# OFF THE MENU

Feature Film Screenplay · Satirical Dark Comedy

Written by
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## SPEC SHEET

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| **Title** | OFF THE MENU (Spanish: *Fuera de menú*) |
| **Based on** | Adapted from the author's own novel *La rebelión de las lentejas* ("The Lentil Rebellion") |
| **Genre** | Satirical Comedy / Absurdist Dark Comedy |
| **Format** | Feature film |
| **Page count** | 79 |
| **Estimated runtime** | Approx. 100 minutes |
| **Original language** | Spanish (Castilian) |
| **Setting** | Barcelona, Spain (present day), with a closing chapter in South America |
| **Project status** | Complete screenplay, first draft in development |
| **Author** | Fernando Gracia Ortuño |

### LOGLINE

A hospital cook crushed by twelve years of institutional silence finally finds his voice — on the very day it can cost him everything.

## SYNOPSIS

Fran has spent twelve years cooking in the underground kitchen of a major Barcelona hospital — a windowless machine of steam, kettles, and hierarchy that swallows everyone in it whole. When an unjust disciplinary file over a plate of overcooked macaroni becomes the final straw, Fran's body does what his voice never could: it breaks, live, in the middle of a shift.

What follows is a descent into a psychiatric ward populated with delirium as sharp as it is darkly funny — hallucinations of monstrous rats, arrogant coworkers reimagined as wild boars, and letters to an imaginary confidante that blur the line between coping mechanism and genuine breakdown. Around him, an entire ecosystem of coworkers reveals itself to be caught in the same machine: a supervisor squeezed by her own superiors, a bully hiding a lonely apartment and a mother he can't disappoint, a friend facing a layoff at fifty-two with a mortgage and a kid in college.

When Fran is finally called before the hospital's disciplinary committee, he arrives with nothing written down — only twelve years of swallowed humiliation and, for the first time, the decision not to swallow anymore. What he says will cost him his job. It will also be the first completely honest thing he's said in over a decade.

OFF THE MENU is a satirical dark comedy about institutional cruelty, precarity, and the strange dignity of finally speaking — even when speaking changes nothing about the system, and everything about the person who dared.

## MAIN CHARACTERS

**FRAN** — Protagonist. A hospital cook in his forties, twelve years into a job that has slowly hollowed him out. Skilled, quietly funny, and pathologically conflict-avoidant, Fran has built an entire personality around swallowing humiliation. His arc runs from silent survival to psychiatric collapse to a single act of public honesty that costs him everything material and gives him back everything else.

**AMANDA** — Head of personnel at the hospital kitchen, the immediate face of institutional pressure on Fran. Sharp, exacting, seemingly without empathy — until we glimpse her own life: squeezed by management above her, caring for a mother with cognitive decline, forced to pass the same cruelty she receives down the chain.

**TONINO "MASCARPONE"** — A bullying coworker whose arrogance dominates the kitchen floor. Physically imposing, casually cruel, obsessed with dominance rituals over Fran and others. A late reveal shows his bravado is a performance for a mother back home he's terrified of disappointing.

**BERNARDO** — A veteran coworker, twenty-three years in the same kitchen, who has made peace — or something like it — with a lifetime of quiet endurance. His friendship with Fran, and the personal cost of his own resignation, form one of the film's most affecting threads.

**BIG MOUTH** — Fran's chatty, anxious coworker, a walking early-warning system for every rumored layoff. When the layoffs finally come for him, at fifty-two with a mortgage and a son in college, his fear becomes horrifyingly concrete.

**CHOMPERS** — A younger coworker in a relationship with Perlita, another kitchen worker. His arc — a physical altercation with Tonino that ends in an unjust sanction — mirrors and reinforces Fran's own experience of a system that always blames whoever's on the bottom.

**LAURA** — A cashier at Fran's neighborhood store, and the one relationship in his life untouched by the hospital's machinery. Her plainspoken warmth, and her decision to fly across the world to see him again, provide the film's one unambiguous note of hope.

**FATHER PELES** — Fran's immediate kitchen supervisor, the man who hired him twelve years earlier with genuine warmth. His slow erosion into cowardly silence under his own superiors is the film's clearest portrait of how institutions manufacture complicity.

**THE DOCTOR** — Fran's psychiatrist during his hospitalization. Calm, genuinely curious rather than clinical, she is the first person in the film to ask Fran what would happen if he said, out loud and to the people responsible, what he's been telling her.

## STATEMENT OF INTENT

OFF THE MENU grows out of a simple, uncomfortable observation: that institutional cruelty is rarely the work of a single villain. It is a cascade — pressure applied from the very top, absorbed and passed downward through layer after layer of people who are themselves being squeezed, until it lands, full weight, on whoever has no one left beneath them to pass it to. I wanted to build a film where every antagonist, examined closely enough, turns out to be another version of the protagonist: someone burning quietly at the bottom of their own kettle.

The choice of dark comedy and delirium as the film's primary register is deliberate. I believe absurdist humor, pushed to its limit, can expose institutional cruelty with a precision that solemn drama often can't — because it forces the audience to laugh a half-second before recognizing exactly why they shouldn't have. The hallucinatory sequences — a coworker glimpsed as a wild boar, a superior's face dissolving into something reptilian, a monstrous rat surfacing from a lake in the middle of a disciplinary hearing — aren't ornamental. They're the film's way of dramatizing what institutional gaslighting actually feels like from the inside: a slow, escalating doubt about whether the cruelty is real, or whether you're the one who's broken.

Tonally, my reference points are Bong Joon-ho's class-conscious grotesquerie, Ruben Östlund's discomfort-as-comedy (The Square, Force Majeure), and the deadpan absurdism of Aki Kaurismäki — filtered through a distinctly Spanish social realism in the vein of Ken Loach's Sorry We Missed You. I'm interested in a film that can hold a genuinely funny sequence about industrial-scale carrot purée in the same breath as a genuinely devastating one about a fifty-two-year-old man facing unemployment, without either undercutting the other.

The ending resists easy resolution. Fran's speech doesn't reform the hospital — the system he denounces remains, by his own admission, unmoved. What changes is Fran: he leaves with nothing material, and everything he actually needed. I wanted an ending that is hopeful without being naïve — one that trusts the audience to sit with the difference between winning and surviving with your voice intact.

# SEQUENCE TREATMENT

## ACT I — THE UNDERGROUND

We meet Fran deep inside "the Underground," the hospital's windowless central kitchen, and the twelve-year routine that has quietly worn him down: the assembly line, the casual cruelty of Tonino, the constant small humiliations of a system designed to extract maximum output for minimum acknowledgment. An unjust disciplinary file over a plate of dried-out macaroni becomes the first crack — the first time Fran, instead of swallowing it, walks upstairs to demand answers. Around this central conflict, the act establishes his private life: an estranged but not hostile family, a budding connection with Laura at the corner store, and glimpses of a wider ecosystem of coworkers each carrying their own version of the same pressure.

## ACT II — THE ESCALATION

The pressure compounds. Tonino's bullying intensifies. A false accusation over a contaminated salad forces Fran to defend himself for the first time with evidence instead of apology — a small victory that costs him more than it gains. Meanwhile, the machinery around him reveals its true scale: Bocas learns his job is on the layoff list; a coworker's altercation with Tonino ends in a one-sided sanction; Amanda's own life, glimpsed briefly, shows the same cascade of pressure repeating one level up. A recurring auditory hallucination — a hum that escalates into a piercing shriek — begins to intrude on Fran's daily life, first as an isolated incident, then as a pattern he can no longer explain away. The act's midpoint lands hard: Fran learns he is not alone — several coworkers have already been through psychiatric leave this same year.

## ACT III — BREAKING POINT

Fran's collapse arrives in full force, mid-shift, in front of the entire kitchen. What follows is his admission to the hospital's own psychiatric ward — an unbearable irony he registers even mid-crisis. Inside, delirium and lucidity intertwine: increasingly baroque hallucinations sit alongside genuinely clear-eyed conversations with his psychiatrist, in which Fran begins, for the first time, to articulate what has actually been happening to him for twelve years. A visit from Bernardo reveals the lifelong cost of quiet endurance. By the time Fran is discharged and returns to work, he has decided: he will speak, without notes, at his own disciplinary hearing.

## ACT IV — CLIMAX AND RESOLUTION

At the hearing, the committee attempts to use Fran's own hospitalization as grounds to dismiss his credibility. It's the lowest point — and the turning point. Fran delivers an unscripted, unsparing account of twelve years inside a system designed to break people quietly and blame them for breaking. The verdict is what everyone expected: termination. But the speech ripples outward in small, concrete ways — a recorded video, a coworker's own small act of courage — before Fran leaves the country to start over, carrying nothing but a suitcase, a photograph, and the promise of a visit from Laura.

## AUTHOR'S CV AND BIOGRAPHY

Fernando Gracia Ortuño is a Barcelona-based novelist and screenwriter, a member of Guionistes Associats de Catalunya (GAC) and registered with SGAE in the audiovisual category. He works in both Spanish and English, with a consistent focus on socially engaged storytelling delivered through distinct genre lenses — social thriller, dark comedy, satire.

His background as a storyteller begins in literary fiction: he is the author of three novels — *Un detective en la cocina*, *La rebelión de las lentejas*, and *Rehenes del Abismo* (Hostages of the Abyss, 2020) — and two short story collections, *Holocausto animal* and *El mote y otros relatos satíricos*.

His screenwriting career grew directly out of adapting his own novels for the screen. *Rehenes del Abismo*, his feature adaptation of the 2020 novel, has been recognized on the international festival circuit: an 8/10 score from Blastoff's professional coverage, Official Selection at the Swedish International Film Festival, six awards at the Caravan International Film Festival, finalist status at the Chicago Script Awards, and two awards at the Art Film Awards, among other recognitions. He is also the author of *The Call* (*La Llamada*), a rural social thriller currently in active festival submission.

OFF THE MENU is his third feature screenplay and his first foray into dark comedy — a deliberate tonal departure that draws on the same socially engaged instincts that define his thriller work, now channeled through satire and absurdist delirium.

## CONTACT

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