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April 21, 2006, 11:12AM

Serves up healthy portions of humor

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By **BRUCE WESTBROOK**

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Indie films can be just as formulaic as teen comedies or action romps.

Take *When Do We Eat?*, whose feud at a family gathering echoes *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, *What's Cooking?*, *Pieces of April* and other films about comically dysfunctional clans.

Here, there's no wedding, Thanksgiving or Christmas. The Stuckman family is meeting at Passover to share the prolonged mealtime rituals of Seder — not that many in the family are that devout.

Patriarch Ira Stuckman (Michael Lerner) sells Christmas decorations for a living, daughter Nikki (Shiri Appleby) sells sex and son Zeke (Ben Feldman) is a hedonistic druggie.

But since eldest son Ethan (Max Greenfield) turned Hassidic, mom Peggy (Lesley Ann Warren) wants this Seder to be kosher, not the usual rush through rituals to hasten the chow-down.

It doesn't last — not with old wounds and new resentments lurking on the menu. These erupt in a funny-sad melee of blunt arguments and showy, eccentric behavior — you know, like indie-film families so often do.

Yet within its derivative bent, *When Do We Eat?* works well. Its strong cast is loud and lively, and the bickering banter has snap and drive. For a film centered around one meal, *Eat* has impetus and energy, and even amid the rancor, it's good that feelings are aired. Call it group therapy with matzah.

Zeke tries muting the calamity by spiking Dad's antacid with Ecstasy. Soon Ira is hallucinating and warmly

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ruminating, seizing the occasion to lead his people from the wilderness of their discontent. But is it only the drugs talking?

While embracing the meaning of Seder, the film also underscores conflicts between traditional strictures and relaxed modernity. And with all the talk of sex and drugs, the latter often prevails.

When Do We Eat? isn't preachy about faith so much as tolerant of human foibles, perceived generously — perhaps ironically — as "gray areas." At its best, the film shows a path through that hazy gray to a clear light of understanding.

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