

Angry Beans and Butterfly Wings

“Wonderful,” “Delightful,” “Loved it,” “Want to see it again.” Those are some of the comments I have been hearing from both friends and strangers when someone mentions *Like Water for Chocolate*. No wonder—the dominant motifs are gastronomy and eroticism. Is there a person in the world who doesn’t like to talk about food and sex? The Mexican movie that has been playing to full houses at the Ritz for the past eight months is based on Laura Esquivel’s novel by the same name.

Everybody who has seen the movie has laughed at the unusual effects the gourmet food produces: the acute attack of melancholy and intense longing for lost love caused by tears shed in wedding cake batter, the aphrodisiac effects of blood from Tita’s chest mixed with the roses that prick it, combined in a Pre-Hispanic delicacy—quail in rose petal sauce—and the efficacy of chilies in walnut sauce, garnished with pomegranate seeds, prepared with love.

Food and eroticism are two illustrations of the capacity of the Hispanic to accept, enjoy, and promote combinations, syncretism, “mestizaje.” Gastronomy is not only intertwined with eroticism and other emotions, but with an entire manner of living and dying. The dialogue between the ingredients affects the communion between fellow diners. Tears, blood, and rose petals represent culinary secrets and epicurean alchemy.

In one of the most interesting episodes of the novel (which contains all the recipes), when Tita and her sister argue, the chickens on the patio begin to fly wildly and peck out each other’s eyes. Tita then discovers that the beans she is preparing for dinner are still hard after hours of cooking. She remembers that her nanny used to say that when people argue while preparing

tamales, the tamales won't get cooked because they are angry. When that happens, you have to sing to them to make them happy enough to want to cook. Tita then tries to remember a moment of great joy and passion. With those happy images in mind, she sings a waltz to the beans; the beans allow the water to penetrate them, and in no time at all, they get cooked. The episode could be seen as an example of Latin American superstition, or, at best, magic realism. However, the recognition of the interdependence of plants animals, emotions, food, music, and love can also be interpreted as a holistic perception of the world. After all, how are angry beans that refuse to cook different from Edward Lorenz's Butterfly Effect?

In 1960, while creating "toy weather" on a computer, this MIT meteorologist discovered that the flapping of a butterfly's wings in Peking today can alter a storm system in New York next month. Lorenz's mathematical principle may serve as a metaphor for a view of reality that says that in a cosmic scheme, all events are interrelated. This holistic cognitive style, typical of Hispanics, offers a way of understanding and thinking that promotes tolerance, acceptance of change, and appreciation of diversity. Our ability to deal with uncertainty and "chaos" is one of our greatest strengths. Latin America is proud to be a multiracial, polycultural civilization with a syncretic religion, a neo-baroque aesthetics, and a magic realist/surrealist perception of reality. This ability to mix, to live in simultaneous times and multiple realities, this gift for ambiguity, is not just one of the characteristics that have placed 20th Century Latin American art in the forefront, but, more importantly, one of the strengths of the Hispanic psyche, one of our most valuable ways of thinking.