



FILM REVIEW â?? Off The Menu (Silverman, 2018): USA

Description

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Director/Producer Jay Silvermanâ??s second feature film, the indie, romantic comedy *Off the Menu* made its World Premiere during the 2018 Santa Barbara International Film Festival. Silvermanâ??s first feature was the drama, *Girl on the Edge*, the Audience Award winner at the 2015 San Luis Obispo International Film Festival. Silverman also executive produced and co-created the A&E TV series â??The Cleanerâ?• starring Benjamin Bratt.

Off the Menu is a sweet story about family, food and love. Young, fast-food business heir, Joel, portrayed by Santino Fontana (*Frozen*, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, *Sisters*), is out on the road looking for new menu items for his familyâ??s giant chain of Tortilla Hut restaurants when he meets and falls for a regional chef, Javiera Torres, portrayed by Dania Ramirez, an actress whose star is on a steep trajectory. Not only is Ramirez easy on the eyes, sheâ??s also capable of delivering some serious, dramatic acting chops.



Legendary Latin actress, singer and political activist, Maria Alonso Conchita, is stunning as Javiera's, vibrant, tell it like she sees it, mother. Mackenzie Moss portrays Javiera's daughter, Sophia, possessing a quick wit with timely comedic delivery. Interestingly, over half the *Off The Menu* cast is female and Hispanic as the filmmakers wanted to create a more inclusive experience while projecting a regional authenticity.

Off the Menu opens with a catchy non-diagetic tune, the Chile song (included in a teaser clip at the end of this review) coupled with beautiful shots of harvesting chiles and foodie close-ups of freshly picked chiles and a skillet of multi-colored peppers. Both soundtrack and cinematography are emotionally compelling here.

The film shifts quickly with a parallel story line of Joel as a fish out of water hiding his girlfriend's coffee maker, drinking blender-made, green smoothies and going to work on his bicycle and in cycling shorts and the passionate chef, Javiera, working magic in her kitchen. Javiera is a real home girl in a predominantly brown community and an infamous, regional chef with a wee bit of attitude. She utilizes a farm-to-table approach in making her signature dish featuring her home-grown green chiles from a secret family grow patch a far cry from the food scientists who are responsible for creating Joel's Tortilla Hut products. Hysterically, Javiera only makes her coveted dish once a week temperament permitting!

The character of Joel, on the other hand, initially reminded me of the late Chris Farley's lead character in *Tommy Boy*. Joel's character arc, however, evolves once he gets to where the film is set, a small fictitious, New Mexico town, Villanueva. Villanueva is a stand in for Taos, New Mexico. As his character evolves, so does Fontana's performance.

Throughout the film, Joel gets a few needed come-to-Jesus moments with his boss/sister, a domineering Tortilla Hut corporate executive leader. First, Joel is given marching orders to scout the Southwest for new recipes and, in particular, New Mexican cuisine. Later, Joel calls out his sister for poaching Javiera's signature dish. Seemingly, the company's research and development plan is to find authentic recipes and dishes throughout the United States and then mass produce them in a cost-effective manner sacrificing quality for quantity.



Ultimately, Joel realizes his family business is more about profit than creating any sense of community or personal fulfillment. And, unsurprisingly, once he gets a taste of Javiera's home cooking, Joel

feels the love and becomes smitten with Javiera and the feeling is mutual.

Strong cinematography from Matt Edwards, some delicious mise-en-scene, on-the-mark costuming, a complementary soundtrack and solid acting performances wrapped in a traditional, Hollywood-narrative structure make *Off The Menu* on the list of films to see on this Valentine's Day. Highly recommended.

The film is currently available on VOD/DVD.

Category

1. #SBIFF
2. Feature Film
3. Santa Barbara International Film Festival

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