

## Food-as-art films analysis

by Natalie Brennan

The restaurant industry is infamously cutthroat. Whether it be a local pub, fast food chain, diner, gourmet eatery, or anywhere in between, kitchen workplaces demand employees to bring their A-game while on the job. Chefs are expected to be both creative and consistent in their work. Often they struggle to find a balance between these two traits – conflicted between the desire to experiment with new recipes or to obediently prepare the same menu for years. These tensions have been discussed in a number of mainstream movies released in recent years.

The film *Chef* (2014) follows the story of Carl Casper, acclaimed head chef of an upscale restaurant turned traveling food truck owner. After receiving a devastating review from acclaimed food critic Ramsey Michel, in addition to being restricted from preparing new and creative dishes, Carl's career as head chef falls apart. In response, he ventures to Miami and opens a food truck serving Cuban cuisine with the help of his son, Percy, and his friend/fellow chef, Marvin. Another movie that focuses on a chef's aspirations is *Ratatouille* (2007), the story of Remy the rat who has a flavor palate far beyond the average rodent – and most people for that matter. When a storm causes him to become separated from his family, lost in an extensive network of underground plumbing, he emerges from the sewer system to find himself in Paris, France, directly across the street from the famous restaurant of Auguste Gusteau – Remy's culinary idol. By befriending the restaurant's bus boy, Linguini, Remy is able to get an inside look into the kitchen of this renowned restaurant. A relationship based on reciprocity, Remy instructs Linguini – or, more accurately, controls Linguini's motor skills – on how to cook while, in return, Linguini gives food to Remy. In both *Chef* and *Ratatouille*, food and the language used

in conjunction with it reveal complex relationships individuals have with their food and how, in turn, food becomes representative of a deeper significance.

The means by which a person engages with food – whether that be through methods of procurement, production, preparation, or consumption – can be indicative of their personal relation to their cuisine. In *Chef*, Carl participates in nearly every level of such foodways. This includes carefully picking fresh groceries from local markets, designing a new menu from scratch while working as head chef, preparing meals in various settings for different target audiences, and selling his culinary creations to everyone willing to taste them. For him, food embodies a deeply-rooted emotional connection so personal it has become the biggest constant in his life. Carl's passion for food is evident in his universal attention to detail when it comes to cooking, whether it be a grilled cheese for Percy or a five-course meal for a critic. Furthermore, he encourages those around him to take pride in and care about the food they make. An example of this can be seen when Carl teaches Percy how to grill sandwiches for the food truck. Just as Carl begins to praise his son's grilling abilities, he notices that one sandwich was not up to par. Percy defends his burned Cuban sandwich by saying that it was not a big deal since it was only one mistake. Carl goes on to scold his son by explaining that every single item they serve must be cooked to perfection because every customer matters, a recurring theme throughout the story. The stress that Carl puts on himself and his coworkers stems from his aspirations to touch people's lives through cuisine. The film was clearly made with the hope of inspiring its audience to pursue their passions.

Similar to Carl from *Chef*, Remy from *Ratatouille* is so obsessed with food that it has become not only a passion, but a way of life. Among his family of rats, Remy has been gifted with a superb sense of smell. Olfaction, in combination with other senses, allows for individuals

to detect flavor. Thus, it is fitting that Remy's polished culinary palate is misunderstood by his nose-blind relatives that are content with their garbage scavenging subsistence strategies. Despite being an outcast in terms of dietary norms, Remy ignores the picky-eater comments and continues to consume food he has stolen from humans or has been given by Linguini. His craving for new, complex flavor combinations in addition to his intrinsic culinary skills define Remy's relationship with food. When he eats something delicious the scene goes completely black behind Remy. As he continues to eat fireworks appear, their shape and color in sync with Remy's vocal explanation – a representation similar to synesthesia. There are multiple instances in which Remy shares particularly tasty food fusions with his brother; however, any attempts he makes to share his love of this food are unsuccessful. As a result, he looks down upon his family because they are unable to appreciate not only his, but any culinary talent. On the other hand, Remy idolizes human chefs – Gusteau most of all – because they too are enamored with food. There is a clear language barrier separating Remy and Linguini, yet the two are able to communicate in the presence of food. In order to converse, Remy controls Linguini like a puppeteer in the kitchen, conducting each recipe into a symphony of flavors. Additionally, Remy's body language while hungry – his paws placed on his growling stomach and his slumped body posture – successfully communicate with Linguini. Overall, the film's main message is that “anyone can cook,” just as Gusteau preaches.

A striking similarity between these two films is the role of food critics. Both movies show that food has the power to connect with everyone, even those that are critiquing it. Even though the critics had initially given harsh reviews, they changed their opinions after consuming a meal made with love, whether that be a food truck sandwich or a gourmet take on ratatouille. The ratatouille, in particular, had the power to transport the critic to a comforting scene from his

childhood which further confirms that cuisine truly connects people with one another but also with their own identity. When these chefs had the ability to prepare their cuisines of choice, they no longer felt constricted by the restaurants' rules and standards. This allowed for both Carl and Remy to pursue dishes that rendered not only taste, but emotion. In both instances, as ironic as it may seem, a meal designed out of passion for food rather than a passion for profit proved to be the more successful career path.