



BORDERLINES FILM FESTIVAL

LA COCINA (15)

Director: Alonso Ruizpalacios

Starring: Raúl Briones, Rooney Mara, Anna Diaz, Motell Foster

US/Mexico, 2024, 2 hours 19 minutes, English/Spanish + English subtitles

In recent years there has been no shortage of high-octane dramas set in the stressed-out world of a restaurant kitchen, from the single take Stephen Graham film *Boiling Point* or the award-winning US tv series *The Bear*. But way before that was Arnold Wesker's 1957 play *The Kitchen* now reimagined by Mexican director Alonso Ruizpalacios and relocated from London to New York's Times Square.

A chaotic symphony of nearly two dozen characters, this black-and-white indie confection (garnished with sparing touches of colour) mixes biting social critique with stylistic bravura. The setting is in the guts of a high-volume midtown Manhattan restaurant called The Grill — a hectic pressure cooker where personal and professional concerns come to a boil.

The food looks edible at best, and a lot less enticing after we've witnessed the commotion that goes into preparing it. In Ruizpalacios' version, practically the entire staff — not Rooney Mara's pregnant waitress, but the ones touching the food, at least — are immigrants caught between the proverbial frying pan (sweating into their orders amid the midday rush) and the fire (of losing their work status, which exposes them to the risk of deportation).

Wesker would have approved of Ruizpalacios' changes. As the left-leaning playwright explained at the time: "*The world might have been a stage for Shakespeare but to me it is a kitchen, where people come and go and cannot stay long enough to understand each other, and friendships, loves and enmities are forgotten as quickly as they are made.*"

Peter Debruge, Variety

It's a smart move on Ruizpalacios's part to refresh the geography and politics of *The Kitchen*, as the exploitation of immigrant labour in the food industry is well-documented and sadly all too common. Yet as well as presenting the extent of these gross employment practices, Ruizpalacios also emphasises the found families that exist in these spaces, as immigrants come together to break bread and share cigarettes, swapping stories and bickering like siblings rather than colleagues. It's not all choreographed chaos, either — *La Cocina* soars in its quiet moments, notably as Pedro and Julia meet by the restaurant's lobster tank and share a less sanitary tryst in the kitchen's walk-in freezer.

Hannah Strong, Little White Lies

Notes compiled by Steve Freer

If you like **LA COCINA**, you may enjoy:

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TO A LAND UNKNOWN (12A) Documentary maker Mahdi Fleifel's first feature about two Palestinian refugees stranded in Athens is an intense thriller with high moral stakes.