

The Menu: a spectacle to be savoured?

Emulating the 'cool girl', Margot (Anya-Taylor Joy) nonchalantly smokes a cigarette whilst waiting for a boat to take her and Tyler (Nicholas Hoult), along with other eclectic guests across the river to dine under Chef Julian Slowik (Ralph Fiennes) at the Hawthorne - a restaurant that will set you back \$1,250 per head. What awaits them is a lavish tasting menu, drama and a dessert with a bang. Director Mark Mylod unfolds over the course of the next hour and forty minutes a delightful horror-comedy that entwines haute-cuisine and the polarisation between the upper and lower classes.

Food is presented as a spectacle to be savoured as the diners are reminded "Do not eat. Taste." Borderline biblical, Slowik acts a messiah figure to his team, beckoning them with thunderous claps that are met with "Yes chef" in booming unison. The result is a military style kitchen much to the admiration of their guests: Margot, Tyler, three self-professed finance 'bros' (Rob Yang, Mark St. Cyr and Arturo Castro), struggling rich couple Anne (Judith Light) and Richard (Reed Birney), a washed up movie star (John Leguizamo) and his assistant Felicity (Aimee Carrero), arrogant food critic Lillian Bloom (Janet McTeer) and her enabling editor Ted (Paul Adelstein).

Mylod transports us in the fine dining world with ASMR shots of blue flames erupting in a swirl and demonstrating the painstaking process of perfect leaf placement with tweezers - you can almost smell the salty beads of sweat rolling down the sous chef's face. Tyler proclaims that "Chefs, they play with the raw materials of life itself, and death itself"; a statement that almost begins to make sense to foodie novices like Margot. The latter however takes prominence in the third course - scissor-punctured chicken thigh tacos which serves as dark foreshadowing. The pinnacle point where the horror of the film shines is in the fourth course - aptly named 'The Mess'. The close up shots of the menu and description on screen help bring us into the film so that we feel as if we are dining alongside the characters.

It is only once the film takes its dark turn that we see the purpose in bringing insufferable characters into the mix as the satire takes front and centre, and the film slightly loses its mystery appeal. The divide from kitchen to dining room, upper to working class is apparent. Social commentary films have had a good run recently with *Don't Look Up* having a similar vibe. Given the widening of the class gap in the US, it is a movie that is relevant - even a mention of COVID which feels post-apocalyptic. Mylod's commentary on class serves as the driving force behind the plot however feels slightly overdone.

Slowaik's psyche is as complex as one like Gatsby - they are both eager to impress and throw lavish parties. We glimpse his humanity when he has a moment of cooking that brings a subtle smile to his otherwise wry lips - a reference to Anton Ego trying Remy the rat's food in *Ratatouille*. Fiennes is stellar in a genuine moment of love in an otherwise satirical film.

Cleverly crafted, *The Menu* is a must watch for its ensemble cast, amazing direction and subliminal lessons that we could all learn. An enjoyable ride that will leave you satisfied but not full.