

Movie Review: 'No Reservations'

by David_Elliott

Beware of elite restaurant stories that taste like processed cheese. Is that a special frisson de Velveeta we detect in the glowing, plushly served "No Reservations"?

'NO RESERVATIONS' - Katherine Zeta-Jones is Kate, Aaron Eckhart is Nick and Abigail Breslin plays Zoe in the romantic comedy 'No Reservations.' CNS Photo courtesy of David Lee. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Catherine Zeta-Jones is a classy truffle as Kate, workaholic star chef at a Greenwich Village trendy spot, 22 Bleecker. Aaron Eckhart's Nick, a charmboy chef who challenges Kate's kitchen queendom, is a hearty steak. And as Kate's adoptive niece, Zoe, Abigail Breslin is still the fuzzy peach we adored in "Little Miss Sunshine."

Now, she's Little Miss Mascot and wide-eyed cupid, much like fabled Eloise of the Plaza Hotel. Zoe sniffles moodily about her dead mom, but cozies into Kate's busy, busy kitchen. And she prods the budding, frisky

romance of Kate and Nick that, as main course, is strictly lean cuisine.

Kate has a yummy apartment picnic of homemade gourmet pizza, under a sheet tent; has cute hot spats in the restaurant's cooling room with Nick snorting, "Don't touch my Tupperware!" Wisdom from Kate: "There is no greater sin than to overcook a quail" (she's the pope of poultry).

Scott Hicks ("Shine") directed as if the actors are catered munchies, primed for display. As gravy, there is a stream of classic arias and pop tunes. For dessert, isn't the pat resolution of turf rivalry simply endearing?

Carol Fuchs helped redo the menu, from Sandra Nettelbeck's 2002 "art" hit "Mostly Martha." In that, a brilliant German chef-ess is angered, then wowed by a sexy Italian interloper. If not a classic, it was a nice convergence of well-made dishes.

Zeta-Jones subs just fine. But Eckhart, for all his manly stubble and dental dude smile, is just a big American stud who "loves all things Italian." The robust proof is that, during peak hours of cookery, he sings along with Pavarotti's engulfing "Nessun dorma." Nick, we guess, might pass over Kate for a good load of lasagna.

From "Mostly Martha" to "Mainly Comfort Food" - by way of the Hollywood microwave. Even maternal death is just another flavor at the snack bar. And nobody has weight issues in the food-happy film, a convenience that might butter extra sales of popcorn.

A Warner Bros. release. Director: Scott Hicks. Writers: Carol Fuchs, Sandra Nettelbeck. Cast: Catherine Zeta-Jones, Aaron Eckhart, Abigail Breslin, Bob Balaban. Running time: 1 hour, 48 minutes. Rated PG. 2 stars.

