



Like water for chocolate

Director: Alfonso Arau

Country: Mexico

Date: 1992

A review by Janet Maslin for *The New York Times*:

Food and passion create a sublime alchemy in "Like Water for Chocolate," a Mexican film whose characters experience life so intensely that they sometimes literally smolder. The kitchen becomes a source of such witchcraft that a fervently prepared meal can fill diners with lust or grief or nausea, depending upon the cook's prevailing mood.



This film, a lively family saga that is centered on forbidden love and spans several generations, relies so enchantingly upon fate, magic and a taste for the supernatural that it suggests Gabriel Garcia Marquez in a cookbook-writing mode. (The best-selling Mexican novel by Laura Esquivel, who also wrote the screenplay, interweaves the fanciful story of "Like Water for Chocolate" with actual recipes.) Whether you approach this swift, eventful tale on the culinary or the cinematic level, prepare for a treat.

"Like Water for Chocolate," which opens today, is the story of Tita (Lumi Cavazos), whose way of connecting cuisine with strong emotion truly begins at birth. Tita is born on a kitchen table to a mother who weeps so profusely, a narrator maintains, that the residue of her tears yields an enormous bag of salt. This formidable mother, known as Mama Elena (Regina Torne), has endured her share of hardships and is determined to make her youngest child do the same. She decrees that Tita, the last of three daughters, must always serve her and therefore can never marry.

Years later, as a shy and watchful young woman, Tita attracts the attention of Pedro (Marco Leonardi). This is one of many romantic events that the film casts in amusingly food-related terms, as the narrator explains that when Tita felt Pedro's gaze on her shoulders, "she understood exactly how raw dough must feel when it comes into contact with boiling oil."

Pedro asks for Tita's hand in marriage, but his request is denied by Mama Elena. But she persuades him to marry Rosaura (Yareli Arizmendi), one of Tita's older sisters, instead. Pedro agrees to this empty marriage as a means of staying close to his beloved. But the idea of his marrying Rosaura is roundly criticized, once again by means of a culinary metaphor. "You can't just exchange tacos for enchiladas!" a household servant declares with indignation. Of course, she turns out to be right.

Tita herself is typically acquiescent, resigned to her role as a dutiful spinster. But then, with the help of Nacha (Ada Carrasco), the elderly cook who presides over the story before and after her death as spiritual adviser, Tita works on a wedding meal. Somehow, when saturated with Tita's tears, the food becomes so infused with her longing and frustration that the wedding guests are overcome. All are simultaneously taken sick, mourning for their own lost loves.

"Like Water for Chocolate" takes its title from a Mexican method of making hot chocolate by boiling and re-boiling water with cocoa, until this substance becomes sweetly overagitated, much as Tita herself feels in the presence of her new brother-in-law. In one of the film's most wildly imaginative episodes, Tita

pricks her fingers on thorns and thus turns a meal of quails cooked in rose-petal sauce into the pure physical embodiment of her desire for Pedro. At this point in the story, food is described as "voluptuously, ardently fragrant and utterly sensual," and ordinary nourishment is truly beside the point.

The effects of this dish are so potent that Gertrudis (Claudette Maille), Tita's other sister, feels her temperature rise and rushes to an outdoor shower to cool off. The dinner has so overheated Gertrudis that her body actually gives off smoke. Then the boards surrounding the shower catch fire and Gertrudis is carried off naked by one of Pancho Villa's soldiers, who has also fallen under the quail-and-rose-petal spell. Incidentally, Gertrudis's eventual fate establishes the story's faith in feminine power as a force that extends well beyond the kitchen.

Miracles like that of the quail and roses are presented almost matter of factly by the film's producer and director, Alfonso Arau, who acted in "El Topo" and "The Wild Bunch." (Mr. Arau is also the husband of Ms. Esquivel.) His direction can be seen as refreshingly plain, especially in light of the curious events the film often depicts, events that work best without stylistic flourishes. Strong passions produce sparks and lightning; a colossal knitted bedspread that expresses Tita's misery takes on epic proportions; one party scene somehow carries the celebrants 20 years forward in time. All of this is presented with the simplicity of a folk tale, with exaggerated events blending effortlessly into those that seem real.



Miss Cavazos's performance as Tita is reticent and sly, perfectly in keeping with the film's muted manner. Tita never overreacts, preferring to bide her time and marvel silently at outward events that confirm her intuition. Mr. Leonardi, as the person who shares many of Tita's thoughts, enhances the film's romantic mood while also evolving from object of desire to petulant brother-in-law. Miss Torne carries Mama Elena's sternness to a suitably fierce extreme.

Also appearing in the story, eventually to bedevil Mr. Leonardi's Pedro, is John Brown (Mario Ivan Martinez), the doctor whose American Indian heritage has made him privy to a whole different strain of folklore. It is he who compares the human spirit to a box of matches, suggesting how sad life can be if those matches are allowed to grow soggy. The film itself eagerly embraces the opposite notion, presenting a torrid, slow-burning love affair and never losing its own bright, original flame.

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