

# The Grocer's Son

Autumn  
Season  
2009

## From the New York Times review:

The rolling countryside of Provence may be a dream vacation spot, but it is the last place in the world that Antoine (Nicolas Cazalé), the sullen 30-year-old protagonist of *The Grocer's Son* would like to be. In this French variation of the fable of the prodigal son, Antoine reluctantly returns to his rural hometown after 10 years in the big city when his father (Daniel Duval) has a heart attack.

Someone has to run the family's grocery store while his father recovers, and Antoine's unhappily married older brother, François (Stéphane Guérin-Tillié), who stayed by their parents when Antoine fled, insists the time has come for Antoine to shoulder some responsibility. While their mother (Jeanne Goupil) has minded the store, their father has operated a van selling produce and staples to the area's mostly elderly inhabitants.

This small gem of a film, a surprise hit in France, is the second feature directed by Éric Guirado, who prepared for it by filming portraits of traveling tradesmen in southern and central France. For 18 months he focused on mobile grocers in Corsica, the Pyrenees and the Alps. As the movie affectionately observes the gruff, self-reliant customers, some of whom hobble to the van on canes, it has documentary-like realism. You grow to respect these hardy, weather-beaten people who lived their whole lives close to the land.

Antoine brings to his customers the same surly, put-upon attitude with which he confronted his superiors in urban restaurants where he held and lost a succession of waiter's jobs. Brusque and detached, he repeatedly offends old folks whom his father had befriended on his rounds. Even when they voice their disgruntlement, Antoine doesn't seem to notice.

It is only when he is joined by Claire (Clotilde Hesme), a free-spirited friend visiting from the city, that his attitude begins to soften. Although Claire is spending most of her time taking a correspondence course in hopes of being accepted into college in Spain, she enjoys riding around the countryside. After she suggests painting the white van in circus colors and calling it the Flying Grocery, the drudgery becomes more of a lark. As Claire and Antoine spend time together, their simmering, barely acknowledged attraction comes to a sudden boil, complicating both their lives.

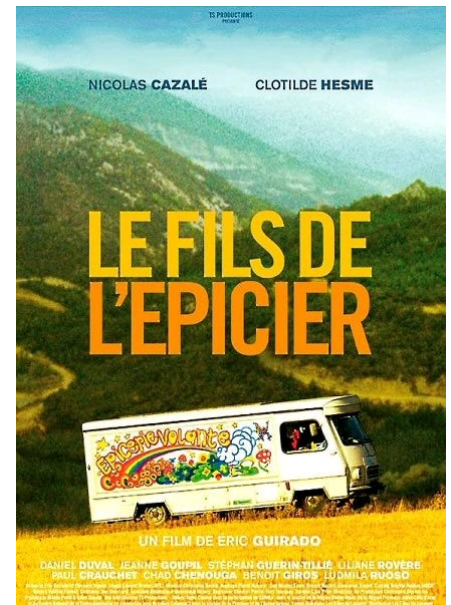


*The Grocer's Son*, which Mr. Guirado wrote with Florence Vignon, captures family dynamics with an acuteness that reveals decades of stored grievances. Antoine can hardly stand to be in the presence of a father who conveys contempt and disappointment in every suspicious gaze. The movie signals that temperamentally father and son are two of a kind. Relations between Antoine and François, who is deeply depressed and can't bring himself to tell his parents that his wife has left him, are equally tense. The mother, who loves her family, tries to keep the peace without rankling anyone.

Slowly Antoine warms to the rural environment he turned his back on and, almost despite himself, begins to feel a tentative happiness and community spirit. Mr. Cazalé's subtle performance makes his transformation entirely believable and prevents this cautiously upbeat movie from curdling into a sentimental advertisement for the simple life.

His performance is matched by Paul Crauchet's and Liliane Rovère's sharp thumbnail portraits of two regular customers. Mr. Crauchet's Clément, an increasingly frail widowed farmer who trades fresh eggs for staples but begins to forget exactly where the eggs are stored, is an endearing old codger who has accepted that the end is near. Ms. Rovère's Lucienne, a haughty, self-sufficient woman with a past, is soft-hearted under a prickly exterior and has a wicked, deadpan sense of humor. After an accident in which she is knocked to the ground by the hood of the van, she reappears on its next visit wearing a metal mixing bowl on her head.

*The Grocer's Son* is a triumphant accumulation of such quirky, perfectly observed details.



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