

Haute Cuisine (2012)

“Les saveurs du Palais” (Original title, French with English subtitles)

Rated PG-13. Our advisories: Violence 0; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our Star Rating: 3 Running time: 1 hour 35 min.

Do not seek your own advantage, but that of others.

1 Corinthians 10:24

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

Philippians 2:4

This is no *Babette's Feast* (though part of it is set on a coast even more cold and rugged than the stormy coast of Jutland, frigid Antarctica), but for those who love food and food films, director Christian Vincent's *Haute Cuisine* is somewhere between a cinematic feast and a nice lunch of cold cuts. He and his co-writer Etienne Comar based their script on Danièle Mazet-Delpeuch's memoir about her years as the private chef for President Mitterrand. The President in this film is given no name other than his title, and the chef is given the name of Hortense Laborie.

Hortense (Christine Frot) is plucked from her provincial farm where her simple meals and scrumptious truffles served at her B&B have earned her a devoted following. The government emissaries reveal almost nothing of why they are taking her to Paris until they arrive at the Elysee Palace, whereupon she is told that she will be cooking for the President. She objects that she does not cook fancy meals, and is told that is why the President wants her. She downgrades her ability, but the

emissary informs her that the influential food expert who recommended her for the position praised her cooking.

As Hortense is taken on a tour of the kitchen facilities, it becomes evident that head chef of the Main Kitchen Pascal Lepiq (Brice Fournier) deeply resents her coming—she is the only woman among the dozen or more of the cooking staff. Fortunately in her small kitchen her sous-chef Nicolas (Arthur Dupont) is totally supportive. But she feels ill at ease more because she has not met the President to learn his tastes, than because of the scorn from Lepiq. When she does manage to meet the President (Jean d'Ormesson), the two hit it off well, her boss telling her, "If you cook for me like my grandmother cooked for me, I'll be perfectly happy." Over the course of time she discovers that he loves reading cookbooks, preferring the older ones because they were written closer to a narrative style in which the context of the recipe is given. A perfectionist devoted to obtaining the best ingredients, she seeks out her own sources of food, which ruffles feathers of the Main Kitchen, and also eventually runs afoul of the bean counters worried about expenses, and nutritionists, concerned with the elderly President's health. They insist on censuring her recipes.

All this we learn in a series of flashbacks, the film beginning at a French scientific outpost in Antarctica where she is completing her yearlong assignment as chef. The men have come to love her and her simple but elegant cooking. An Australian film crew is there to make a film about the project, but upon learning that Hortense once cooked for the president of France, head journalist Mary (Arly Jover) focuses her attention on Hortense, who proves less than cooperative.

As one might expect, the food and its preparation are photographed in glorious color at close-up range. Hortense creates mushroom broth, boeuf en croute, rack of lamb, cabbage stuffed with salmon, platters of luscious berries, St Honoré pastry, and more. If you are not hungry going into the film,

you will be coming out. The battles with the chauvinistic Main Kitchen and the layers of bureaucrats surrounding the President provide the conflict.

A highlight is the late night visit of the President to the kitchen and Hortense's impromptu serving him truffles on toast. This quiet, personal scene made me wish for more such character revealing moments. At the Elysee Palace only the President seems to appreciate her, but the lowly batch of men at the Antarctic station warmly show their love for her and her food. I presume this framing device is meant to show the contrast between the powerful and the haughty who take for granted the work of their subordinates and the appreciative commoners more used to mass-produced gruel from their other cooks.

Christine Frot is memorable as the no-nonsense chef with a strong will, but it is a will directed toward serving others, and not herself. She is at the beck and call of the President: neither he nor his staff seem to think how some of their demands are inconsiderate of her. In one instance she has just a few minutes to prepare an unexpected meal, causing her to rush out of the kitchen to fetch the supplies at a near-by market. She certainly follows the apostle Paul's admonition to look to the interests of others more than her own. During a season when so many films such as *Gravity*, *Captain Philips*, and *12 Years a Slave* deal with life and death issues, this little film comes as a nice relief, reminding us that the search for excellence and the call to serve others above oneself also resides in such mundane matters as cooking and eating.

The full review with a set of questions for reflection or discussion will appear in the December issue of Visual Parables, which will be available toward the end of November or early November. If you are a subscriber and plan to discuss this film with a group, contact the editor, and he can send you the full review.