



One of the surprises of BITTER FEAST is that, over a decade into the Information Age, it's the first feature film to center on an artist's vengeance over a destructive on-line review. And it's one of the movie's achievements that, though it would seem clear where its creators' sympathies lie, you might wind up rethinking your rooting interest before the story's over.

Another of the strongest qualities of BITTER FEAST (opening today at Brooklyn, NY's [reRun Gastropub Theater](#)

) is the lead performance of James LeGros as the artist in question, specifically a chef named Peter Grey. He's a man with an overwhelming care for his craft and passion for the finest ingredients (all organic, of course), and LeGros invests the role with a laserlike focus that makes you feel the purity of his enthusiasm. He's clearly an obsessive, but not necessarily one to act out against any slight; he's forced to share his televised cooking show with a bimbo named Peg (Megan Hilty), whose job is to provide bubbleheaded color commentary and jokes at his expense, and the fact that he hasn't taken off after her with a filleting knife proves he has some measure of self-control.



But then comes a vicious Internet review of Feast, the restaurant where Peter heads the kitchen, by blogger J.T. Franks (Joshua Leonard). It's far from the first on-line hatchet job J.T. has committed against a hapless eatery, but it's enough to inspire Peter's dismissal from both Feast and the TV program. J.T. has ruined Peter's life—and perhaps just as bad, in Peter's mind, he has demonstrated a complete lack of respect for the art and finesse of food preparation, and the experience and precision it requires. So Peter sets out to teach J.T. a lesson in true culinary appreciation...

The specific nature of the “tests” Peter puts J.T. through, and the way they, er, organically grow out of the two men’s shared milieu, allow Maggio to tease unforced black humor out of the situations while essentially playing the material straight. LeGros’ überdiscipline as Peter is nicely complemented by Leonard’s turn as J.T.; the indie-film stalwart (from *THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT* to *HUMPDAY*) perfectly embodies the self-satisfied snark that oozes from so much web commentary these days. Yet it’s not an entirely unsympathetic portrait; he and his wife Katherine (Amy Seimetz) have suffered a recent tragedy that, if it didn’t initially inspire J.T.’s nasty attitude, certainly has stoked it. Peter has some suffering in his past, too, and the way in which Maggio insinuates that he and J.T. are not such opposites as they first seem adds resonance to the situation. Even as the indignities J.T. undergoes at Peter’s hands seem deserved, it’s possible to feel a little sorry for him, too.

Mixing the worlds of fine dining and rural torment, Maggio and cinematographer Michael McDonough give *BITTER FEAST* a modest but polished look, with plenty of shiny surfaces in the former and deep-woods darkness in the latter. (The copious close-ups of meats, vegetables, etc. are pretty tasty too.) Composer Jeff Grace, the secret weapon in so many of producer Larry Fessenden’s features, contributes another of his nerve-jangling, suggestive scores. Fessenden also turns up on screen as William Coley, a PI looking into J.T.’s disappearance, bringing his entertaining New York edge to what’s essentially a functional part.

*BITTER FEAST* comes to increasingly depend on such conventional devices as it enters its final act, which is a bit of a shame given how much mileage Maggio gets out of his specific scenario and central combatants. Even as the action grows familiar, though, the writer/director and his leads remain true to the characters, which allows you to remain invested in their plights. Revenge may prove to be bitter, but this *FEAST* is pretty sweet.



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