

Pot Luck

(L'Auberge Espagnole)

France 122 mins

Cert 15 (UK release 2003)

Written and directed by Cédric Klapisch

Cinematographer: Dominique Colin

Editor: Francine Sandberg

Music: Loïk Dury

Cast:

Romain Duris:	Xavier
Barnaby Metschurat:	Tobias
Judith Godrèche:	Anne-Sophie
Cécile de France:	Isabelle
Kelly Reilly:	Wendy
Audrey Tautou:	Martine
Cristina Brondo:	Soledad
Kevin Bishop:	William
Federico D'Anna:	Alessandro
Christian Pagh:	Lars



The Director has pointed out in interviews that "L'Auberge Espagnole" is a cultural pun. "In French it means Spanish hostel, but it also refers to a mess. Spanish hostels in the 19th century didn't have restaurants, so all the nationalities had to bring their own food and eat together. It was all about cultural difference, and sharing." Klapisch's own suggestion for the British title was to call the film Europudding, but the distributors worried that this might be construed as too negative. Therefore it now comes affixed with a rather more drab translation: Pot Luck

Anyone who spent some of their college or grad-school years sharing a house with half a dozen other people will recognize the cozy bohemian squalor of L'Auberge Espagnole. The seven scruffy, eager students in "L'Auberge," each from a different country in Europe, have crammed themselves into an old-world apartment in Barcelona.

The atmosphere of gentle communal chaos is authentic enough to become the movie's dramatic center. Xavier (Romain Duris), who has arrived from Paris, is handsome and purposeful but all buttoned-up (his girlfriend back home, played by Audrey Tautou, is a petulant nag), and the house acts on him like a balm he didn't know he needed.

Ironically Klapisch based the film at least partly on his own experiences as a student in the US. In his early 20s, he left Paris to study film at NYU. "I wanted to get out of France because I didn't feel very French at the time. I didn't like French movies in the 80s. It was the end of the nouvelle vague, and it was very dogmatic and over-intellectual and boring. And all the movies I liked were American. It's just that as soon as I got there, I realised that I was much more French than I ever imagined. Also, the people I was mixing with were all European. I had Russian friends and Italian friends, and I realised that I was very related to them. It was the first time I became aware that a European culture existed."



Klapisch assembled an effective and winning ensemble cast. Romain Duris, a popular figure in France, brings a freshness and likeability to Xavier. Cécile De France, who won a César Award (Best Newcomer) for the role of Isabelle, is feisty and forceful. The beautiful Judith Godrèche makes Anne-Sophie a fragile and needy woman. And Audrey Tautou, in the small (but crucial) part of Martine, comes across as bitchy and manipulative, barely recalling the wide-eyed innocence of *Amelie*.

Although the narrative is fairly traditional, Klapisch spices things up with some interesting camerawork. These stylistic quirks are enough to maintain an element of spontaneity, but do not go overboard to the extent that they call undue attention to themselves. There's a fine line between satisfying and excessive, and Klapisch stays on the right side of it. In the film's early scenes, the monotony and pointlessness of working in a stifling corporate environment is highlighted by the use of literal fast-forwarding (for example, characters are speeded up as they walk from office to office). During a key sequence near the end, when residents of the apartment are racing home, Klapisch employs fast cuts and split screens.

In the English subtitles, several sections are purposefully translated incorrectly. The list of strange names around Paris is changed to "Honolulu, Punxsutawney, Piccadilly, Massachusetts, Saskatoon and Machu Picchu;" and during the scene in which Wendy mispronounces "Xavier n'est pas ici..." the English subtitles say "Xavier eez not here..."

L'Auberge Espagnole is an enjoyable import – a light hearted, good-natured motion picture that contains enough humour to lighten the tone and keep the drama from becoming too serious. Whenever Klapish presents a serious scene, he has a joke ready to punctuate things. Not all the characters in the film are well developed, but those that are fleshed out make the overall experience rewarding. And the smiles, laughter, and chuckles that Klapish provides along the way don't hurt matters.



It energetically captures the frenzied pace of contemporary existence, the complexities of life in a multicultural world, the rootless joys of living in a foreign city and the heady world of possibilities one envisions while in college.

Iain McGlashan