

Flamin' Hot

Flamin' Hot is a 2023 American <u>biographical</u> <u>comedy-drama film</u> directed by <u>Eva Longoria</u> in her feature-length directorial debut. Written by Linda Yvette Chávez and <u>Lewis Colick</u>, it is based on the memoir *A Boy, a Burrito and a Cookie: From Janitor to Executive* by <u>Richard Montañez</u>, who claims to have invented <u>Flamin' Hot Cheetos</u>. The film stars <u>Jesse Garcia</u>, Annie Gonzalez, Dennis Haysbert, and Tony Shalhoub.

The film had its world premiere at <u>South by Southwest</u> on March 11, 2023. It was released on June 9, 2023, by <u>Hulu</u> and <u>Disney+</u> to mixed reviews from critics. At the <u>96th Academy Awards</u>, *Flamin' Hot* received a nomination for <u>Best Original Song</u> for "The Fire Inside" written by <u>Diane Warren</u>, but lost to "<u>What Was I Made</u> For?" from *Barbie*.

Plot

In 1966 <u>southern California</u>, Richard Montañez grows up as a hard working child with a strict father and supportive grandfather. He meets his future wife Judy in school where he begins selling burritos to other children. He is arrested at a young age when nobody believes that he earned his money honestly. As adults, Richard and Judy marry but live as <u>hoodlums</u> in a gang, hustling to survive. They make an effort to turn their lives around once Judy gets pregnant with their first child. A second child later, Richard and his family still struggle to make ends meet as Richard searches for honest work. He eventually turns to his friend, former hoodlum Tony Romero, who helps him get a job at Frito-Lay. Despite lying on his resumé, floor head Lonny Mason hires him.

Richard begins paying attention to all the nuances of the factory and starts pursuing engineer maintenance leader Clarence C. Baker to teach him about the machines. Despite some reluctance, Baker agrees and teaches Richard how to operate all the machinery in the factory. Unfortunately, the Reagan administration begins to severely affect low-paying jobs and Frito-Lay's stocks begin to go down. This eventually results in some of the workers getting laid off. Frito-Lay CEO Roger Enrico releases a video encouraging the workers to "think like a CEO" which inspires Richard.

Flamin' Hot



Promotional release poster

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Directed by	Eva Longoria		
Screenplay by	Linda Yvette Chávez		
	Lewis Colick		
Based on	A Boy, a Burrito and a Cookie: From Janitor to Executive by Richard Montañez and the life stories of Richard and Judy Montañez		
Produced by	DeVon Franklin		
Starring	Jesse Garcia Annie Gonzalez Dennis Haysbert Tony Shalhoub Hunter Jones		

After picking up his kids from school, Richard takes them out for <u>elotes</u> (Mexican street corn). Noticing that his youngest son Steven likes the spicy flavor, saying it "burns good", he realizes that the way to save Frito-Lay is to pitch the brand to the Latino market. He convinces Baker and the rest of his coworkers to let him take some unflavored Cheetos home, but Judy offers that he talk to his father Vacho first about a job. Vacho ends up belittling Richard's plans, causing Judy to support Richard even more. The Montañezes work tirelessly trying to find the perfect spicy flavor for Cheetos, eventually getting the right concoction. Richard attempts to pitch his idea to Lonny only to be turned down, forcing Richard to sneak in and copy Enrico's phone number.

Richard manages to get through to Enrico who, while perplexed over being called by a janitor, is intrigued to learn that he saw his video and asks that he send his flavored Cheetos. He tastes them and is immediately hooked, setting up a meeting at the factory right away. While Lonny is upset with Richard, Richard prepares himself for the pitch, finally getting the approval of his father to back him up. Richard proceeds to speak from the heart and his pitch is accepted with the Flamin' Hot Cheetos being put into production. While this results in more jobs, the new flavor is not flying off the shelves. Disappointed, Richard's children point out that there are no advertisements for the flavor. Richard returns to

Federico Cantini	
Liza D. Espinas	
Kayla Emter	
Marcelo Zarvos	
Searchlight Pictures Franklin Entertainment	
Hulu Disney+	
March 11, 2023 (SXSW) June 9, 2023 (United States)	
99 minutes	
United States	
English Spanish	

work and orders everyone to use their skills to sell the new flavor from the street. The tactic works and Enrico calls to ask that the factory produce an even bigger order.

While Baker gets the promotion he always desired, Richard is still a janitor, though Baker gives him some support. Lonny asks Richard to clean upstairs, only to find Enrico who tells him that he understands his struggles growing up, before revealing that he has been promoted to Director of Multicultural Marketing. Richard is applauded by all his coworkers for his success and he happily calls Judy to tell her the good news.

Cast

- Jesse Garcia as Richard Montañez
- Annie Gonzalez as Judy Montañez
- Emilio Rivera as Vacho Montañez
- Vanessa Martinez as Concha Montañez
- Hunter Jones as Lucky Montañez
- Dennis Haysbert as Clarence C. Baker
- Tony Shalhoub as Roger Enrico
- Pepe Serna as Abuelito
- Bobby Soto as Tony Romero
- Jimmy Gonzales as Hector Morales
- Matt Walsh as Lonny Mason

Production

In August 2019, it was reported <u>Eva Longoria</u> would direct *Flamin' Hot*, a film about <u>Richard Montañez</u> who claimed to have invented <u>Flamin' Hot Cheetos</u>, with <u>DeVon Franklin</u> producing under his <u>Franklin Entertainment</u> banner alongside Samuel Rodriguez, who served as the executive producer. <u>Searchlight Pictures</u> also contributed to the making of this film. [1]

Prior to the announcement, in April 2019, Franklin Entertainment was informed by <u>Frito-Lay</u> that Montañez's account of inventing Flamin' Hot Cheetos was disputed after an internal investigation had been prompted the previous year, but the producers elected to continue with the original premise. [2][3] The script received rewrites prior to shooting due to the publication of a <u>Los Angeles Times</u> article in May 2021 disputing Montañez's account. [4]

In May 2021, <u>Jesse Garcia</u> and Annie Gonzalez joined the cast of the film. The film completed production in August 2021, and the cast was announced at that time. [5][6]

Historical accuracy

Though *Flamin' Hot* is <u>advertised</u> as a true story, [7][8][9] the authenticity of Montañez's account became doubtful after the <u>Los Angeles Times</u> published an in-depth article scrutinizing his claim, with later corroboration by NPR. [10]

Creation of Flamin' Hot Cheetos

As portrayed in the movie, Montañez claims to have been encouraged by Roger Enrico's "think like a CEO" message and invented the Flamin' Hot seasoning with his wife Judy as a DIY project, taking home unflavored Cheetos in garbage bags to experiment with when the machine broke and left them unseasoned.[11][12][13] Montañez previously stated Enrico's phone number was listed in the company directory. He called Enrico, pitching his idea for a product aimed at Latinos, and arranged a sales presentation where he handed out homemade bags sealed with a clothing iron and hand-drawn logos. The presentation and a test market in Los Angeles happened in 1991, before a nationwide release in 1992. [14][15] Reporting by the *LA Times* and NPR contradicts this account. Frito-Lay told the *LA Times*, "We value Richard's many contributions to our company, especially his insights into Hispanic consumers, but we do not credit the creation of Flamin' Hot Cheetos or any Flamin' Hot products to him," $\frac{[2]}{}$ NPR was told, "We do not credit the product creation to him and him alone." $^{[10]}$ McCormick developed the Flamin' Hot seasoning and sent initial samples to Frito-Lay on Dec. 15, 1989. Frito-Lay filed a trademark for Flamin' Hot in June 1990[16] and started testing spicy Lay's, Cheetos, Fritos and Bakenets in Chicago, Detroit and Houston beginning in August 1990, and Roger Enrico joined Frito-Lay at the start of 1991. [2][17][18] Lynne Greenfeld is credited with managing the team that developed Flamin' Hot Cheetos, with contributions from Fred Lindsay. According to Al Carey, a former executive at Frito-Lay, and Patti Reuff, Enrico's former assistant, Montañez pitched a similar product, but this could not have been before 1992. [2][10] Carey stated the product was approved and sold in California using seasoning from the Midwest.[10] Montañez did in fact rise from a floor-level position to marketing executive, and he was involved in pitching new products such as Flamin' Hot Popcorn in 1993 followed by two types of Fritos —

Flamin' Hot and Lime and Chile Corn Chips. [2][19] Roberto Siewczynski, who worked with Frito-Lay as a Latino-focused <u>consultant</u>, clarified that events Montañez has described actually took place during the Sabrositas test market in 1994. [2]

Other details and responses

Montañez has said he was a janitor during the development of Flamin' Hot Cheetos and is portrayed as such in the movie, [14][20][21] but he had actually been a machinist operator since 1977. [2][19] The movie presents an economic downturn during Ronald Reagan's presidency leading to layoffs and prompting Enrico's message. [14] In reality, the United States experienced a recession in the early 1980s that began prior to the 1980 presidential election, followed by consistent economic growth and decreasing unemployment until July 1990. [22][23] Roger Enrico joined Frito-Lay in early 1991, two years after Reagan left office. [2][17][18] Frito-Lay cut 1800 jobs later that year.

Clarence Baker, played by Dennis Haysbert, was based on a co-worker Montañez had at the plant. He $\underline{\text{died}}$ several years before production of the movie and a different name was used for the character. [8]

Montañez initially responded to the controversy by claiming he was pushed out of development before the test markets and his contributions were not documented due to his low level position at the time. He stated, "I think that [the film is] going to inspire people to do the right thing. Don't make the mistake Montañez made. Document everything." The week of the movie's release, *Variety* published an article where Montañez stated, "I've got letters, notes, and presentations, proving their faith in me and my creation," but did not make any documentation public. Co-writer Lewis Colick has stated, "I think enough of the story is true," adding, "I've written a lot of true stories, like *October Sky*. Not every single thing in the story is exactly true. I always stand behind the essence of the story." Director Eva Longoria responded to criticism of the movie's accuracy, "We've always been telling Richard Montañez's story, and we're telling his truth. We weren't making a movie about the history of the Flamin' Hot Cheeto. We're telling the story of Richard Montañez." She separately admitted that the scene where Montañez's coworkers clap and cheer for his promotion is "the one thing that did not happen." Addressing a screening of the movie at the White House, an official speaking anonymously stated it is not a documentary, and was shown to reflect Americans of different backgrounds.

Soundtrack

Release

Flamin' Hot had its world premiere at <u>South by Southwest</u> (SXSW) on March 11, 2023. [29][30] It was released in select theaters and on both <u>Hulu</u> and <u>Disney+</u> on June 9, 2023. [31][32] The movie was screened on the <u>South Lawn</u> of the <u>White House</u> on June 15, 2023. President Joe Biden and director Eva Longoria, a notable <u>Democrat</u> campaigner, delivered remarks at the event, promoting it as the first White House screening of a movie focused on Hispanic characters. [33][28]

Reception

Audience viewership

According to Whip Media's TV Time, Flamin' Hot was the seventh-most-streamed film across all platforms in the United States during the week of June 11, 2023, and the ninth during the week of June 16, 2023. According to the streaming aggregator Reelgood, Flamin' Hot was the tenth-most-streamed program across all platforms in the United States during the week of June 8, 2023, and the ninth during the week of June 15, 2023.

Critical response

On the <u>review aggregator</u> website <u>Rotten Tomatoes</u>, 69% of 127 critics' reviews are positive, with an average rating of 6.1/10. The website's consensus reads: "*Flamin' Hot* may have a little more than its share of empty calories, but this fun feel-good story is still a decent cinematic snack." <u>Metacritic</u>, which uses a <u>weighted average</u>, assigned the film a score of 58 out of 100, based on 31 critics, indicating "mixed or average" reviews. 40]

Carlos Aguilar of <u>Los Angeles Times</u> said, "*Flamin' Hot* turns out to be a surprisingly enjoyable crowdpleaser. It mostly works because Garcia, Gonzalez and Longoria agree on a poignant, yet not sanctimonious approach that crystallizes the specific fortitude of mining hope from dire struggle." Brian Lowry of \underline{CNN} said that Eva Longoria did an "admirable job of wringing as much mileage as she can out of this underdog tale," and wrote, "Playfully presented, it's the kind of mildly tasty cinematic snack that doesn't exactly stick to your ribs." $\underline{[42]}$

John Nugent of *Empire* gave the film a grade of three out of five stars, praised the performances of <u>Jesse Garcia</u> and Annie Gonzalez, and complimented Eva Longoria's direction. Clarisse Loughrey of <u>The Independent</u> gave *Flamin' Hot* a grade of three out of five stars, complimented the chemistry between Jesse Garcia and Annie Gonzales, and stated that the film "keep its audience on their toes" owing to Eva Longoria.

Brian Tallerico of <u>RogerEbert.com</u> wrote: "*Flamin' Hot* has so much to say about culture that it never gives its characters room to breathe outside the movie's 'message.' It makes for a film that doesn't seem to tell a true story as much as one that came off a product line from a Frito-Lay factory." [45] Monica Castillo, also

writing for RogerEbert.com, gave the movie two out of four stars: "Overall, *Flamin' Hot* is more cheesy than spicy. Its focus on the '*Si*, *se puede* ... *trabajar y ganar dinero*' mantra dulls the flavors of what makes the movie enjoyable: the family at the center of Richard's drive to survive." [46]

Accolades

Award	Date of ceremony	Category	Recipient(s)	Result	Ref.
Palm Springs International Film Festival	January 16, 2023	Directors to Watch	Eva Longoria	Won	[47][48][49]
South by Southwest	March 19, 2023	Audience Award – Headliners	Flamin' Hot	Won	[50][51]
Hollywood Music in Media Awards	November 15, 2023	Original Song — Feature Film	"The Fire Inside" – <u>Diane Warren</u>	Nominated	[52][53]
Imagen Awards		Best Feature Film	Flamin' Hot	Won	[54]
	December 3, 2023	Best Director	Eva Longoria	Won	
		Best Actor	Jesse Garcia	Won	
		Best Actress	Annie Gonzalez	Nominated	
Celebration of Cinema & Television	December 4, 2023	Breakthrough Director Award (Film)	Eva Longoria	Won	[55]
Society of Composers and Lyricists Awards	February 13, 2024	Outstanding Original Song for a Comedy or Musical Visual Media Production	"The Fire Inside" – Diane Warren	Nominated	[56]
Satellite Awards	March 3, 2024	Best Original Song		Nominated	[57]
Academy Awards	March 10, 2024	Best Original Song		Nominated	[58]

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