

# What's Cooking? (2000)

*Rated PG-13    Running time : 1 hour 41 min.*

*Our content rating: V- 1; L – 3; S/N-2.*

Our star rating (1-5): 5

*Moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and  
take pleasure in all their toil.*

*Ecclesiastes 3:13*

The answer to the question in the title is "Plenty!" Filmmaker Gurinder Chadha serves up one of the most delicious banquets of a film since *The Big Night*, or [\*Babette's Feast\*](#). Set in Los Angeles, just before and during Thanksgiving, the film shows us a Thanksgiving that has not ever appeared before on the screen. It is a multi-cultural Thanksgiving, from the children's school Thanksgiving Pageant that opens the film, to the dishes served alongside the traditional turkey, as well as the people sitting around the tables. Miss Chadha is a Kenyan-born Englishwoman married to Los Angeleno Paul Mayeda Berges (who wrote the screenplay), so she brings an outsider's fresh perspective to the American holiday. Her fascination with and love for this uniquely American celebration shows in the wonderful way that the food is photographed and the fact that we enter not one, but four, households where the family gathers together around the biggest meal of the year. The families are African American (with two yuppie guests), Vietnamese, Latino, and Jewish.

There are so many characters in the four families that the following annotated list might prove helpful:

The Williams Family: Audrey Williams (Affre Woodard) is a bit flustered because her mother-in-law Grace keeps criticizing her dishes and preparations. Grace is anything but that, and yet she comes through when a table accident almost spoils the perfectionist Audrey's dishes. Audrey is also understandably worried that her husband Ronald, a workaholic spin doctor, is keeping back a terrible secret from her. She's concerned too that their grown son Michael has not showed up. When he does, however, his criticism of his father's working for a conservative white governor poses still another threat to his mother's carefully planned gathering. Complicating this is the presence of the white couple whom Audrey has invited because they live too far away to return to their own family.

The Avila Family: Elizabeth Avila (Mercedes Ruehl) teaches school and is a newly single mother, adding tamales and other Latino dishes to her carefully prepared turkey. Her married son Anthony, meeting his father at the supermarket and worried at how bad he looks, invites him to the dinner, in the hope that his parents will reconcile. He has no idea what a potentially explosive situation he has created because of a special guest his mother has invited. Gina is the college-student daughter who has invited her new Asian boyfriend to dinner. Imagine her embarrassment when the only topic for conversation with her guest her brother and father can think of is Bruce Lee. Javier (Victor Rivers) is the father whose adultery has exiled him from his house. He now realizes what he has lost and is repentant—but is it too late?

The Seelig Family: Ruth (Lainie Kazan) and her husband Herb (Maury Chaykin) are Jewish parents who want their single daughter Rachel (Kyra Sedgwick) to marry and be happy, like their other children. Rachel, however, has chosen as her life-partner Carla (Julia Margulies), who graciously agrees to go along with the fiction that they are just roommates. Ruth and Herb realize there is more between the two young women but cannot stand to confront the truth about Rachel. Rachel's

siblings are supportive of her decision, but they all worry about their naive Aunt Bea (Estelle Harris), who is so naive that she cannot see Rachel's discomfort over her insistent questioning of why Rachel is not married yet.

The Nguyen Family: Trinh Nguyen (Joan Chen), a recent and proud immigrant, is having great difficulty coping with her children's adopting American ways. They all work to make their video store a success, but when she finds a condom in the pocket of her daughter Jenny's (Kristy Wu) clothing, she jumps to the conclusion that it is for her Anglo boyfriend. And hidden under the bed of son Gary (Jimmy Pham) is a secret that will really traumatize Trinh. Then there is Jimmy (Will Yun Lee), a student at a near-by college, who claims he is too busy to come home for the family gathering.

The above are just the principals in the four family gatherings, some of whom are joined together in unsuspected ways, but all by the desire that their families come together in something resembling peace and harmony on this one day. The food is lovingly photographed by Jong Lin, whose exquisite photography of the food in "Eat Drink Man Woman" so captivated audiences. With such artists behind and before the camera, Gurinder Chadha succeeds in giving us a film that is as pleasing to the eye as to the mind and spirit. "What's Cooking?" has something for every family that sees it—family loyalty and betrayal; misunderstandings and efforts to reconcile; love and anger—all are there, along with a delicious looking array of food that will remind everyone of their own Thanksgiving meals. The families are from different cultures yet united in their celebration of the holiday that brings families together, whether its members want to or not. Each begins their feast by offering thanks, a brief ritual that reminds even the skeptical that they do indeed have much to be thankful for.

Food has always been an important part of life and faith—Abraham and Sarah's hosting the three strangers, with

momentous results; the Passover meal; the manna in the wilderness; the wedding at Cana; the feeding of the 5000; and the Last Supper. Jesus did affirm the ancient Scriptural declaration that "humans do not live by bread alone" (too bad Martha in her kitchen didn't hear this), but he did nonetheless enjoy a good meal, even inviting himself to dinner at the sinning Zacchaeus' house. He broke the taboos against dining with societal outcasts and the ritually unclean so often that his enemies charged him with "eating and drinking with sinners." Jesus even compared the kingdom of God with a wedding feast, and his last command to his disciples in the Upper Room concerned a meal, "Do this in remembrance of me." Thus, there is for people of faith much to celebrate in "What's Cooking?" In each family the Thanksgiving meal becomes more than just eating and drinking, which is why those preparing it go to such loving lengths to make it special. The traditional turkey affirms their entrance into the amorphous American society, whereas the ethnic dishes affirm and celebrates the goodness of the tradition from which each have come.

Why this excellent film has remained largely unknown, while such inferior tripe is doing so well at our cineplexes, remains one of those mysteries of the film industry and public taste.