

CULTURE



DINING

Pumpkin Love Justified

Word-Of-Mouth Hit Pumpkin Catching Up To Hype Thanks To Dishes Like Their Rapture-Inducing Mussels

By BRIAN FREEDMAN
THE EVENING BULLETIN

By the end of the summer, going out for a meal in Center City can be a disconcerting experience. Tables remain empty. Dining rooms are uncomfortably quiet. Everyone, it seems, is down by the shore, and the atmosphere at most restaurants lies somewhere between subdued and depressing.

PUMPKIN
1713 SOUTH STREET, 215-545-4448
CHEF: IAN MORONEY
★ ★

Unless you find yourself at Pumpkin, as Ms. Martini and I did one Wednesday evening in August.

The first thing that struck us was the noise. As we rounded the corner from 17th Street onto South, what began as a low-level hum grew to a full fledged din as we opened the door and entered the tiny dining room of Pumpkin.

A strange scene was laid before us: A roomful of tables, all but one of them full, and diners laughing and talking over one another in an effort to be heard over all the unexpected joviality.

Since it opened its doors and fired up its burners last September, Pumpkin has benefited from one of the most extraordinary word-of-mouth reputations in the city. Philadelphians love this place, and generally with good reason.

But as with any young restaurant, Pumpkin has its flaws, and the night Ms. Martini and I visited, there were more than a few.

After several minutes of looking over our menus, the waitress arrived at our table bearing a basket of bread. She reached in with a pair of tongs and gave us each a few slices.

This basket ritual is generally a good sign, for it implies that the bread is fresh, or at least freshly warmed. But this was not the case at Pumpkin. The slices of baguette were slightly stale, as if they had been cut or warmed through well before they arrived at our table.

Fortunately, the saucer of basil and garlic-infused olive oil made up for it. Green-tinted and perfectly seasoned, the oil was an exercise in balance. In fact, it only suffered from one happy flaw: It was so good that, had we not showed a restraint I never knew we had, we might have ruined our appetites with it before even the appetizers had arrived.

Earlier in the evening, as we were shown to our table, I saw my father's business partner across the dining room. Once Ms. Martini and I were settled, we went over to his table to say hello. But rather than greeting us with the usual small talk, he extracted a promise from us: One of us had to order the mussels as an appetizer. "It's outrageous," he said. "Absolutely delicious." His voice trailed off and he stared into middle distance, as if remembering a past love affair.

His rapture was justified: The mussels, tiny, sweet, and perfectly steamed, arrived in a warm white-bean ragout that was studded with cubes of smoky bacon and hearty French coco beans. The combina-

tion was both well-conceived and comforting, and halfway through I found myself wishing I had asked the waitress if I could have had it in an entrée portion. I just didn't want to stop eating it.

But our other appetizer was a disappointment. It consisted of pan-roasted figs, a disc of goat cheese, a small herb salad, and a gentle anointment of vin cotto. While each of the individual elements was fresh and flavorful, something was missing from the assemblage as a whole. Perhaps it was the herb salad, which imparted an oddly vegetal quality and did nothing to accentuate the depth of the other flavors on the plate. Arugula would have been much better, or some other peppery green.

Our entrées, too, ran the gamut.

The New York strip steak, perfectly cooked and sliced thin, was overwhelmed by the blue-cheese aioli. This was unfortunate, for I was able to find one slice that had not been touched by it, and it was one of the sweetest and most deeply-flavored cuts of meat I'd had in a long time. The tangle of caramelized onions atop it all, ostensibly an attempt to gild the proverbial lily, achieved nothing more than muddling the already overly aggressive flavors. Fortunately, the base of unadorned, sliced tomatoes provided a much-needed touch of elegance and understatement.

The fish stew, on the other hand, was light and flavorful. Large chunks of red snapper and monk fish rested in the center, and a phalanx of fingerling potatoes and shrimp surrounded it. A lighter interpretation of the classic bouillabaisse, but finished with ozo rather than pernod, this was summertime comfort food at its best. The stew succeeded in the same way the mussels did: Both were rich, thoughtfully conceived, and expertly prepared.

Having saved just enough room for dessert, Ms. Martini and I decided to split two: The peach cobbler and a cheese-and-fruit dish.

The cobbler took full advantage of this summer's astounding-sweet fruit, and the streusel topping provided the perfect crunch. This, indeed, was a superb late-summer dessert.

The Delice de Bourgogne, a creamy cow's milk cheese, arrived sliced and arranged in the shape of an asterisk, accompanied by a tropical-fruit compote and cream cheese pastry-dough cookies that were somehow both light and rich at the same time. I had half a glass of wine remaining, and this was the perfect pairing with which to finish it.

So while most of the city's restaurants suffer through the lean months of summer, Pumpkin has somehow managed to carry on at full capacity. Since it opened last autumn, its reputation has spread and its fan-base has grown. Though the kitchen still has its fair share of kinks to work out, it is easy to see why so many diners like Pumpkin as much as they do.

With a little more consistency, Pumpkin could become a destination restaurant. It's almost there, but not quite.



Peter Falk, left, and Paul Reiser star in *The Thing About My Folks*, opening in theaters tomorrow.

Q & A

The Thing About These Actors: Talking To Paul Reiser And Peter Falk

By JOHN CARROLL
THE EVENING BULLETIN

PHILADELPHIA — Paul Reiser and Peter Falk have been touring the country with their new film, *The Thing About My Folks*.

Reiser, the *Mad About You* star who recently appeared in the comedic documentary *The Aristocrats*, says the film is a word-of-mouth picture, and so he's making sure people can get the word out.

Reiser and Falk spent an August weekend in Philadelphia promoting the film at the Ritz Theaters, as well as in Bryn Mawr. In between visits, they sat down with *The Evening Bulletin* to talk about their film, their journey, and their relationship.

It's rare for filmmakers to come to Philadelphia to introduce their film and take questions. Why are you here?

Reiser: We have nothing to do and our wives asked that we don't come home so soon.

Falk: If we had a few more explosions in the picture we wouldn't be doing this.

Reiser: We've shown it probably 25 times in festivals and a couple of screenings all over the country and the response has been great. Everybody not only loves the picture, but they feel this sort of discovery about it. It's very much a word-of-mouth movie. To get the word out, we have to do it differently.

Have any of the audience reactions surprised you?

Falk: I didn't expect this many people to come and talk about their spouses. Women to come and say, "I've got to get my husband to see this picture."

Reiser: It almost becomes like a confessional, a bit. They stand up, they're teary-eyed. There's something very personal about it and powerful. It shouldn't be very surprising because when you do something personal, it's always the most universal.

The film is about a father-son relationship. Can you talk about your fathers and what you learned from them?

Falk: I remember when I told him I was going to be an actor, he said to me, "What are you gonna do, you gonna paint your face and make an ass of yourself the rest of your life?" What I really remember about my father is work. That's what you're here for. He loved it, he loved his work. He owned a store. He treated that store just like a baby.

Reiser: I think both our fathers were very similar. My father had a business and it was the same way, it was his baby. You put your time into your work. Sometimes it's easier to put your energy into work than to really be with your family. I've tried in my life to make more of an effort, to be a more attentive dad. In the movie, I'm the kid who thinks he knows everything about his dad...but there's a lot of stuff I don't know. What's at the heart of the story is guys trying the best they can, but are sure to miss the mark.

Peter, your career has bounced between comedy and drama, but here you get to do both. Do you prefer one to the other?

Falk: I'll tell you what I prefer: I prefer a terrific story and a terrific character. That's what I want, that's what I look for. I don't look to see, "Is it a comedy, is it a drama?" I don't care what the hell it is. I just respond to a good script and a good part. I know the difference. I know when it's fake.

Paul, you starred in *The Aristocrats*, which is a crude, popular movie. There are also

comedies out there like *Wedding Crashers* and *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* that do crude comedy very well. As a writer, do you find it more difficult to do heartfelt, sincere comedy like in this film?

Reiser: You can't really put *Aristocrats* in the same vein. It's not a dirty movie. I feel it's a heartfelt movie about guys who love what they do and love a well-told joke. There's a surprising sweetness to it. I feel like Peter does, you can tell on page one. To me, there's sort of a litmus test — does it sound like real life? On *Mad About You*, we'd ask, "Would they really say that, or is that TV people talking to each other?" At the heart of it, these people talk to each other in real terms. This movie is about real things and about real people. Part of why it's hard for people to peg this — well, it's a comedy, it's a big funny comedy, but there are other things in this. I think there's too much of a tendency to call things "it's a comedy" or "it's a drama." The things I always love are the things that straddle both and the actors I admire are the ones who can do both, and Peter is the king among them.

Paul, did you have any trouble as a television writer switching to a feature-length script?

Reiser: No. This always wanted to be a movie and I knew what the story was and I knew who the people were and I thought I knew how to write for Peter because I had his voice in my head. It wasn't hard, it was exciting. In the back of my mind, I always pictured this in a theater. You get lost in a movie the way you don't in a TV show. It's a great journey that these two characters go on, and it's fun to aim for that.

The father and son do a lot together in this film — fishing, shooting pool, watching baseball. Did you have a favorite?

Reiser: I've never fished in my life, he's never fished. I don't know if I ever saw Peter shoot pool in a movie, but I just knew that he could. Did you ever shoot pool on film?

Falk: I probably have. In *Columbo*, I probably shot a little pool. In this picture, I shoot more pool than in any other picture.

Reiser: Somehow I knew from the beginning they would go to a ballgame, play pool, go fishing — just because those are typical male bonding things.

Were you two comfortable acting together right away?

Falk: When you get with a terrific actor, it's a terrific thing. When you get with a terrific actor who also wrote those terrific lines that you're saying to him in the scene, you've got a double thing going.

Reiser: Peter — not only do I know the way he talks, I love the way he talks, and it was so much fun to write for him. As a writer, when I got to hear him back, it was oddly correct. "Yup, that was exactly how I was hoping he would say it." As good as I hoped it would be, there was this playfulness and rhythm that Peter had. It was a joy.

Paul, was it difficult working with director Raymond De Felitta since you were the writer and the star?

Reiser: Well, it wasn't really scary because I got to be the producer. I picked him. The reason I picked him is he is a very smart, talented director, and a writer as well. I wanted him to bring his expertise and his objective eyes so I could feel free to play with Peter and play in the playground and be an actor. We spoke about it before so clearly he didn't say, "What if it's a Gothic period piece?"



Andrew Niccol, writer and director of *Lord of War*, works on the set of the film with stars Nicolas Cage, left, and Ethan Hawke. *Lord of War* will be released in theaters nationwide tomorrow.

At Arm's Length

An Interview With Andrew Niccol

THE EVENING BULLETIN

PHILADELPHIA — Andrew Niccol, famous for writing *The Truman Show* and not so famous for writing and directing *Simone*, returns to theaters this weekend with *Lord of War*, a story about an arms trafficker named Yuri Orlov (played by Nicolas Cage). The film had a troubled road to the screen as studios passed on the film, which is at times critical of the U.S. arms industry.

In Philadelphia to answer questions after a screening of his film, Niccol took some time to sit down with *The Evening Bulletin* at the Four Seasons and discuss his latest project.

Did you have any specific films in mind when writing and directing *Lord of War*? At times, the film reminded me of *GoodFellas* or *Boogie Nights*, talking about something big through family.

Not intentionally. I'm sure I'm influenced by every movie I see, but I wouldn't have any intentional influences. I can see some parallels [with *GoodFellas* and *Boogie Nights*], but I can see some differences as well. It's almost like a how-to.

How do you research a film like this and write a character like Yuri Orlov?

It's sort of torn from the headlines. I've been collecting information about arms dealers for a long time. I've always been interested. There's been so much interest in drug trafficking, but arms trafficking has a much more devastating effect upon the world.

How hard was it to find financing for this film and get it to the screen?

It was difficult. No typical Hollywood studio wanted to touch it. The script went out the week before the latest war in Iraq. It was the timing from hell.

Did you ever think this film wouldn't get made? Were you ever ready to give up?

I always have a feeling they're about to collapse, every movie at almost any time, but especially with this movie because it was all eventually done with foreign money and an insane French producer who put his hand into his own pocket and paid for things, which is unheard of. From day to day, I didn't know if the financing would be there because I didn't have that studio bank to rely on.

Are you at all anxious about how this film will be received by critics and the public at large?

Not really. I think that movies have a long life. I think the true reviews come only five years after a movie. I don't think there should be any real sensitivity. It's not political, unless you consider the truth to be political. I'm only stating a fact. The U.S. is the biggest arms supplier in the world, by a long way. But that's the same if Bush is president or if Clinton is. It's not a partisan thing, it's just a big moneymaking enterprise.

Regardless of your intentions, do you think viewers will twist this film around and try to make it a political issue?

People always will do that, but these are all documentable facts, so it's not like I made any of this up.

The war caused problems in terms of getting this film made, but do you think it adds some relevance to the film now that it is being released?

I think it will. Americans are looking outside their borders, so for that reason alone we are forced to confront the world. It may have some relevance because of that.

This is a film about serious issues and ramifications, yet it can be very funny at times. As a writer, was it difficult to strike that balance?

I think the devil is charming. And glamorous. And witty. And so that's why I wanted this character to be that way. It needed to be that way.

You worked with Ethan Hawke on *Gattaca*, and now on this film. What appeals to you about him as an actor?

He's more complex than a lot of leading men. This character could be seen as some sort of dogooder, but he's a cop who doesn't just want to catch the bad guy, he wants to get his picture in the papers. That's his flaw. I also like that the way Ethan played it. He always looked like the tortured one even though he's the chaser instead of the chased.

Was Nicolas Cage the guy you always wanted for the role of Yuri?

I don't write with anyone in mind, but when I finished I thought, "Who is going to make the devil charming?" And no one does that better than Nicolas Cage. He sort of has-in-built irony, which I wanted for the character.

Jared Leto is a great, but rather unknown, actor. What film of his caught your attention?

I guess *Requiem for a Dream*. Why isn't this guy doing more movies? I still don't know why he isn't doing more movies. I ask him occasionally, "Jared, why aren't you doing more movies?"

Your other films — *Gattaca*, *The Truman Show*, *Simone* — are all set in the future. *Lord of War*, however, is present day. Was this a stark change for you?

You only get to see what gets made, so it looks like I'm making very calculated steps, but it's more chaotic than that. It's only what you can get financing for. I just write the stories I'm attracted to, I don't think about it in genre terms.

What do you mean by chaos? Do you tackle a lot of ideas at once?

You'd be frightened to see how I work. Sometimes an image comes to me, sometimes it's a character, sometimes it's a scene. Somehow a movie winds up at the end of it.

***The Truman Show* is the only film of yours that you have written but not directed. Why?**

I only write to direct. I also don't think of myself truly as a writer. I don't think screenplays should be published, they're not really works of literature. They change every day, they're just very fluid documents. I see them as working documents. For *The Truman Show*, I made the biggest mistake by writing my most expensive film first. I wrote that before *Gattaca*. I remember the meeting with the studio head who said, "Andrew, we're just not going to give you \$80 million to direct your first film but we would give you 20." And so I went off and wrote *Gattaca* and made sure it was \$20 million dollars. And sure enough, it was. And then it got made before *The Truman Show*.

How much do your scripts change while filming?

To me a script is like a newspaper — there's a new one every day.

Is that because you let actors improvise?

I want people to make things better and I give them the freedom to make it better. If I don't think people make it better, I'll leave it on the floor, but I at least give somebody a chance.



HOTLIST

Ember Swift In Town Tonight

By JOHN CARROLL
THE EVENING BULLETIN

Tonight, Ember Swift brings their unique jazz sound to World Cafe Live. The group, which started and still runs its own independent record label, Few'll Ignite Sound, layers their sound with acoustic, bass and electric guitar, electric violin, drums and vocal harmonies.

Their lush sonic performance won't be the only unique part of the evening. Girlyman will open for Ember Swift, and while their music is more traditional in terms of pop music, the band mixes in delightful musical accompaniments with instruments like the djembe, banjo, baritone guitar and mandolin.

Movie

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, 5 p.m. 7:15 p.m. 9:30 p.m. Franklin Institute. 222 North 20th St. 215-448-1200.

Music

Bodeans with Shannon McNally, 9 p.m. \$20. Theatre of Living Arts. 334 South St. 215-922-1011.

Ember Swift with Girlyman, 8:30 p.m. \$19. World Cafe Live. 3025 Walnut Street. 215-222-1400.

Channels, 9 p.m. \$8. The Khyber. 56 South Second St. 215-238-5888.

String Band Concerts, 8 p.m. Free. Mummies Museum. 1100 South Second St. 215-336-3050.

Sports

Atlanta Braves at Philadelphia Phillies, 7:05 p.m. \$15-\$45. Citizens Bank Park. One Citizens Bank Way. 215-463-5000.

Stage

Hairspray, 8 p.m. \$25-\$81.50. The Merriam Theatre. 250 South Broad St. 215-336-1234.

Measuring Man, 7 p.m. \$20. Mum Puppettheatre. 115 Arch St. 215-925-7686.