



Mid-August Lunch. Live the Italian Ferragosto at the Movies!

Benedetta Grasso (March 12, 2010)



From March 17 2010 on "Mid-August Lunch" by director Gianni di Gregorio (Zeitgeist Film) will be screened at Film Forum in New York. The movie was first presented at the Italian Cultural Institute on Feb 24 at the presence of famous chef, TV star, and cookbook writer Lidia Bastianich. It recounts the funny and yet deep story of a man forced to take care of four lively old ladies...

August 15, Ferragosto... Every Italian city looks like an empty movie set, a ghost-town. No store is open, the streets are deserted and the few cars around are rushing out to escape the heat of the summer. Some families prepare for this day, Ferragosto, days in advance, like for a hurricane, knowing that it won't be possible to buy essential ingredients or supplies on the actual holiday.



Ferragosto is a unique Italian holiday which is not so easy to define as it seems at first. For some people it's a religious event (a Catholic holiday that has its roots in a Roman Summer Feast at the end of harvesting), celebrating the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, but if you asked many Italians, even the most religious, this is not really what this day is about.

For many people it's a synonym with being at the sea-side or in certain cases the mountains or the country-side. This is the typical picture of a family on Ferragosto: towels and tablecloths spread open on the sand, the food covered in the shadow of colorful giant beach umbrellas, kids running in and out of the water and their parents taking a break from work and enjoying a day of complete vacation.

Ferragosto is also connected with food, in a particular way. In the South there is the tradition of a big meal, which - much like Thanksgiving in the US - might start in the afternoon and then become like a prolonged lunch and dinner all together.

In other regions of Italy food comes into play in other ways, through special family recipes or traditions. When I would spend my summers in Piedmont in a country-house, for example, Ferragosto was symbolized by my grandma's "pesche al cioccolato", a typical Piedmont recipe for the "Assunta" (dialect for Ferragosto) which consisted of oven cooked peaches with inside a filling of macaroons and dark chocolate, the most delicious dessert ever in my childhood memories...

The famous chef and TV star [Lidia Bastianich](#) [2] Ferragosto used to spend her Ferragostos in the country-side as well: "As the cities quietly stopped their activity and all of Italy is on vacation there is the need to do something, to celebrate one's work through the year. We went to the country-side and we spent the day eating on and off the table. I don't recall necessarily a big Ferragosto meal, as it happens in the South, but inevitably everything culminated at the table or in a picnic, carrying food in plastic net bags: sandwiches, fried zucchini, chicken, prosciutto, wine, kept cold in a bucket of cold water"

Lidia shared these and more memories on a very particular occasion on February 24 2010 at the Italian Cultural Institute while a movie - appropriately called Mid-August Lunch (by Gianni Di Gregorio) was screened, - linking this warm Summer day with a cold winter night in New York...and taking a very funny and personal look at this Italian holiday...

In fact, even if Ferragosto can be described in different ways it ultimately stands for complete vacation with family and friends, sharing food and being out of the city, out of the everyday routine.

The irony is that the premise of the movie is exactly the opposite. Gianni, in the middle of August, is at home in the charming district of Trastevere in Rome and for him the days are one like the other. He's living with his mother, a somewhat tyrannical and yet sweet and endearing woman who takes advantage of his son's generosity and keeps him around the house. He seems happy and content with his life, cheerfully taking care of his mother in any way he can. The problems start as Alfredo, the accountant who administers the apartment block makes him realize he's in debt and he hasn't been paying the rent or his utility bills.

Cornered by his financial issues Gianni is forced to accept a deal, agreeing to look after Alfredo's mother on Ferragosto, while he goes away with his young lover, in exchange of money and the relief of some bills. Alfredo drops at Gianni's place his mother Marina but also his aunt Maria, another woman over 80 years old. A few hours later his doctor makes a similar offer and due to the same financial issues, Gianni can't say no. Another elderly lady, Grazia, the doctor's mother finds herself in the cramped apartment.

As the movie unfolds the four ladies - with very distinct and strong personalities - will comically interact with each other, with positive and negative effects and by the end will have created a bond that is hard to break and shared a Ferragosto meal.



The movie was screened at the Italian Consulate and preceded and followed by a discussion by Antonio Monda, NYU Professor and journalist, Lidia Bastianich, Italian American chef, and Andrea Visconti, a multimedia correspondent for the magazine [Espresso](#) [3].

Simonetta Magnani, the attaché for Cultural Affairs (Cinema and Art) for the Italian Cultural Institute introduced the guests and Emily Russo, the co-president of [Zeitgeist Film](#) [4] announced the film-release. Mrs Russo explained that this is the first Italian film that Zeitgeist is releasing and that it will open on March 17 at [Film Forum](#) [5] in New York and nationally afterwards.

Antonio Monda read a message from the director Gianni Di Gregorio in which Gianni apologized for not being in New York but declared that he felt like he was taking a concrete step to the realization of his dreams and ironized on his movie concluding the note with these words: “You Americans always say that us Italians are mama-boys and we have a thing for good food...well...you know... that is true!”

Antonio Monda described the movie as “a legitimate heir of the ‘Commedia all’Italiana’. A movie that has a very deep sense of humanity, that deals with themes such as solitude and the egoism of our modern society in a light way, having the characters react through irony and pietas”

He went on saying: “ I think this is one of the most delightful, tender interesting and also original film made in Italy.”

The discussion between Andrea Visconti and Lidia Bastianich, enriched by the audience’s questions, was very well-organized and thought provoking. The movie was analyzed in depth, in its themes, motifs and characters, through fascinating intuitions and reflections on from the eloquent hosts.

Lidia Bastianich focused on how food was represented and how the message of the movie was carried through food metaphors and images, through the main activities of the movie which are buying food, getting food, preparing it and talking about, something that, as Lidia said, is also a strong element of Italian Culture.

When the audience exited the room, entertained by this short “slice of life” - an almost too realistic and honest example of film-making - everyone left with the feeling that Mid-August Lunch is about a lot more than a summer holiday and good food: aging, memory, being a woman, the richness of the generations connecting, sons becoming parents to their own parents, observing life and being an active participant in it...

As Andrea Visconti pointed out this is a story about Italy at large. “The main four characters have all different accents. Zia Maria has a southern accent, Grazia a central one, probably from Umbria, Valeria, the mother has a sophisticated Roman accent while Marina a more “vulgar” Roman accent.”

This movie is remarkable in its attention to language, in the directness and the joyful spirit through which it addresses different issues and in its production, a low-budget project that involves the director and his mother as actual protagonists of the story, inspired by real life and as actors in the movies.

Mid-August Lunch won two prizes at the [Venice Film Festival](#) [6] and had a great critical reception in Italy. Gianni Di Gregorio made this movie, his first one, after a career as an AD and a screenwriter (he co-wrote [Gomorra](#) [7] with Matteo Garrone): a movie that perfectly combines an endearing home-made feeling with the dream-like experience and entertainment big movie productions can give.



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