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Jeremy Allen White as The Bear's head chef, Carmen Berzatto, in the FX series "The Bear" (Hulu)



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After being [locked in the freezer](#) during opening night, The Bear's head chef, Carmen Berzatto, begins Season Three determined to regain control of the kitchen by presenting a list of "nonnegotiables": rules for the restaurant spanning basics like "personal hygiene" to buzzwords like "vibrant collaboration" to budget breakers like "change menu every day." They're inspired by lessons learned at Michelin-starred restaurants, sans the compassionate mentorship offered to him by most of the chefs he worked with, and it's not at all clear that they're a recipe for success.

We've come a long way from "let it rip."

Much like the food at its eponymous restaurant, FX's "The Bear" is impressed with itself and spinning its wheels as a result. News that the Chicago Tribune has reviewed the restaurant unbeknownst to the staff sets the stakes early on, but then the season stumbles into side plots that stall the action.

The successful episodes illuminate why the restaurant matters so much to the characters (see: "Napkins"), but most of them just fill time (see: "Ice Chips" and whatever the Faks are doing all season). While superb acting and a compelling story buoy the third season of "The Bear," it lacks the breakneck pace — and more importantly, the heart — of Seasons One and Two.

Carmy is haunted — by the exacting standards he learned at Michelin mainstays, the verbal abuse he suffered under Chef David, his chaotic family, the absence of his older brother, Mikey, whose death by suicide brought Carmy back to Chicago.



Moments like an early-morning brainstorm between Tina (Liza Colón-Zayas, pictured) and Marcus (Lionel Boyce) serve as windows into the collaborative restaurant The Bear could be — if Carmy would loosen his grip. (Hulu)

Unable to apologize after burning bridges with his girlfriend, the restaurant is the only thing Carmy can control, but by clinging so tightly, he is strangling it. Grief isn't linear but time marches on, and the restaurant is bleeding money and employees. It's no wonder Sydney is having second thoughts about signing her financial future to this partnership.

The action is interspersed by shots of food publications announcing the closures of lauded restaurants — reminders that survival is not guaranteed for even the most competent establishments, which The Bear is not. With razor-thin margins and high operating costs, opening a restaurant is always an act of faith, and at times it seems The Bear needs an act of God.

Like in earlier seasons, Season Three's nods to the characters' Catholicism are subtle: a glance at a prayer card, characters filing into a church for a funeral. "The

Bear" never indulges in the heavy-handed TV prayer-monologues you might know from "The West Wing," instead favoring a quiet, persistent faith that can survive a long Midwestern winter.

In Season Two, we see the often-abrasive Richie kiss the cross he wears underneath his T-shirt and glance at the Good Shepherd on the prayer card he keeps displayed on his bathroom mirror (Mikey's) before staging at Chef Terry's Ever. There, he meets friends who affirm and hone his people skills, and he leaves with a sense of purpose and a passion for making patrons' days.



In one episode, Natalie takes to an empty church to pray through her anxieties about motherhood; later, she reconciles with her own mother. (Hulu)

Natalie, terrified about her impending motherhood, takes to an empty church to pray this season; later, she reconciles with her own mother in a well-acted (if gratuitous) episode.

Throughout the series, characters' prayers are answered through others' reassurance and support. That's a problem for Carmy, who's shutting everyone out in his neurotic quest for a Michelin star. (As well as for viewers who want to see more of characters like Marcus, Ibra, Tina and Richie.)

To his credit, Carmy seems to know he's struggling. At one point, he says that he wants his culinary legacy to be "panic-less," but to do that, he says, he "would have to be square with everything ... and everybody."

He doesn't follow through on doing anything to fix that, however; he never considers the blessings the people around him offer. So the cycle continues, and we are stuck with him.

As The Bear awaits the Trib review, Carmy prepares for Ever's "funeral dinner." (It's closing after Chef Terry decided she wants to live a little, a desire foreign to Carmy.) Before he leaves, he gazes at the Good Shepherd on Mikey's prayer card. But at the dinner, he cannot even listen to the stories and lessons being shared by the chefs around his table — once he sees Chef David, he can only kindle the resentment burning in his chest.

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When Carmy confronts his former boss about the ulcers, panic attacks and nightmares he suffered under David's tutelage, Chef David maintains that Carmy got what he wanted: He became an excellent chef.

Carmy is left destitute and alone, if excellent; but it's becoming clear that alone, one man's excellence cannot keep a restaurant afloat. Moments like Tina and Marcus' early-morning brainstorm on a cauliflower recipe serve as windows into the collaborative, collegial restaurant The Bear could be — if Carmy would loosen his grip.

Maybe Carmy's encounter with Chef David was a blessing. Maybe Carmy needed reminding that, for all his excellence, he needs his flock. Maybe this will mark a turning point, and we will return to the heartfelt, relationship-driven dramedy of Seasons One and Two. But we don't know yet, because "The Bear" failed to tie up almost any of its loose ends this season.

During bitter winters growing up near Chicago, I would pray for March to arrive — spring at last. Then, March would bring a snowstorm and a week of subfreezing temperatures. I was reminded of this feeling while the credits rolled on Season Three of "The Bear": the hope of relief, the disappointment when it doesn't come.

But the show's nods to faith suggest that it believes that redemption is found in relationships, which offers hope that this cold spell will break in Season Four.

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