

Montreal's Man of Grease and spatula finally on DVD

BY BILL BROWNSTEIN, THE GAZETTE DECEMBER 1, 2011 7:06 PM



Man of Grease director Ezra Soiferman with his daughter Talula and Cosmos founder/chef Tony Koulakis in a bonus scene from the film, to be released on DVD.

Photograph by: Perpetuum Productions

MONTREAL - Before there was the Lord of the Dance, there was the Lord of the Potatoes. Others know him simply as Captain Cholesterol.

His name is actually Tony Koulakis. He is the founder of the legendary Cosmos Snack Bar in N.D.G. Koulakis, now in his mid-70s, and his spatula, also up there in the years, officially retired a few years back, leaving his kids Nikos and Nicki to run the landmark breakfast joint. But the Tony Koulakis legacy will live on with the long-awaited DVD release of the documentary [Man of Grease](#), Monday at CinemaSpace in the Segal Centre. The film will be screened following the launch.

It's taken 11 years to get Man of Grease to the DVD market, but it hasn't been for a lack of trying on the part of the film's director, Ezra Zoiferman. Life and work and technology kept getting in the way.

Man of Grease, which had its premiere at the 2000 Montreal World Film Festival, is a charming and whimsical chronicle that pays tribute to a man and his manic desire to sweat it out behind a grill, making grub for the masses.

As its legions of fans will attest, Cosmos is more than a monument to the joys of grease and Arborite and 11 counter stools from another era. It is a city institution. Despite the fact that a flower wouldn't last an hour inside, bank presidents and garbagemen alike roll up their sleeves and chow down here on eggs, bacon and arguably the best hash browns this side of Afghanistan. It's all breakfast, all the time at Cosmos.

Soiferman gives Koulakis's famed Creation Sandwich and Mish Mash omelette their due. He also goes where no Cosmos customer has dared to venture. He brings the Mish Mash – an enticing, but artery-clogging combo of bacon, ham, sausage, salami, onions, tomatoes and eight eggs – for an analysis to a certified calorie-counter. He is then told that a single Mish Mash portion packs a staggering 1,900 calories.

Soiferman also follows Koulakis and his wife, Erene, to their Crete island birthplace in Greece on their first vacation since he opened Cosmos in 1967. Erene, who passed away in 2003, had been dutifully peeling potatoes daily in the couple's garage from the beginning.

Not that the travel plans went smoothly. Koulakis, keen on re-establishing his roots, is terrified of airplanes. His fears were even more exacerbated when he learned that Greece had been devastated by earthquakes. Soiferman picks up on all the drama as he hops the plane with Koulakis and Erene and later shoots him soaking up surf – without spatula in hand.

As a bonus, Soiferman was able to engage Montreal klezmer/hip hop phenomenon So-called to create and perform a custom-made Greek-hop soundscore.

Soiferman's fascination with Koulakis goes back to 1988, when he attended high school in the area. He would feast on the Cosmos Good Morning Burger – a bacon cheeseburger with a fried egg on top. Soiferman has since married and gone veggie, but he's still a Cosmos regular, now hooked on the Cosmos Veggie Creation omelette, which, by default, is now the healthiest and least artery-clogging item on the menu.

"Tony's kids are now holding the fort and keeping it going strong, which makes Tony happy that the tradition continues," Soiferman, 39, says. "He still drops by to visit."

Man of Grease went on to play eight film festivals, had 46 TV broadcasts on seven Canadian networks and was nominated for a 2001 Quebec Jutra Award for Best Documentary. It also went on to develop a cult following among Cosmos customers and aficionados of people and places eccentric.

"People were always asking over the years where they could get their hands on the film," Soiferman says.

"We first brought it out in VHS and soon sold out, but just never got to the DVD version until now. The response has been great, too. It's been hard for me to let Cosmos go. And why should I? I'm really proud of this movie. People still come up to me to talk and reminisce about the place."

The film has been re-mastered for DVD and contains two hours of bonus features, including commentary from the filmmaker, slide shows, updates and shots of Tony, sporting not a smock but a smart suit, and Erene emerging from a limo to attend the doc's premiere at the Montreal World Film Festival in 2000.

Soiferman makes for an interesting subject himself. After graduating from film school in New York, he interned for Jim Henson Productions, toiled in creative affairs at Montreal-based Telescene and served as producer of Eat My Shorts!, the short-film component of the Just for Laughs fest. Then he and a partner established Perpetuum Productions to make docs and corporate films.

Perpetuum's first major venture, Tree Weeks, a documentary about enterprising Quebec Christmas-tree vendors in Manhattan, premiered at the 1998 Montreal World Film Festival and was subsequently aired on CBC Newsworld, among other outlets. After completing Man of Grease, Soiferman made a seven-part TV series about the world of film shorts, Burlyvision, on Lorne Michael's Burly Bear Network.

In 2005, he did Cod Help Us, on the plight of cod fishermen in the Gulf of St. Lawrence as their livelihood slowly slips away. In 2007, he was at the helm of another tasty film curio, Posthumous Pickle Party, a quest to find the secret recipe for the late Simcha Leibovich's unique homemade pickles after Simcha's Grocery on the Main closed.

Soiferman is currently directing a documentary about the history of the Herzl Family Practice Centre of the Jewish General Hospital. Producing this film are his wife, Alexandra Yanofsky, and Christos Sourligas, director of Elephant Shoes and Happy Slapping. He is also teaming up with his wife on the production of the therapy drama You Arrive, by Concordia professor Bonnie Harden, who will direct the film.

Soiferman somehow found the time to start and run the Segal Centre's boutique screening-room CinemaSpace from 2007 to last year.

"I'm proud to say the room still has its first-in-the-world hemp-covered cinema seats intact." And unsmoked.

[Man of Grease DVD launch and screening](#), Monday at 7 p.m. at CinemaSpace at the Segal Centre, 5170 Côte Ste. Catherine Rd. Tickets: \$8; \$6 seniors/students. Information: 514-739-7944 or www.segalcentre.com

. DVDs go on sale after the screening for \$19.99 and will be available as of Saturday at manofgrease.com and Cosmos Snack Bar, 5843 Sherbrooke St. W.

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