

Rat's tale

By [John Petrakis](#) in the [August 7, 2007](#) issue



Remember when children would learn key life lessons from their parents—when core beliefs and specific values would be passed down from one generation to the next whenever an opportunity for a lesson presented itself? With the continued splitting of the nuclear family, more and more kids are relying on the media to instruct them on the vagaries of growing up and finding a place in the world.

Since many of the messages emanating from video games and movies are harsh and cruel, we should be grateful to the creative minds at Pixar Animation that have skillfully addressed all sorts of difficult issues while keeping an eye on the comedic subtleties that bring adults as well as kids to the theaters. From the groundbreaking *Toy Story* films, through such gems as *A Bug's Life* and *Finding Nemo*, to the wildly imaginative *The Incredibles*, Pixar has given children fables and parables about family, loyalty, fear, bravery, love and community.

Ratatouille lives up to its predecessors and then some. It shows a more accomplished and impressive use of computer graphics, which allows for greater speed and movement and even subtler lighting. The technical advances have not come at the expense of content—the screenplay is sharp and clever—which is what has always kept Pixar steps ahead of its competitors.

Ratatouille concerns the seemingly hopeless aspirations of a rat named Remy (voiced by comedian Patton Oswalt), who lives outside of Paris with a large and very

hungry pack that includes his chubby brother, Emile, and his demanding father, Django. Though he comes from a race of animals that has survived through the ages by eating scraps and garbage, Remy has a much finer palate and enjoys cooking for himself. (He even walks on his hind legs, since he doesn't want to soil his cooking hands.)

Remy has been inspired by the late, great chef Auguste Gusteau (voiced by Brad Garrett), whose credo was "Anyone can cook!" Comic-strip circumstances take Remy to Paris (or more accurately, underneath Paris), where serendipity leads him to Gusteau's famed kitchen. There he meets Linguini, a bumbling kitchen boy who wouldn't know a brioche from a croissant. And before you can say "Cyrano," Linguini becomes Remy's hands, as the duo pair up to create a series of culinary masterpieces.

Of course, it wouldn't be a Pixar film if there weren't numerous obstacles in Remy's path. Apart from the obvious fact that rats aren't welcome in any kitchen, let alone the kitchen of a famed restaurant, Remy and Linguini must contend with an unscrupulous new chef, an overworked health inspector, and an acid-tongued food critic with the moniker of Anton Ego (voiced brilliantly by Peter O'Toole). Remy and Linguini also have their supporters, most notably the talented but wary sous chef Colette (voiced by Janeane Garofalo), the only female in the male-dominated kitchen, who knows a thing or two about prejudice.

Ratatouille was written and directed by Brad Bird, who also worked on *The Incredibles*, and directed *The Iron Giant*, a sadly overlooked 1999 antiwar fable that speaks volumes about tolerance and courage. Bird also wrote and produced for *The Simpsons*. His rare ability to combine lessons and laughter is what makes *Ratatouille* so appetizing.

A few of the film's characters need more development, and some of its subplots run out of gas before they pay off. But as a story about following your dream, working hard and not giving up, *Ratatouille* is almost as good as a long talk with Dad while playing catch in the front yard. And twice as funny.