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CINEMA

A delicious, tantalizing film

Review by Lois Wadsworth

Tampopo

Japanese film director Juzo Itami's outlandish love affair with the noodle focuses on the plight of a would-be ramen chef but tantalizes with its tasty observations on food and pleasure.

It's raining. In the cab of a tanker barreling down the highway, a trucker reads aloud to his partner. The driver's weathered cowboy face is framed by a Western hat set straight across his forehead. The words and windshield wipers drone on, setting the scene at a cafe counter where an old man instructs his student in the Zen way of eating noodles. Begin by gazing at the bowl, he advises meditatively. Contemplate the fat that streaks the soup broth. Stroke all the soup's ingredients lightly with the chopsticks, but give extra, affectionate pats to the pork slices and move them gently to one side. He demonstrates how to regard the vegetables, admiringly. The apprentice, however, is eager to begin slurping his noodles in the noisy manner of those all around him. When the driver can't

take any more of the master's lesson, he pulls the truck over to a ramen house, and the two truckers go in, famished.

This Tokyo noodle shop is run by a middle-aged widow named Tampopo, which means "dandelion," an apt description of her commonplace appearance. The place is filled with disreputable looking toughs, and when the truck driver insists that the noodles aren't very good, the locals beat the daylight out of him. When he awakens the next morning, Tampopo has cared for him and now asks him to stay on and be her teacher. She wants to become the best noodle maker in the city. Surprised at himself, Goro accepts and enlists a variety of helpers to assist. Their escapades are great fun. In the end, Tampopo is transformed, and happy customers throng to her shop.

Juzo Itami casts a satirical eye at the Japanese attitude toward food (and most delightfully explores the connection between eating and sex) in *Tampopo*. Nothing is too sacred to be profaned, including the tongue-in-cheek sequence with the Zen sensei. From the slender thread of a plot revolving around Tampopo's dream and Goro's rescue, the director wanders far afield in search of the kinky and wonderful. The man-in-white (a snappy dresser of a gangster) and his lus-

cious honey pie take care of the sexier stuff, while a whole host of more mundane characters mouth comments about noodles that parody the pompous buzzwords of food critics. Even Goro tells Tampopo that her noodles are beginning to have "substance" but still lack "depth."

Nobuko Miyamoto gives an understated performance as Tampopo, going through a gradual awakening that is subtle and believable. She is the wife of the director, Juzo Itami, and starred in his 1984 film, *Ososhiki*, for which she was awarded Japan's Academy Award for best actress. Tampopo's pasta mentor Goro is treated with an endearing, sardonic worldliness by Tsutomu Yamazaki. Among his many film roles is that of the kidnapper in Kurosawa's 1963 classic, *High and Low*. Actors well-known for other roles in Japan make cameo appearances, bringing gusto and charm to even the briefest characterizations. *Tampopo* is the second film directed by Juzo Itami, who is an actor and essayist as well. He said he made it because he wanted to "describe people in a situation where sex and eating are not yet clearly separated." The final sequence of a mother nursing her lusty baby on a park bench says it all. Delicious.

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Friday, November 20, 1987

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