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MFF Review: "El Bulli – Cooking in Progress"

September 23rd, 2011 | By Jennifer Kaufman

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Imagine dishes resembling sheets of ice sprinkled with sugar, pasta that "vanishes" when immersed in water and another dish that looks like miniature upside-down trees. This is not your standard restaurant fare. However, these are dishes found at the infamous Spanish restaurant El Bulli, and these both excite and bewilder the palate.

El Bulli serves up to 35 courses over a three hour time period to patrons lucky enough to get a table. Using less than orthodox methods, El Bulli's staff take food and make it into dishes you barely recognize. German filmmaker Gereon Wetzel captures it all in the documentary, *El Bulli: Cooking in Progress*.

Head chef Ferran Adrià, part culinary expert, part scientist and part Willy Wonka, is at the helm of El Bulli. For six months, Adrià and his staff close down the restaurant and head to Barcelona to create a whole new menu. They don't just do it by adding new spices or herbs. They do it through freeze drying, sautéing, pureeing and vacuum sealing different food items.

El Bulli grabs our attention immediately with Adrià tasting a glow-in-the dark sucker made out of fluorescent fish. Soon we are in the Barcelona experimental kitchen, which almost resembles a laboratory.

During this time, a sweet potato is juiced, peppermint is freeze-dried, ravioli is encased in an edible plastic-like substance and almond oil is drizzled into a cocktail to make it "silky." Only when the chefs visit a local food market do we see recognizable food. It's quite comforting to see grapes in all their glory.

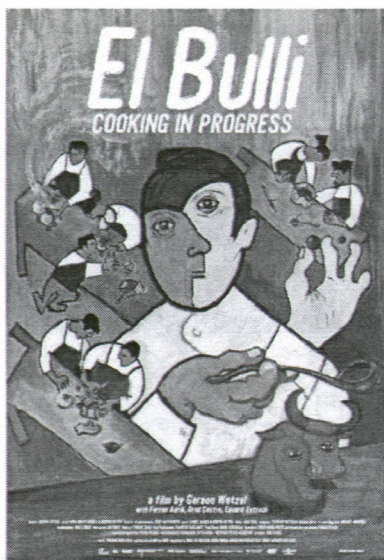
Experimentation continues once Adrià and his staff come back to El Bulli to re-open the restaurant. Though all the chefs taste the striking new dishes, Adrià has the final say in what will make the menu. He meticulously records every dish, noting both the good and bad, and makes suggestions on how to improve the dishes before they can be



Still from "El Bulli: Cooking in Progress." Images courtesy "If...Productions".



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enjoyed by El Bulli's patrons. Perhaps "enjoy" is not the right word. Sure, Adrià wants his dishes to taste good, but he also wants to keep patrons guessing just what it is they are eating.

Tensions escalate as El Bulli as opening day nears. Just how will the patrons react to the new menu? Will Adrià and the staff's dishes be a success or a failure? Feedback on the dishes in mostly positive, yet El Bulli can't rest on its laurels. Soon more experiments will be made and a new menu will be created. But before that, the film treats us to gorgeous photographs of El Bulli's new creations. Lovingly photographed by Francesc Guillamet, these photographs capture El Bulli's dishes as a hybrid of art, science and culinary expertise.

I will admit *El Bulli* is dry at times. There is no narration; this film simply observes. And if anyone is looking for any Gordon Ramsay profanity-laced blow ups will be sorely disappointed. The only time Adrià loses his cool is when a computer's hard drive malfunctions. We also never get to know the man behind the chef. Adrià simply lives, breathes, and yes, eats food.

Still, *El Bulli: Cooking in Progress* will appeal to both hard-core foodies and mad scientists everywhere. Even people with less adventurous palates might be intrigued by *El Bulli*; but they might also crave something more basic.

El Bulli: Cooking in Progress in not rated and is in Spanish, Catalan and French with English subtitles.

The film will be screened at the following theaters:
 Downer Theater, Saturday, September 24th, 4:45 p.m.
 Ridge Cinema 1, Monday, September 26th, 7:00 p.m.
 North Shore Cinema 1, Friday, September 30th, 7:00 p.m.

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