



Babette's feast

Director: Gabriel Axel

Country: Denmark

Date: 1987

Film notes from David Humphrey for Manchester's *Cornerhouse* cinema:

Babette's Feast, directed by Gabriel Axel, is one of the very best films ever to emerge from Denmark. Suffused with a bewitching Scandinavian melancholy, it tells the story of Babette Hertsard (Stéphane Audran), a 19th century French political refugee who flees on a boat to Frederikshavn and is given shelter by elderly, God-fearing sisters Martina (named after Martin Luther) and Philippa (after Luther's friend and biographer Philip Melanchthon). Portrayed by Birgitte Federspiel and Bodil Kjer, they are the daughters of a pastor who founded his own, austere religious sect.



Babette, who conceals her superlative gifts as one of Paris's foremost chefs from the villagers, starts work as a cook and housekeeper for the pair in their house in a small village on the rugged and windswept coast of Jutland. In the end, the new arrival teaches the sisters and their flock about grace and sacrifice, and how sensual experience can change lives. It proves to be nourishment for both body and soul. As the film unfolds, the sisters are shown through flashbacks to have once been beautiful women (played by Hanne Stensgaard and Vibeke Hastrup), who gave up their chance of romance and fame to take refuge in religion.

Babette goes on to spend 14 years as their cook, submitting uncomplainingly to being "taught" how to prepare the dreary fish soup which forms their staple diet. Her only link to her former life is a lottery ticket renewed annually by a friend in Paris. Sure enough, her number eventually comes up and she wins a handsome amount which she decides to use to prepare a delicious dinner for the sisters, who had been planning their own celebration to commemorate the 100th anniversary of their father's birth. Although nervous about what to expect from Babette, a Catholic and a foreigner, they allow her to go ahead. She then prepares the feast of a lifetime for the members of the tiny church and their distinguished guest, a general whose aunt belongs to the religious community.

Innocently and to everyone's amazement, he identifies Babette as the famous chef from the Café Anglais in Paris. The banquet of turtle soup, quail in pastry, rich sauces, dessert, fromage and fruit, washed down with amontillado and champagne, is Babette's way of saying thank you to the sisters who gave her refuge all those years ago. At the centre of this Bergmanesque film, directed by Axel with precision and careful attention to detail, is the conflict between the congregation's unwavering Biblical beliefs with their denial of earthly enjoyments, and the sheer sumptuousness of the meal. The puritanical community in this remote part of Denmark stresses the life of the spirit, not that of the flesh. There are bleak, harsh winters, interminable hours of knitting, long silences and deep sighs. When the ladies show Babette how to prepare the mundane Danish meals of bread soup and soaked, smoked flounder, she modestly says not a word, choosing instead to learn the Danish names and faithfully follow the Danish recipes as though she were a stranger to cooking.

While the greying congregation grows rancorous, a simple act of kindness by Babette brings everyone together in an inspirational, life-affirming moment. Several films have used food as a metaphor for love, but few demonstrate the artistry and beauty of *Babette's Feast*, which in 1988 won an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film and a BAFTA for best film not in the English language.

Taken from: http://www.cornerhouse.org/wp-content/uploads/old_site//media/Film/film%20notes/BABETTE.pdf