

Hollywood, Etc.: Stars get crash course on being pros in the kitchen

by Norma Meyer

Even in Hollywood, faking it as a chef is no piece of cake. Just ask the two hambones starring in the new movie "No Reservations."

To perfect his culinary wrist action for the Warner Bros. kitchen romance, Aaron Eckhart spent hours at home tossing granola in a pan while watching TV. Oscar winner Catherine Zeta-Jones practiced her thin-slicing technique on radishes before cutting into truffles, which cost \$2,200 a pound.

MICHAEL WHITE - Before filming of 'No Reservations' began, stars Catherine Zeta-Jones and Aaron Eckhart took culinary lessons from New York top chef Michael White. CNS Photo by Joseph De Leo.
GETTING A TASTE FOR IT - For a film about Hollywood chefs, stars Catherine Zeta-Jones and Aaron Eckhart got a crash course on how to chop, saute and move like a kitchen pro from New York top chef Michael White. CNS Photo by Joseph De Leo. "We went through hundreds of dollars worth of truffles," said Michael White, the former chef of New York's Fiamma Osteria, where the actors took a three-week crash course before shooting began.

White tailored training to the stars' roles - Kate (played by Zeta-Jones) is a no-nonsense head chef who clashes with free-spirited sous chef Nick (Eckhart) at the fictional 22 Bleecker restaurant in Manhattan. At the same time, Kate is trying to figure out how to raise her late sister's 9-year-old daughter (Abigail Breslin).

Eckhart obviously sank his teeth into the part. Before arriving at Fiamma, the actor spent two months in the kitchen of Melisse, a foodie mecca in Santa Monica, where chef Josiah Citrin showed him the haute cuisine ropes.

"I cut my fingers incessantly, but I was assured everybody still does," Eckhart said. "You're using such sharp knives, and you're dicing in such small little portions. I cut my fingernails into the food."

Chopping was one cinematic hurdle. But to take command in a hectic kitchen with servers and busboys rushing in and out, Eckhart had to be able to talk while cutting up vegetables. In one scene, he recalls he was telling a joke to Breslin, and "meanwhile, I was cutting my finger off. She looked down and there was a lot of blood on the onions."

At Melisse, adds Eckhart, "I hit my head all the time on the hanging pots. I burned myself. I would make bad slices. When you have a Dover sole that's air-flown from the English Channel and you're trying to cut it along the bone and you don't, you have to throw that sole away. I'd say, 'Sorry, chef.' He'd say, 'Don't worry about it - it's only \$50,'" referring to the menu price.

White said "No Reservations" director Scott Hicks wanted him to teach the stars all the nuances of being a chef, like how to throw a towel over their shoulders or tuck it under their apron strings or how to hold a spoon. He even coached Zeta-Jones on the right posture when she leaned forward to sauce a plate.

In the film, which is a redo of the German pic "Mostly Martha," Zeta-Jones' character goes into the dining room to meet customers. At Fiamma, White said the actress ventured out from the kitchen in a white apron one night to give it a trial run.

"She actually brought out a plate or two, and the gentleman at the table said, 'You know, you look a lot like Catherine Zeta-Jones.' She said, 'You know, I get that all the time' and went back in the kitchen," White said.

As the on-set technical consultant, White also sat during filming with Hicks, who was obsessed with getting the chefs' movements right. "He would ask me questions like, 'Would you pass that dish that way?'"

GOURMET FARE

The movie's gourmet fare, which includes Quail With Truffle Sauce, Langoustine With Scallops, Stuffed Dover Sole With Saffron, and creme brule, was prepared by a full cooking staff just feet from where cameras rolled.

To keep it real, Hicks cast professional line chefs as the on-screen kitchen staff. The set itself was a completely equipped, functioning kitchen built from scratch on a studio soundstage in Queens.

Even the props had back stories: The bottles of wine were from Australia's Yacca Paddock Vineyards, which is owned by Hicks and his wife, producer Kerry Heysen. The yellow plastic box that Zeta-Jones' character locks her truffles in is the same one in which White stored his pricey fungi. And the used carbon-stained pots and pans were from Fiamma.

"They took all of my pots and gave me brand new ones," said White, who is now executive chef at New York's Alto and L'Impero restaurants.

If the cross-talk and barking of orders - "I needed it five minutes ago!" - sounds like it came from a genuine bustling kitchen, that's because it did. Before shooting began, Hicks videotaped the Fiamma kitchen and later wove some of the under-pressure dialogue into the script.

White also tutored his celeb pupils on how to work together in a cramped space and had Zeta-Jones, an Oscar winner for "Chicago," practice pan-toss sauteing with rice in a cold pan.

"Rice was too slippery," said Eckhart. "When I was at home, I'd flip granola for an hour or two each day."

The actor, whose credits include "Erin Brockovich" and "Thank You for Not Smoking," says he bought 10-pound bags of potatoes and carrots to hone his chopping skills at his L.A. abode.

"When he came the first day, he came with a bag with his knives in it. He was ready to roll," White recalled. The pro's first advice: "Keep your fingertips curled under when you're cutting so you don't nip them off."

The leading man also hung out with White's "meat guy" and butchered and cleaned chickens and fish.

"I think the greatest skill I learned was how to sharpen a knife and how enjoyable that is," Eckhart said.

White hadn't yet seen the movie, but he said he was sure the faux chefs pulled it off.

"It's one thing to learn to make the dishes. It's another thing to learn how to cut and act like a chef," he said. "They're professional actors. They can act like anybody."

Before his hands-on epicurean stint, Eckhart said he "knew what an oven was and what a refrigerator was. Other than that ..."

Now, he said, the mystery of making meals is gone. "To cook a Dover sole, all you have to do is oil a pan, flip it for 30 seconds, put it in the oven for three minutes, and you've got a Dover sole."

So after his culinary foray, what are his favorite foods?

"Pizza," he said, with a laugh. "And burritos. Me? I'm a surfer. I like surf food."

Tasteful films

Here are a few choice films with food, lovingly photographed, as a pivotal character.

"Babette's Feast" (1987), subtitled: This Danish/French production and Best-Foreign Language Oscar winner connects religious themes with gastronomical delights as the heroine pours lottery winnings into a magnificent banquet.

"Big Night" (1996): With mouthwatering footage of Italian dishes, this indie dramedy centers on two immigrant brothers who gamble on a huge feast to save their struggling New Jersey restaurant.

"Chocolat" (2000), partially subtitled: Desserts take center stage in this multi-Oscar-nominated English/French film about a single mom who opens a chocolate shop in a conservative Catholic town.

"Eat, Drink, Man, Woman" (1994), subtitled: Ang Lee nabbed a best foreign film Oscar nom for this affectionate exploration of Taiwanese gastronomical and generational dynamics through the story of a master chef and his three daughters.

"Like Water for Chocolate" (1992), subtitled: In this Mexican family drama, home-cooked cuisine does strange and mystical things to the characters.

"Mostly Martha" (2001), subtitled: "No Reservations" was inspired by this German tale of a top chef whose headstrong 8-year-old niece comes to live with her.

"Ratatouille" (2007): This Pixar comedy is about Remy, a young rat who lives in the walls of a fancy Paris restaurant and aspires to become a chef.

"Soul Food" (1997): The 40-year-long ritual of a family's Sunday dinners of sumptuous soul food is interrupted by the matriarch's hospitalization.

"Tampopo" (1985), subtitled: This Japanese comedy centers on efforts to make a humdrum ramen bar into a three-star noodle restaurant.

"Waitress" (2007): Keri Russell plays a Southern pie-maker with pastry-centered daydreams and hopes of leaving her control-freak husband to start her own pie shop.

- Beth Wood

Sources: imdb.com, rottentomatoes.com

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