



Sweet Land • by writer/director Ali Selim

My father is an immigrant. He arrived in the United States in December 1953 and spent the first night in a hotel near the Egyptian Embassy on Decatur Street in Washington, D.C. The next morning he went downstairs for breakfast and asked for “the most American food you have.” The waitress had never been out of the country and had to think. To her it was just food.

“Pancakes, bacon and coffee?”

“Yes, pancakes.” But, having been raised by a father who followed the Five Pillars of Islam and taught their importance to his children, he politely declined the bacon. Then he noticed the clear coffee pot the waitress held. He could see the pattern of her apron through the thin, brownish water that was so very different from the thick, sweet-smelling Turkish coffee to which he had grown accustomed.

He ordered tea.

She was gone quite a while before returning with the maple syrup dispenser. He felt the syrup. Warm. He made an assumption, poured it into his cup and drank a “tea” so thick and sweet it made his teeth hurt. He wrote home about it, a story that was both adventure and a cautionary tale of the American interpretation of tea.

This is the story I carried with me while making *Sweet Land*, a story about food, language and culture. A story that taught me how intrepid, progressive and perhaps precarious it is to leave what is known and immerse oneself in the unfamiliar.

Sweet Land tells the story of Inge Altenberg, a German mail-order bride sent to Minnesota in the paranoid and nationalistic days following the First World War to meet her future husband, Olaf, a Norwegian bachelor farmer. After hurdling the obstacles laid out for them by the government, the church and the community, they finally get together in the same house and Inge cooks for Olaf. As he enjoys the meal that is apparently unlike anything he has ever experienced, he asks, “Is this German food?”

Inge replies, “No, just food.”

My father emigrated from Egypt when he was 29 to study Economics at the University of Minnesota. Like all great immigrant stories his began with a dream, letters and applications, patience and an ocean vessel called the *Khdav Esmail* carrying ten passengers and a cargo hold of Egyptian cotton. The ship sailed through the Mediterranean Sea and the Straits of Gibraltar, across the Atlantic and into the New York harbor on the eve of the longshoremen strike. Because of the work stoppage, neither the passengers nor the cargo were permitted to disembark. They sat outside the harbor, in view of the Statue of Liberty and the decayed, abandoned Ellis Island for a week before an invitation to the Port of Boston cleared the way for my father to stand on American soil with \$52 (all that Gamal Abdel Nasser would allow to leave the country) and a single leather suitcase.

A simple love story becomes a celebration of romance, determination and the immigrant experience as debut writer/director Ali Selim charts one couple's intimate struggles through the challenges faced by their grandchild. Young Inge (Elizabeth Reaser), a German mail order bride, arrived on a Minnesota farm in 1920 to meet her destined husband Olaf (Tim Guinee), a Norwegian farmer. After her death, her grandson must either sell the farm or cling to the legacy of the land. Seeking advice, he turns to the memory of Inge and the stories she passed on to him. Co-starring Alan Cumming, Ned Beatty, John Heard, Paul Sand, Lois Smith and Alex Kingston.

Aside from visits to Egypt, my father has been here ever since and calls the United States "home" without stumbling over the concept.

What could have happened, I suppose, is he could have said the tea in America was too sweet and gone back to Egypt. But he didn't.

He retired last year after 50 years as a professor of Economics at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he taught tens of thousands of young students the principles of "supply and demand" and the concept of "opportunity cost" as illustrated through graphs of guns and butter. He also conceived of and created the Center for Senior Citizens' Education, opening the doors to the University, free of charge, to scholars on the other end of their learning lives.

My father is a citizen. He taught many minds in Minnesota. Depending on where those students finally lived and worked, you could say he changed the world.

A colleague, a priest at the University, was once asked, "Who on campus best exemplifies the Christian values we attempt to inspire in our students?" He responded, "That Muslim in the Economics Department."

The world really is a small place and, as we move around it and commingle, we have the ability to recognize our similarities, to go *beyond* tolerance toward acceptance, to redefine communities and humanity out of new combinations of people, sounds, stories and, of course, food.

When Inge says, "Just food," she is telling him to savor, find the common ground. The food she prepared may taste a little different or have a different texture, sure, but Olaf enjoys it nonetheless. As with all good food it satisfies, inspires and nourishes.

So, he eats.

And what comes of this nurturing is the foundation of America.

Who cares if the tea is a little thick and sweet?