

Turkish delight, Greek tragedy

The culinary arts are not clichéd, but do these spices have enough bite?

A Touch of Spice

Village Roadshow Hellas
Writer/Director/Producer:
Tassos Boulmetis

In 1964, as Turkey was being accepted into the European Economic Community and attending talks in London about its problematic joint occupation of Cyprus with Greece, Greek families were being deported from Istanbul.

The Greeks were active members of the community, and, it would seem, their departure was a great loss to Turkey. This sad historic occurrence is the basis of *A Touch of Spice*.

The story takes a Greek lecturer in astrophysics (George Corraface) back to Istanbul, where, as a child, he lived an entirely different life, based on discoveries about love, life and, most importantly, food.

The culinary arts are an easy element to a film these days, and can easily become cliché. *A Touch of Spice* avoids that trap by being a visual, if not aromatic, lesson in traditional Greek cuisine. Not only do we learn about the great ceremony of cooking in this culture and the



strong social ritual of eating together for special occasions, but also about the emotional power of food. You will learn, for example, that a pinch of cinnamon in meatballs supposedly stimulates intimate gazes.

Writer/director Tassos Boulmetis has re-created much of his own story in this film. It seems authentic. Certainly the Greek grandmother who was at the screening I attended spent most of it bent forward, gasping with nostalgia. But there's a downside: the second half of the film, in which the protagonist returns to his home town, is mired in cheesy sentimentality.

The opening watery-smooth images of Istanbul (the cinematography by Takis Zervoulakos is beautiful) create a precious and delicate

world where, despite political troubles, a young boy has plenty of time to contemplate the focus of life: family and cooking. Boulmetis succeeds in taking us inside the world of the young Fanis (Markos Osse) who is learning about the sensuality of life.

One of the film's most memorable moments is of the young Fanis cooking mini-meatballs for his sweetheart, who, in exchange, dances for him. Another is of the grandfather teaching him the myths of spices in the old attic of the spice shop.

Fanis is deported and winds up in Athens. His grandfather remains in Istanbul. He grows up being discouraged from cooking – his school teachers think it is an unhealthy obsession for a young boy, despite his obvious talents.

However, he cannot be excluded from Greek rituals, and listens in as women discuss their secrets while preparing wedding banquets. This highlights the inextricable link between cooking and life, and we realise that there are some talents that cannot be denied. As his grandfather's prodigy, there's no stopping this little boy.

At 40, Fanis returns to Istanbul. This should be the film's most powerful bit, but it goes wrong, partly because Fanis's now-adult girlfriend and love interest (Basak Koklukaya) isn't particularly convincing. She is attractive and sweet enough, but the depth of emotion in comparison to the build-up is disappointing. At the point when they should be growing and developing more complexity, the characters suddenly fall flat. In this sense, nostalgia seems to have become indulgence for Koklukaya.

Corraface is a strong lead and enjoyable to watch. But it is Osse as the boy Fanis who evocatively and charmingly pulls us into the world of spice and innocence. Through this character, *A Touch of Spice* makes you curious about these delicate spices and tastes.

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