequence, during which chef Chu puts together his gourmet Sunday repast. Knives fly over veggies, fingers piece together dumplings, meat cubes explode in skillet sauce. As the camera roams over the numerous meals in the film, as it pauses to observe a tasting in Chu's kitchen, you can almost smell emanations from the screen. A warning: eat hearty before you see this film, because you can expect major hunger pangs otherwise!

If this reviewer were handicapping those foreign-language films released in Washington over the last few months, *Eat Drink Man Woman* would win in a wok.

("Eat Drink Man Woman" carries no rating, but it has zero violence and nasty language and only one very decorous sex scene.)

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