

# BURNT

■ Anna Dai

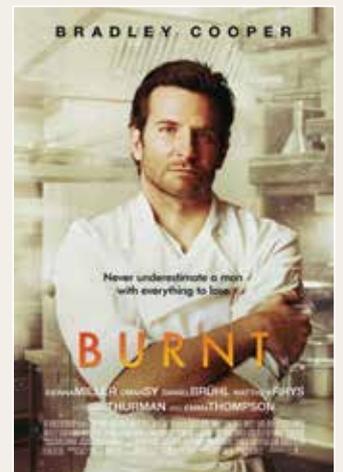
For Adam Jones (Bradley Cooper), life outside the kitchen is much like life in it: a continuous, clattering storm of heat and meat. Jones, the lead character in *Burnt*, is a Michelin-starred chef with an impossible temper and a reputation that can no longer justify it.

A few years ago, things were very different: Jones was a member of a sainted circle of young cooks working in an haute Paris kitchen under Jean-Luc, their gastronomic mentor. But then came drugs, drink and dramatic self-combustion – followed by a self-imposed penance shucking oysters in a Louisiana gumbo joint.

As the film begins, Adam is splitting his millionth mollusc: a spiritual milestone

that means he's ready for a comeback. His stage will be London, and his enabler his old maître d' (Daniel Brühl), now gliding serenely around the restaurant floor at the Langham hotel, in blissful ignorance of the firestorm to come. Adam's arrival means trouble, but it could also spell glory.

Or that's the theory, at least. In practice, John Wells's film turns its lively premise and appealing cast into stodge so bland it barely registers that you're watching anything at all: imagine tossing beef shin, seasonal herbs and root vegetables and a slug of red wine into a casserole dish, then removing it from the oven a few hours later to discover it had somehow transformed into Super Noodles.



Directed by:  
John Wells

Starring:  
Bradley Cooper, Sienna Miller, Daniel Brühl

Year:  
2015

Running Time:  
101 Minutes

Rating:  
PG-13

The dated angry chef clichés are out in force – Cooper spends lots of the film throwing plates against walls and screaming about turbot (it comes as no surprise that Gordon Ramsay is listed in the credits as a “chef consultant”). But the film takes no apparent joy in cooking itself: unforgivably for a film about food, there isn’t a dish here that you’d actually want to eat.

Jones grandly disparages sous-vide cooking, which has become fashionable in his absence, as “warming up fish in condoms”. But despite occasional cutaways to him in deep conversation with greengrocers and thoughtfully sucking sauce off his finger in a takeaway, there’s no sense that he’s a champion of “honest” cooking in the same way as John Favreau’s character in last year’s vastly more enjoyable *Chef*: his own dishes are mostly assembled with tweezers and look like small piles of leaves and Lego.

The screenplay, based on a story by Michael Kalesniko, was written by Steven Knight, who is operating some way below the high standards of his work in *Eastern Promises* and *Locke*. There are crumbs of stylish dialogue, but they’re largely swept away by the leaden exposition, which arrives in lines like “When we were both sous-chefs at Jean-Luc’s...”, “He had a difficult childhood, you know?” and, perhaps worst of all, via Uma Thurman’s waspish restaurant critic: “I say to myself, ‘Simone, you’re a lesbian...’”.

Thurman’s character is wheeled out to convince us of Adam’s prowess in the kitchen, a gambit that becomes immediately ludicrous when she reacts to a dish of his sautéed prawns with the kind of face Frankie Howerd used to pull in *Up Pompeii*. That said, Cooper himself doesn’t ever really convince as a chef in the first place. We already know from both *American Sniper* and *American Hustle* that he can do intense, but he never looks at ease with his utensils, and despite his supposed years of training in Paris, he speaks French like a Home Counties father of two trying to haggle over artichokes at a Brittany farmers’ market.

When the film does connect, it’s invariably thanks to Sienna Miller as Helene, Adam’s chef de partie, whose wiry physicality and stoicism in the face of her boss’s tantrums make her by some distance *Burnt*’s most intriguing and watchable character.

Miller’s terrific recent work – opposite Cooper again in *American Sniper*, plus supporting roles in *Foxcatcher*, *Mississippi Grind* and the forthcoming *High Rise* – feels like something of a career renaissance. In *Burnt*, she’s like a sliver of rare steak served on the side of a plate of plain rice. ■

