

MONTHLY MOVIES

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Food for thought, holidays

Films for foodies

By T. Rob Brown

It's difficult to come up with timeless classics to watch during the Thanksgiving holiday that celebrate it. Sure, there's *Free Birds* ... but honestly, who cares? By this time of the year, we find ourselves eager for Christmas cheer for all to hear. Did you just groan?

So as to save the Christmas movies for next month, let's talk about movies about food. Heck, it worked for "Weird Al" Yankovic on his *Food Album*. Maybe it will work here too.

Aside from the holiday cheer, festive outfits, family bonding and gifts, food is one of the central parts of the holidays. Even Christmas songs delve into parts about foods: "... chestnuts roasting over an open fire ..." "... Oh, bring us some figgy pudding, and bring it right here ..." You get the idea.

As a self-proclaimed foodie, let me guide you on a tour of a few dramatic movies about food: *Chef* (2014), *Burnt* (2015) and *The Founder* (2016). Well, that's a movie a year for that trio—must have been a good time period for food films. After those, we'll briefly look at two comedic food films: *Waiting ...* (2005) and *The Slammin' Salmon* (2009).

Let's look at these in chronological order.

Proving himself yet again as a triple threat, Jon Favreau took on the roles of writer, director and star for *Chef*. As Carl Casper, Favreau cooks up some carne asada—literally and figuratively—as he loses his job at a fine-dining restaurant after getting upset with a food critic who gave his restaurant a horrible review.

Suddenly unsure of what to do with his life, he gets some sound advice that he's never going to be happy cooking for some restaurant owner and that he should go into business for himself. Unable to afford a bank loan or a restaurant of his own, he decides to start up a food truck so he can build up his menu and his clientele.

This story hits the heart of a question we all ask ourselves from time to time, throughout our career lives: Are we doing what really makes us happy?

Touted as an official selection of both the Tribeca Film Festival and the Newport Beach Film Festival, both in 2014, this feel-good film delivers a comedic yet dramatic story about someone rebuilding their life, taking control of their situation and making their dreams come true. But it isn't easy—it never is. Along the way, he also learns to be a better role model, in terms of career choices and happiness, for his son.

Don't watch this film on an empty stomach—it will make you hungry. It shows so many lavish shots of delicacies and tasty looking dishes that you will want to have some snacks or a meal ready. Maybe just watch this while you're eating in the living room on a TV tray or at the coffee table.

Chef (2014), Rated R, stars Favreau, John Leguizamo, Bobby Cannavale, Emjay Anthony, Scarlett Johansson, Dustin Hoffman, Sofia Vergara, Oliver Platt, Amy Sedaris and Robert Downey Jr. At 1 hour and 54 minutes, it received a certified-fresh 87% on the Tomatometer and an 85% audience score at Rotten Tomatoes, plus a 7.3/10 on the International Movie Database. I give it two thumbs up.

While Favreau played his chef as someone with more heart, Bradley Cooper took to the starring reins of *Burnt* as more of a prima-donna chef with some serious past drug issues. Fighting against money problems and enemies, he attempts to rebuild his career in an attempt to redeem himself, but his personality clashes with his coworkers and others in his business. Frankly, he's a character you have trouble rooting for to succeed.

I get the feeling Cooper is trying to pull some elements of his character, Adam Jones, from real life's British chef Gordon Ramsay. What makes this fall apart is that we have little reason in the film to respect Jones, as opposed to Ramsay, who is highly respected in the real world. Cooper's dramatic take on the character does his acting talents credit but falls short in connecting with audiences.

This film attempts to be a feel-good story like *Chef* but falls short of that mark as well. If you want a grittier look at the competitive life of a culinary chef, this film might be more appealing to you.

Burnt (2015), Rated R, directed by John Wells, stars Cooper, Sienna Miller, Daniel Brühl, Omar Sy, Uma Thurman and Emma Thompson. At 1 hour and 41 minutes, it received a rotten 28% on the Tomatometer and a 44% audience score, plus a 6.6/10 at IMDb. I give it one thumb up for the drama and one thumb down.

When I first watched this film, I didn't know what to expect, I just knew I wanted to see it to learn more about the history of the fast-food clown: McDonald's. Throw in a great, sinister delivery by Michael Keaton and you have a memorable film.

What amazes me about it is how Keaton can expertly craft a character's fall from grace. In the beginning, you meet Ray Kroc and he's a likeable character struggling to get by, and you root for him to succeed. But along the way, he gets corrupted by the power and the money and his own desire for success. He pushes harder and farther and begins to cross those ethical lines, delving into the realm of a sinister business owner, cheating his partners and lying to the public.

In the end, you want nothing more than for him to fail or get arrested or somehow get his comeuppance. Yet, that's the day that never comes. It takes a skilled actor to pull that off and Keaton delivers.

The Founder (2016), Rated PG-13, directed by John Lee Hancock, stars Keaton, Nick Offerman, John Carroll Lynch, Laura Dern, Linda Cardellini, B.J. Novak and Patrick Wilson. At 1 hour and 55 minutes, it received a certified-fresh 81% on the Tomatometer and a solid 82% audience score, plus a 7.2/10 at IMDb. I give it two thumbs up for showing me just how sinister—I'm digging that word today—the McDonald's corporation really was as it took our nation and eventually the world by force, if you will.

Let's transition from the deep thoughts of dramatic food films and move into the realm of humor. Two of the funniest movies about food that come to my mind are *Waiting ...* and *The Slammin' Salmon*. Both are from the first decade of the 2000s and feature hilarious casts of characters.

Early in his career, Ryan Reynolds had just come off his first starring role in National Lampoon's *Van Wilder* (2002) and a co-starring role in Marvel's *Blade: Trinity* (2004) as Hannibal King. 2005 was a big year for Reynolds as he ended up in major roles on the silver screen in *Just Friends*, *The Amityville Horror* and *Waiting ...*

Portraying Monty, Reynold's signature sarcasm really comes to bat in this film as it did in *Van Wilder*. Be forewarned, there are lots of sexual and perverted jokes, but what may actually disturb you the most is how the servers and cooks handle the food. This was the first movie I viewed that talked about what people jokingly refer to as the 5-second rule, or the 10-second rule. Most of the time, they really mess with the food of the rude customers.

This film will make you think again before making a scene in a restaurant or serving up a dish of meanness to your servers. As Monty states in his Cardinal Rule of Food: "Don't f*** with people that handle your food."

Waiting ... (2005), Rated R, directed by Rob McKittrick, stars Reynolds, Anna Faris, Justin Long, David Koechner, Luis Guzman, Chi McBride, John Francis Daley, Andy Milonakis and Dane Cook. At 1 hour and 54 minutes, it received a rotten 30% on the Tomatometer and a respectable 75% audience score, plus a 6.7/10 at IMDb. I give it two thumbs up for setting the standard for this type of film, helping kick off Ryan Reynolds' career and for making me laugh so much.

If you've ever seen *Super Troopers* (2001), *Beerfest* (2006), *Club Dread* (2004) or *Super Troopers 2* (2018), you might be familiar with a comedy group known as Broken Lizard. Another film they're known for is the Michael Clarke Duncan-led film *The Slammin' Salmon*.

The late Duncan played Cleon Salmon, a former heavyweight boxing champion who retired and opened up his own elite restaurant, specializing in seafood. He named it after his boxing nickname: The Slammin' Salmon. Duncan expertly portrayed the role as a man who took one-too-many hits to the noggin'.

The premise of the film is centered around the champ making a bad bet and owes money to the Yakuza. In order to get the money to pay them back that same day, he puts his serving staff to the test in a contest to see who can collect the most tips so the restaurant will make more money than usual. The servers get more and more competitive to win the constantly changing prizes and to also avoid ending up in last place—which the champ promised to give them a punch to the gut—and the hilarity ensues.

The Slammin' Salmon (2009), Rated R, directed by Kevin Heffernan, stars Duncan, Jay Chandrasekhai, Heffernan, Paul Soter, Steve Lemme, April Bowlby, Cobie Smulders, Erik Stolhanske, Morgan Fairchild, Jim Gaffigan, Will Forte and Lance Henriksen. At 1 hour and 38 minutes, it received a rotten 35% on the Tomatometer and a low 47% audience score, plus a 6.4/10 at IMDb. I give it one thumb up for making me laugh often.

Before we go, there are some upcoming Christmas movies that look promising: Ryan Reynolds and Will Ferrell in the Christmas musical comedy film *Spirited* (Nov. 18, 2022) on Apple TV+; David Harbour and John Leguizamo in the action dark comedy film *Violent Night* (Dec. 2, 2022) at cinemas from Universal Pictures; LiLo herself, Lindsay Lohan, in the amnesiac holiday comedy *Falling for Christmas* (Nov. 10, 2022) on Netflix, which kind of looks like a Christmas version of *Overboard* (1987, 2018); we return to visit Ralphie (Peter Billingsly) as an adult in *A Christmas Story Christmas* (Nov. 17, 2022) on HBO Max; and last, but certainly not least, Chris Pratt (Peter Quill/Star-Lord) and the rest of the crew of *The Benatar*, plus Kevin Bacon, return to Earth for the holidays in *The Guardians of the Galaxy Holiday Special* (Nov. 25, 2022) on Disney+.

Happy holidays and “The show must go on.”