

## Chocolate, Friendship and Romance with Claudio Cupellini

Marina Melchionda (November 20, 2008)



i-Italy interviewed Claudio Cupellini, the young director of Lessons in Chocolate, his first feature film. We met him at the American Premiere, in occasion of NYC NICE festival.

Lessons in chocolate was among the movies on schedule for the New Italian Cinema Event



(NICE) this year. The work features actors coming from all sort of backgrounds, from theater to cinema and TV as well. Among them, the Italian model Luca Argentero (Mattia), the daughter of director Michele Placido, Violante (Cecilia), and Neri Marcorè (the Maitre Chocolatier).

Set in Perugia and in the provinces nearby, the movie touches many important issues and themes of extraordinary actuality in contemporary Italy. The questions of immigration, social uneasiness and unemployment are described as those touching and affecting the lives of the main characters, of whichever generation they might be.

Their lives and stories interweave in the Perugina workshop, where they learn how to melt and work chocolate. They all attend the same course to win the amount of money necessary to open their own laboratory. All except for Kemal, an Egyptian cook, who was injured while working in Mattia's abusive construction site.

The friendship between the former and the latter begins actually because of that accident: the entrepreneur has to substitute the immigrant at the chocolate school to avoid to be denounced. Their relationship develops throughout the movie and the scenes portraying them together are surely some of the funniest. They also give an important message to the audience: friendship can overcome all differences, both ethnic and cultural.

Also, the love story that involves Cecilia and Mattia is outstanding, in its own way: a girl who believes in no men, considering all of them cheaters and liars, falls in love with the king of fakers! The passion they share, finally, is perfectly comparable to the chocolate candy Kemal creates at the ends: a mixture of flavors and aromas with a bittersweet after-taste. Sensual dark chocolate, crunchy nuts, sweet dates: that little chocobite is the perfect metaphor of their newborn affair. And they both reveal to be winning combinations.

i-Italy interviewed Claudio Cupellini, the young director that with *Lessons in Chocolate* produced his first full-length movie. We met him during the American premiere in occasion of NYC NICE festival. At the cinema there were no empty seats and the mostly young public assisting to the projection enjoyed it and laughed right from the very first minute, showing not to be uncomfortable at all with the Italian dialogues and English subtitles. After a small debate with the public, we asked him a couple of questions.

Claudio, how did you come up with the idea of this film?

Actually it was the production house [Cattleya](#) [2] that proposed me to direct it. The plot had already been outlined while I was free to write down the dialogues together with the screenwriter. It was a great challenge for me: it was my first movie after my collaboration with Virzì in "Quattro Quattro Due" in 2006. At that time, I was just coming out of the Centro [Sperimentale di Cinematografia](#) [3] of Rome and he demonstrated to believe in me. This encouraged me to start a new adventure on my own...

What was it that you really liked about *Lessons in Chocolate* when you first had the proposal?

Chocolate in this story is a sort of a background setting, while the real issue is the friendship between Mattia and Kemal. They represent completely different worlds, from a cultural, linguistic and social point of view. However, they manage to fight prejudices and finally overcome them. I think they represent a good example for a country like Italy in which the new waves of immigrants cause great discomfort and uneasiness among the citizens.

Kemal is not only an immigrant, he is also a Muslim. Did you have any difficulties in tracing his psychological and cultural profile?

Well, we surely had to carry on many researches on Muslim culture: it was the only way to create a realistic character. But we could also count on Hassani Shapi, who played Kemal in the movie: coming from Kenya, he is a good connoisseur of the rules and paradigms of this religion.



The place where the characters of the movie take their chocolate lessons is the Perugina factory. Was the company involved in the production of the film?

No, it just put the location to our disposal. As I said, we wanted to be as realistic as possible and report life in Italy as it actually is. Well, nowadays, if you want to go to a chocolate school, [Perugina](#) [4] is the only company throughout the country where you can gain this kind of diplomas. And we wanted to give it some credit.

During the projection, I had a chance to notice that the public was really having a lot of fun. Did you aspect such a warm welcome from the American public?

No, really! It was amazing! I mean, America is the country of expensive productions, great Hollywood stars and special effects of every imaginable kind. Instead, we had a very small budget and we used many young and inexperienced actors for our movie. And they liked it anyway. This proves that you do not need great money to make people laugh. Only passion and deep commitment can make of a film a good film.

Projects for the future?

A dramatic movie and a comedy. However, I cannot tell you anything else. It is bad luck!

i-Italy congrats director Cupellini and wishes him a great success in the US with this original, funny and romantic comedy.

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