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Garlic Is As Good As 10 More Nicaraguas

Rob Baker

Garlic Is As Good As Ten Mothers Cineprobe, Museum of Modern Art

Eating garlic may be the ultimate personal political act. I used to think it was transvestism, but that was before I saw (heard, smelled and *experienced*) Les Blank's new film, *Garlic Is As Good As Ten Mothers*. Now I realize that transvestism merely trashes the uptight, heterosexist, patriarchal majority fringe, whereas radical garlic-eating is preconditioned to offend everyone within a five-block area, in the most democratic and nondiscriminatory way imaginable.

"Fight Mouthwash — Eat Garlic" is the call-to-arms of Blank's newest exploration of alternative American lifestyles: The "remedy" is the enemy; it can only be combated by embracing the naturalness of the original cause of stuffy dismay. And why garlic — quite possibly the greatest culinary aid and natural cure-all known to mankind — should have gotten so much bad press in the first place is the curious (and distinctly political) paradox that Blank explores in his latest (and as yet unfinished) film.

The film's title has the usual Les Blank tongue-in-cheek quality, and one should certainly not misconstrue it as anti-nuclear family or anti-woman, two entities that are celebrated with much gusto here, as in all Blank films. The title also implies a sense of renegade unity and shared outsider-ness central to Blank's concerns.

The new work was premiered last Monday at the Museum of Modern Art's excellent Cineprobe series, but the powers that be had decreed that Blank could not feed the viewers on his homemade garlic mayonnaise, whole-roasted garlic heads, blanched garlic salad and hot garlic sausage afterwards, or let them see the film while garlic bread was baking in the background, so that the aroma would bombard their noses as the film's wonderful images and spoken-and-sung manifestos about garlic reached their eyes and ears.

So Blank and the folks up in the film department made their own plans for a counter-screening the next night, in a spacious loft on 29th Street, this time following Blank's wishes while letting flow the white wine and assorted other garlic-complimentary beverages. The result was exactly the kind of pleasure fair that Blank celebrates in all his films.

And what a film it is — Blank's best, I think. And it's absolutely obscene in its obsession with the growing and harvesting

of garlic and the preparation, cooking and eating of garlic dishes — everything from whole suckling pigs to garlic soup to a sauce for red snapper that features, in addition to tons of garlic, whole cups (not pinches) of chili powder and cayenne. The garlic cooking of many cultures — the Chinese, the Mexicans, the Spanish, the French, the Cajuns — is explored, and I've a hunch that Blank plans to expand this even further by tracking down more out-of-the closet garlic-philes around the world before finishing the film.

As in all of Blank's films, the people interviewed are beautiful, natural and full of zest for life. Like the Mexican-Americans

in Blank's *Chulas Fronteras* (still showing at the Museum next Sunday and Monday at 2:30 p.m.), these garlic-lovers take great pride in their own identity, glorifying it in song and dance and turning it into constant celebration. They are hard-working, uncomplaining, truly *happy* people.

They are also terribly sexy (even the pigs in a Les Blank film are sexy). After all, they do thrive on garlic (the pigs love it), which is alleged to have not only aphrodisiac but also contraceptive properties. And what other plant in the world, viewed from its various perspectives, looks like the more interesting parts of both the male and female anatomy? ●



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