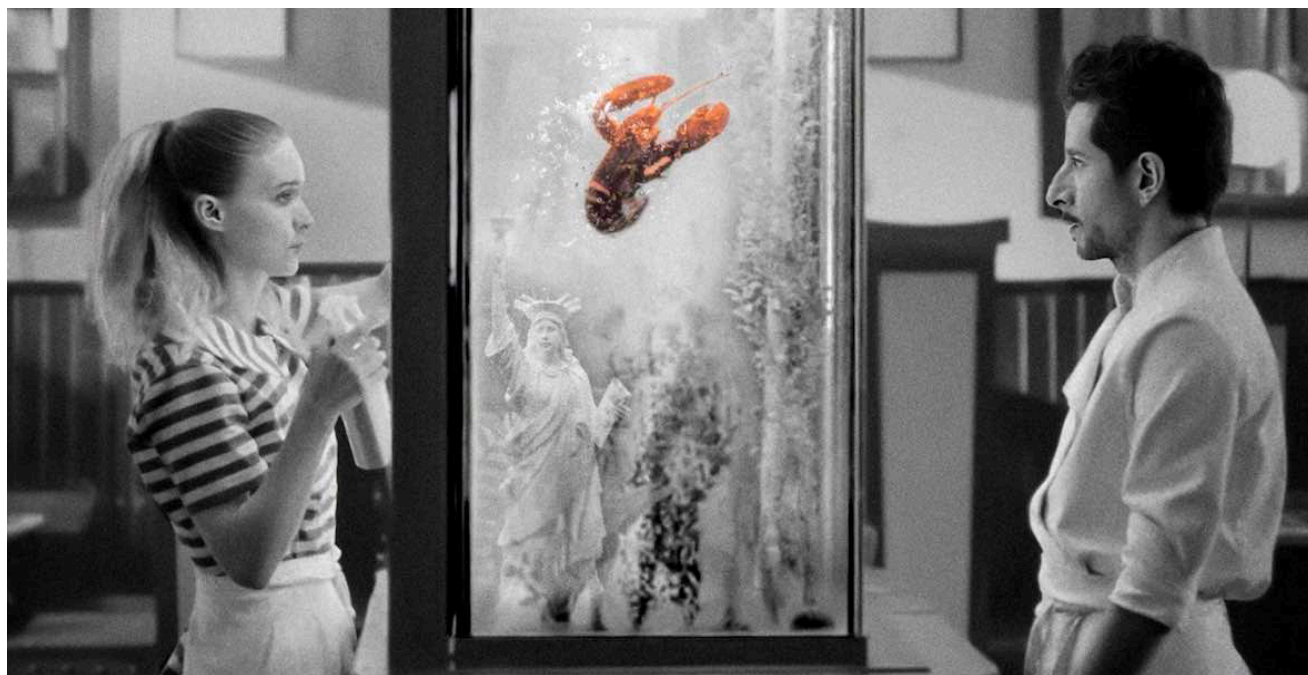


 **PRAGDA** | SPANISH FILM CLUB

DISCUSSION GUIDE



LA COCINA

A film by Alonso Ruizpalacios

Mexico, United States / 2024 / 139 min
Spanish with English subtitles

BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM:

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Before watching a film, it is important to know the current events and history of the country that film comes from. Learning about the filmmaker is also a relevant way to gain insight on the context in which the film was produced. You can learn more about Alonso Ruizpalacios at <https://pragda.com/film/la-cocina-by-alonso-ruizpalacios/>

INTRODUCING THE FILM

A **film synopsis** is a piece of text designed to summarize the film's narrative, genre, style, and key participants in a way that appeals to a wide audience. The synopsis is part of the film's marketing process and tends to follow a traditional format. Read this synopsis for *La Cocina*.

Set in the chaotic kitchen of a bustling Times Square restaurant, *La Cocina* by Alonso Ruizpalacios is a gripping exploration of migration, power dynamics, and the pursuit of the American dream.

Pedro—one of Mexico's most-coveted actors Raúl Briones, —is a fiery and charismatic undocumented Mexican cook who struggles to navigate the pressures of his precarious existence. Torn between his dreams of legal status and his volatile reality, Pedro faces mounting tensions when he becomes the prime suspect in a theft investigation. His relationship with Julia—played by Academy Award® nominee Rooney Mara—an American waitress grappling with her own personal conflicts, further complicates his journey as their lives collide in moments of passion, betrayal, and revelation.

Through a mix of dark humor and poignant drama, *La Cocina* delves into the invisible lives of immigrant workers who keep the city running while enduring systemic exploitation.

The film's rich ensemble cast and surrealist touches transform the kitchen into a microcosm of societal divides, where every interaction reflects broader struggles of identity, class, and survival.

From the film synopsis, can you imagine the genre and tone of the film? From this same text, try to identify the main events of the film's plot and the socio-political context of the film.

- Do you think that the film will have a political message? Cite specific language from the synopsis to support your answer.
- How do the trailer, poster, and still images encourage you to watch the film?
- Viewing the marketing materials alone (i.e. trailer, poster, and still images available at <https://pragda.com/film/la-cocina-by-alonso-ruizpalacios/>) without the aid of the synopsis, can you make any assumptions regarding what the film is about?



AFTER WATCHING THE FILM:

NARRATIVE

- *La Cocina* opens with a sequence of Estela arriving in Manhattan via ferry and subway, making her way to Times Square and eventually finding The Grill. What does this opening say about Estela's journey to find work in New York City? How does it introduce the immigrant experience in the U.S.?
- Estela gets hired to work at The Grill by opportunistically taking the interview slot of a candidate who was delayed because they got lost on the subway. What does this make you think about Estela's character? What does it tell us about her situation?
- Pedro's internal conflict is first introduced through his relationship with Julia and his phone call back home, and as the film goes on, we see many examples of his volatility. Combative and often at the center of conflict, how does his flawed character offer insight into the shared experiences of someone in his position?
- How does the lost money create tension in the film? How does the mystery evolve as more information is revealed throughout the film? Was Mark's eventual discovery an unexpected conclusion for you?
- The "back of house" kitchen staff is filled with immigrants of different nationalities and backgrounds; how do their interactions with each other differ from interactions with Americans like Max, the grill chef, or Mark, the accountant? What about with Luis, a U.S-born Mexican American in a managerial position?
- The chef's Spanish rendition of the US national anthem offers a moment of levity for the kitchen staff. What is this scene's purpose in the broader context of the film's narrative?
- What does the lunch rush scene reveal about the working conditions at The Grill? What does the contrast between front of house and back of house show? How does it relate to the kind of people who work front of house vs back of house?
- How is Julia and Pedro's relationship impacted by their different social statuses? How does Luis change his approach with each of them when interrogating them about the lost money?
- What does the conversation about dreams reveal about each of these characters? Why does Pedro reject Raton and Salvador's dreams of tranquility and financial stability? Why are those their dreams and not something more emotionally ambitious?
- Later in the film after Pedro tells Julia about the commercialization of lobster as high-end food, he is chastised by the head chef for giving one away because it is \$39.50. What do you think is the message the film is trying to send with these scenes?
- Julia's abortion has a large impact on her as well as Pedro. How do the character's personal issues throughout the film relate to the context of their employment in The Grill?
- What do you make of Pedro's outburst at the end of the film? How do you feel about Pedro after watching the film?
- Most of the film takes place in The Grill or just outside. What feeling does this create?
- Rashid, the owner of The Grill, is portrayed as a ruthless boss. However, he has slight traces of an accent and is not a white American; what are your perceptions of his unspecified background and what do you think his lack of empathy represents in the story?
- What did you think about the ambiguous ending of the film? Serving as a callback to Nonzo's story about the Neapolitan, what do you think the green light represents as it shines on Pedro and reflects onto Estela?



CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES

- How does the opening's intentionally blurry visual effect make you feel? Why do you think Estela's journey to The Grill was shown this way?
- Why do you think the filmmaker decided to shoot this in black and white? What do you think the few instances of color represent?
- Did you notice any particularly long takes? What is the purpose of these long takes?
- How did you feel about the changing aspect ratios throughout the film? What effect does this have on you as a viewer?
- What do you notice about the camera movement throughout the film? When does the director choose to move the camera and when is it still? When is camera movement smooth and when is it handheld? Why?
- What did you think about the compositions of certain frames? How do certain close ups throughout the film make you feel? What do they say about the characters in those moments?
- What did you notice about the film's sound both in terms of non-diegetic music and diegetic sound design?¹ How does the film's sound play a role in building the world of The Grill?
- How does the set design of The Grill both in the restaurant area and kitchen area, reflect the themes in the film? Analyze the film's mise-en-scène.²
- How would you describe the film's editing overall? Is it fast paced or slow? How does this vary throughout the film, and to what effect?



¹ Non-diegetic sound is sound whose origin is from outside the story world. Voice-overs are typically non-diegetic since the narration does not appear in the film's story world. Usually, the music soundtrack of a film is non-diegetic. "Term Index." The Columbia Film Language Glossary. <https://filmglossary.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/term/>

² Mise-en-scène...is used in film to refer to everything that goes into the composition of a shot--framing, movement of the camera and characters, lighting, set design and the visual environment, and sound. "Term Index." The Columbia Film Language Glossary. <https://filmglossary.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/term/>

THEMES

- What do you think is the meaning of the film? What messages does it communicate to the audience?
- What are some of the main themes of *La Cocina*? What is your main takeaway from the film's story?
- How does the film explore complex issues of identity and belonging? How do the characters and the relationship to their setting explore these central themes?
- How does Ruizpalacios explore the idea of the American dream? What do you think the film is saying about it?
- How do power dynamics manifest themselves in *La Cocina*? How does hierarchy play a role in the film's story?
- What do you think the film is trying to say about immigration? How do you view the film in the context of the social and political debates around this topic?
- What role does race play in this film? How do certain characters and relationships explore complex issues of race?
- How does the film explore the theme of ambition in the context of these characters' setting?
- In what ways does the film touch on issues of gender? How do these issues relate to other themes explored by Ruizpalacios?
- The restaurant is called The Grill while the film is titled *La Cocina*. How is language explored as a theme, and how does it serve to examine other issues of ethnicity and belonging?
- How would you describe the film's tone and mood? How does this relate to what goes on in the film?
- What does the film have to say regarding issues of class? How are these issues linked to other issues of race and immigration?

