The Bear: Comedy-drama set in Chicago restaurant mostly offers crumbs

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The FX television channel's *The Bear*—a comedy-drama set in a Chicago restaurant—has won numerous awards, including the Emmy for outstanding comedy series and the Golden Globe for best musical or comedy. Several actors on the program have collected awards, including Jeremy Allen White, Ebon Moss-Bachrach (who has supported calls for a ceasefire in Gaza) and Ayo Edebiri. The overall critical reception has been very positive.

The Bear will launch its third season in June 2024.

The Bear follows young and talented chef Carmen "Carmy" Berzatto (White), who inherits the family restaurant in Chicago. The Beef caters to the locals and has managed to survive the pandemic—barely. After his brother Mikey's suicide, Carmen abruptly leaves his award-winning career in the New York culinary scene to save the hometown joint.

Carmen finds The Beef run-down, indebted and largely dysfunctional. Conflicts emerge between Carmen's high-end vision for the shop and the status quo of sandwiches and comfort food. Sydney (Edebiri), a youthful sous-chef he hires, takes heat from the old timers before gradually winning their respect and developing self-respect too.

The kitchen staff engages in hijinks, as does the handyman, Neil Fak, played by chef and internet personality Matty Matheson. Carmen's family sets him up with a love interest, a girl-next-door from his youth (Molly Gordon). Carmen's sister, Natalie (Abby Elliott), reluctantly signs on to manage the books.

Moss-Bachrach plays Richie—best friend of the recently deceased Mikey Berzatto (Jon Bernthal, in flashbacks)—who has managed The Beef until Carmen's appearance. Richie is the chief opponent of Carmen's efforts to reinvent the restaurant into a Michelin-star experience. His seething resentment feels authentic at times. Scenes involving his shared custody of a young daughter—including the urgency of securing Taylor Swift concert tickets—ring true. As a whole, however, the depiction of Richie's finding his purpose in the hospitality field is uneven, often moralizing.

In the strongest episode of the series, The Beef's bread baker, Marcus (Lionel Boyce), makes the most of a trip to Copenhagen, learning high-end desserts and life lessons from a talented chef and one-time colleague of Carmen, Luca (Will Poulter).

Marcus' mother is succumbing to a terminal illness and, at first, he recoils at the thought of leaving her. The travel montage makes the trip tangible, and Boyce masterfully brings his passionate, but soft-spoken character to life.

When the two chefs trade war stories in Copenhagen, the veteran Luca explains that his favorite recipes aren't the product of brilliant cooking technique. Rather, he says, it is the inspiration that makes the food, the ability to live *outside* the kitchen and to bring life experience back into it that creates great food.

Marcus enjoys the novelty of residing on a docked boat. He saves an old man who suffered a bicycle accident (and gets right back on his bike). He takes in much from the Danish trip and the proof is in the pudding, as they say: he brings back a successful dessert menu. The direction and dialogue in this episode stand out for subtlety and genuine realism.

Unfortunately, these unassuming qualities find too little expression elsewhere in the program.

The second season ends with the soft opening of the restaurant, relaunched as Carmen's vision: The Bear. The animal reference attempts to capture the feel of a creature that is both fierce and loyal.

In the sphere of family dynamics, one of the series' weakest areas, *The Bear* tends to bury the viewer in

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various elements of personal crisis: suicide, substance abuse, dysfunctional parent-child relationships, mental illness—with little dramatic or genuine psychological explanation. In so many instances, the show merely stops where it should begin. "It is enough to *see* the mess of it all" seems the unstated premise.

The characterization of matriarch and alcoholic Donna Berzatto, played by Jamie Lee Curtis, epitomizes this approach. Donna is a trainwreck as she prepares a traditional Italian "seven fishes" meal for Christmas dinner. Her smoking and drinking and yelling and tasting and reheating and food-throwing make much sound and fury, but signify little. She deeply resents her children's offers to help her in the kitchen. She berates the assembled family at the dinner table before storming out and then driving her car through a wall.

At the end of this hour-long *tour de force*, the sarcastic title takes over the screen: "The Berzattos."

There is voyeurism and sensationalism in this approach. Why has Donna—epicenter of the family's emotional turmoil—reached this dead end? The episode is pivotal, with masses of commotion, and represents a large failure, and the larger failure of the series: the inability to offer coherent explanations for its characters' sometimes extreme behavior.

The frenetic restaurant scenes fare little better. The tick-tick-ticking timer in Donna's home kitchen finds a very literal, unartful complement inside the professional kitchen (and in Carmen's nightmares). Yelling and mistreatment predominate, that is, until Carmen supplants them with a military discipline and *esprit de corps*.

Creator/director Christopher Storer based The Beef on a childhood friend's restaurant, Mr. Beef, in Chicago's River North neighborhood. Storer's sister is a chef and serves as a culinary supervisor on the series. Likewise, chef Matheson not only plays Fak, but he also serves as a consultant to the show. There is an *intention* to portray some part of the food service industry accurately, at least in its immediate form of appearance.

Storer's resume consists mostly of directing and producing stand-up comedy specials for Bo Burnham and Hasan Minhaj. *The Bear* is his first writing project. Storer described his inspiration for the show to *Esquire*:

"When I was growing up, my household was kind of gnarly. I had mental illness and addiction in my family. I go to Al-Anon all the time. I'm still dealing with this, as an adult, and finding healthy ways to approach it. Some of the same thoughts that I was feeling about my family I noticed in a lot of toxic work environments. No one sets out, I don't think, to create a gnarly workplace. Especially in kitchens, you realize that they were probably mistreated by someone, they probably learned this, they probably have something they're not dealing with."

This is a bland, resigned recipe. And it explains why so much of *The Bear* feels like bullet points about *personal* suffering. For Storer—and this is not unique to him, by any means—mental illness and addiction more or less simply *happen*. And one has to then *deal with them*.

For all of its self-congratulatory "harshness," *The Bear* doesn't trouble itself with something as close-at-hand as a workplace injury that threatens a dishwasher, busser, server, runner, line cook etc., etc., with poverty or eviction. What is the role of class exploitation and inequality in causing trauma? Rising rent? Unemployment? COVID-related death and ongoing symptoms?

The Bear has its amiable and honest moments, and a number of endearing background characters. Some of the lead actors are less successful, something formulaic in their performances grows wearing, but their roles are more problematic. One of the features of the series that must be attractive to audiences is the lack of race and gender warfare. The kitchen here is a multi-ethnic, very mixed ensemble, with no particular signs of animosity.

But the very "broadmindedness" in that regard is connected to another feature of the series, which points in a negative direction. The show's theme seems to be "if we all stick together, we can lick this thing!" In a city long known for it brand of Jesse Jackson-type coalition politics, incorporating the unions, affluent African American petty bourgeoisie and various "lefts," this has a definite significance, and not a healthy one.

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