



Culinary Greatness

Passionate *Ratatouille* a beautiful blast

RATATOUILLE: Written and directed by Brad Bird. Original story by Jan Pinkava, Jim Capobianco and Brad Bird. Music, Michael Giacchino. Starring the voices of Patton Oswalt, Peter O'Toole, Ian Holm, Lou Romano, Brian Dennehy, Peter Sohn, Brad Garrett, Janeane Garofalo and Will Arnett. Walt Disney Studios/Pixar, 2007. G. 110 minutes. ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

It is a thrill to find, in the middle of a hot, dull summer for mainstream film, a movie as funny, sweet and fresh as *Ratatouille* — and all the more so when that nearly-perfect film is an animated feature from director Brad Bird, whose 1999 *The Iron Giant* is a too-often overlooked classic. Both *The Iron Giant* and *Ratatouille* have in spades a nearly indescribable quality missing from so many films, mainstream, animated or otherwise. It's a level of heart, a kind of compassion, an understanding of truth and passion that runs through every aspect of the film, like a rat through a tiny tunnel or a flavor through a carefully created dish.

Ratatouille is simply a marvel.

If those last comparisons put two disparate thoughts too closely together for you, you may have a hard time with *Ratatouille*, which is the story of a rat who would be a chef. Let go of your rat-hibitions; embrace the tiny, pink-nosed chef, Remy (Patton Oswalt), with his clean paws and exceptional sense of smell. Remy has decided that if you are what you eat, he only wants to eat good things. His sharp nose means Remy can sniff out poison, but sniffing bits of garbage all day long is not his idea of a fulfilling life, much as it benefits his family and colony. Remy would rather sneak into a nearby house, where he sees the famous chef Auguste Gusteau (Brad Garrett) on TV reciting his catchphrase: "Anyone can cook!"

In Remy's ratty heart, a passion is born. When disaster strikes, Remy, separated

from the colony, winds up in breathtaking, vibrant Paris, just blocks from Gusteau's once-acclaimed, now-suffering restaurant. It's an opportunity no budding chef could pass up, even one who's most definitely not welcome in the kitchen.

Ratatouille gets a lot of mileage from the juxtaposition of rats and food, and it does so in unendingly charming ways — and also by accepting that even in movieland, not a lot of human cooks want rats in their kitchens. It takes a naïve garbage boy to welcome Remy in and to have the open mind required to understand that this little rat has talent beyond his size. The sequence in which Remy and Linguini (Lou Romano), the gangly garbage boy, learn to work together is one of the movie's most entertaining, and if their storyline is a bit standard — the eventual falling out, the reconciliation, the pressures pulling them in different directions — it's utterly forgivable, for it moves forward the vital part of *Ratatouille*: the story about food, love, passion, family, obligation and the drive to create.

This is a movie for foodies: The kitchen's controlled chaos is entrancingly depicted; the signature dish was designed by Thomas Keller; Anthony Bourdain is thanked in the credits. It's also a movie for those who want us all to stop and think about what we're eating, to understand and love food as something other than fuel, and for anyone who's ever cooked up something at home that made someone's eyes widen with pleasure. And it's also simply a film for marveling at, for admiring and watching again and again, noting the beauty in the details: the sunset behind the Eiffel Tower, the tiny leaves Remy throws in the soup, the curve of a cobblestone or twist of a pipe as seen from a rat's-eye view. There is a refreshing abundance of joy in this film: joy in every line of the animation, joy in the creation of something clever and touching, smart and clear, timely and timeless. *Ratatouille*, thankfully, comes without a pat moral, but it does have a point: As skeletal food critic Anton Ego (a deliciously creepy Peter O'Toole) notes in a beautiful piece of criticism, not everyone can be a great artist. But great art can come from anywhere — as this film, easily one of the year's best, shows so well.

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