

Interview: Jonathan Gold, Iconic Food Writer in ‘City of Gold’

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CHICAGO – Although Jonathan Gold is not a household name, his food writing and criticisms have influenced Los Angeles palates for a generation. He is the only food critic to have ever received the Pulitzer Prize, and he is profiled in a new documentary by director Laura Gabbert entitled “City of Gold.”

Gold is basically an explorer, through the foods and diversity of the Los Angeles melting pot. His eclectic style has appeared in the LA Weekly, Gourmet magazine, and currently the Los Angeles Times, and he also was an influential music critic for a time. Director Gabbert provides a fascinating backdrop for Gold’s life adventures, and creates a succulent overview of food, culture and atmosphere for the always creative City of Angels.



Food Critic Jonathan Gold is Profiled in ‘City of Gold’

Photo credit: Sundance Selects

Last week, Jonathan Gold and Laura Gabbert came to Chicago to promote the documentary, and it is currently in theaters here at the Landmark Century Centre Cinema, and elsewhere in limited release around the country. HollywoodChicago.com talked to the foodie legend and his film chronicler.

HollywoodChicago.com: Jonathan, your eloquence and beauty lie in your life’s rich pageant. Food is your focus, but where do you go when you need to escape the analysis of food? Do you ever shamefully eat a bag of Doritos and think, ‘ha ha, I’ve fooled them again!’?

Jonathan Gold: No, I don’t. [laughs] Yes, there is a burrito stand I’ll go to, for a green chile and bean burrito, but it’s a really good burrito stand. I don’t go to McDonalds, but when I was working for Gourmet magazine in New York City, my daughter liked to go there. I was completely paranoid that someone would recognize me there and say, ‘Gourmet critic spotted at McDonalds! Buying a Happy Meal!’ [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: Laura, you had a food critic, his writings and the atmosphere that spawned him. What was the key to getting the thesis for ‘City of Gold’?

Laura Gabbert: It was really about following Jonathan’s lead. His writing gave us the thesis, because he writes about Los Angeles culture and people, and it is all through the portal of food. I let it guide us on how we shot the film, how we edited it, and what was said in the film.

HollywoodChicago.com: Jonathan, when you come to an unfamiliar city, how do you break down what is truly special and get to that restaurant that transcends and defines the city itself?

Gold: There are plenty of online discussion groups, and I’ll read food critics from the various cities, because they know their areas pretty well. Food fandom is a pretty small town, so maybe I’ll talk to someone who has been there or knows someone.

I did do a rather big feature for Travel and Leisure magazine on Chicago restaurants back in 1998. I ate in about 150 places, and tried to find the essence of Chicago – but you can’t nail it down, there are many essences. Was it Gene & Georgetti’s? Maybe. Was it at one point the Lithuanian restaurants in Cicero? Kind of. Is it Lem’s or Leon’s Barbeque? Again, maybe. There are so many places that have different nodes, that define what Chicago is as a food town.

HollywoodChicago.com: Laura, the emotion of Los Angeles plays a big part – and a big heart – in your film. What is your favorite emotion regarding LA, and how was it defined in your film?

Gabbert: The emotions associated with it, again, goes back to Jonathan’s writings. It’s the art of discovery – because it’s impossible to ‘get’ LA when you first arrive. What I learned from reading and profiling Jonathan is that you have to explore it, and you have to seek out the experiences. The process of seeking those experiences is half the fun. You have to work a little harder, but there is something to that, and something very satisfying about that.

Gold: We’re more than Botox and blondes. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: Jonathan, describe one of the finest meals you’ve had at one of the most expensive restaurants in the country and one of the finest at one of the cheapest, and what is similar about the characteristics in both of them?

Gold: As long as I’m in Chicago, let me talk about NEXT, which is one of my favorite places. The hunt meal, for example, was fantastic. The concept that they change the restaurant complete over every four months is brilliant. The staff is so excited about everything, and that excitement is reflected in the food, because the chefs are so used to working with each other. Also with their seating lottery system, it’s not just reserved for the elite.

On the inexpensive side, it can be so many things, but one of the meals that snaps me back in LA is a Mexican-American place called Ciro’s. Just going in there, sitting in the well-worn seats, and smelling the familiar smells, I know I will have a carnitas plate with a jar of fresh avocado salsa that is one of the best things I’ve ever had, yet is basically ripe avocado, chiles, salt and tomatoes. There is nothing better than that, it’s a meal that roots you to a place instantly.



Director Laura Gabbert for ‘City of Gold’
Photo credit: Sundance Selects

HollywoodChicago.com: Laura, your imagery is exotic in the film, especially in the use of archival footage. What makes the art of visuals a challenge in creating a story in a documentary, and what do you think separates the artists from the ordinary imagery pretenders?

Gabbert: That was a huge challenge. First, we had to understand how to use Jonathan’s writing in the film, and then figure out what we would see behind it. We didn’t want literal imagery, so it was a matter of working closely with the cinematographers [Jerry Henry, Goro Toshima] and the editors [William Haugse, Greg King], who were all great.

We would then look at things during editing, and actually send the cameras out to the field again, to get specific images. There was a shot of an Egret bird, for example, because I loved the contrast of the urban environment of the city and the nature within it.

Gold: It was an Egret? All this time I thought it was a Heron.

HollywoodChicago.com: Jonathan, I know this is a touchy subject, but with the declining income of the print media, and no reasonable economic model in online criticism, what is the future of the singular-voiced critic? Will there ever be another Jonathan Gold or Roger Ebert?

Gold: As long as people want to read what we do, I assume so. I’m lucky to be in food at the moment, because we’re living in a time where so many people are obsessed with it. People will go to food festivals now, and argue over the merits of a taco for hours. And then there are the tribes like ‘Team Vegan,’ and everything in association with that. It’s one person’s spleen against another’s uterus. [laughs] And then there are folks where the food source has to be massaged gently and harvested before dawn under a full moon. It’s about the people who deeply care, and want that exchange of ideas.

HollywoodChicago.com: When you die, and you find out there is an afterlife, and it happens to be at a ‘Cosmic Restaurant’ – where you can order anything you experienced in your life as your meal – what is and where does it come from in your appetizer choice, your entree choice and your dessert?



City of Angels: Jonathan Gold & Laura Gabbert
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Gold: For the appetizer, the salads of North and Northeastern Thailand are among the best for flavor, lightness and spiciness. For entrees, you can’t beat France during game season. There is nothing better than a well-cooked hare or woodcock or wild pigeon. I love the extreme food that connects to the earth, and the meatiness of it, I guess. For dessert, I guess I couldn’t technically go back to France...

HollywoodChicago.com: There are no rules at the Cosmic Restaurant...

Gold: [Laughs] Let’s then go for some pie.

HollywoodChicago.com: [Laughs] The culture of food has exploded in the last 25 years. In all of your years of exploration in the realm, what does different tastes – and even fine cuisine – express about the survival instincts of the species known as human beings?

Gold: Cooking is what makes us human. For example, Chimpanzees spend eight to ten hours trying to feed themselves, they are occupied by it, eating basically indigestible things. Once our human ancestors learn to cook things, suddenly we didn’t have to spend that much time on digestion, our brains expanded, and we think about other things.

I think the point of obsession with food means we’re healthy as a species. When we’re hungry, everything tastes good, hunger is the best spice. When you’re in a area that has few resources, you work incredibly hard to have something. And then you make the something taste good. The greatest food in the world comes from the inventiveness of great privation. What emerges is all the miraculous fermentations and all the strong flavors. You put it together in the right way, it’s delicious. That defines survival, and our human species.

“City of Gold” has screenings in Chicago in an open run, at the Landmark Century Centre Cinema – 2828 North Clark Street in Chicago. See local listings for screenings elsewhere. Featuring Jonathan Gold. Written and directed by Laura Gabbert. Rated “R”



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