



BABETTES GAESTEBUD (BABETTE'S FEAST) is a February, 2015 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is Kino Ken's review of that dvd film.

Denmark 1987 color 105 minutes live action feature drama in French, Danish, and Swedish with English subtitles Panorama Film International / Nordisk Film / Danish Film Institute Producers: Just Betzer, Bo Christensen, Benni Korzen, Pernille Siesbye

12 of a possible 20 points

***** of a possible *******

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates juvenile performer

Points:

- 0 Direction: Gabriel Axel**
- 2 Editing: Finn Henrikson**
- 1 Cinematography: Henning Kristiansen**
- 2 Lighting: Michael Wils Jensen*, Jacob Marlow*, and Michael Sørensen***
- 1 Screenplay: Gabriel Axel based on the story from SKAEBNE-ANEKDOTER by Karen Blixen a.k.a. Isak Dinesen**
- Script: Annemarie Aes**
- 1 Music: Per Norgaard, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**
- Choreographer: Niels Bjørn Larsen**
- 2 Production Designer: Sven Wichmann**
- Set Decorator: Peter Obeling Johannsen**

Props: Ena Eisel*, Torben Bækmark Pedersen*

Costume Designers: Annelise Hauberg, Karl Lagerfeld, Pia Myrdal

**Make-Up: Elisabeth Bukkehave, Sanne Dardanell, Grethe Holleufer,
Birthe Lyngsoe, Bente Møller, Lydia Pujols, Aase Tarp**

**2 Sound: Michael Dela*, Carl Aage Hansen*, John Nielsen*, and
Bjarne Risbjerg**

Sound Recording: Karen Bentzon* and Sonja Vesterholt*

Narrator: Ghita Nørby

Sound Mixer: Hans-Erik Ahrn*

**1 Cast: Stéphane Audran (Babette Hersant), Bodil Kjer
(Filippa, sister to Martine), Birgitte Federspiel (Martine, sister to Filippa),
Jarl Kulle (General Lorens Löwenhielm), Jean-Philippe Lafont
(Achille Papin, opera singer), Bibi Andersson (Swedish lady-in-waiting),
Vibeke Hastrup (Young Martine), Hanne Stensgaard (Young Filippa),
Lisbeth Movin (Widow), Ebbe Rode (Christopher), Bendt Rothe
(Old Nielsen), Preven Lerdorff Rye (Captain), Axel Strøbye (Driver),
Gudmar Wivesson (Lieutenant Lorens Löwenhielm), Pouel Kern
(Pastor, father of Filippa and Martine), Erik Petersen
(Erik, Babette's helper), Viggo Bentzon (Fisherman in rowboat),
Cay Kristiansen (Poul), Lars Lohmann (Fisherman), Tine Miehe-Renard
(Löwenhielm's wife), Finn Nielsen (Kobmand), Holger Perfort (Karlsen),
Else Petersen (Solveig), Ebbe With (Löwenhielm's aunt), Tina Kiberg*
(Singing voice of Filippa), Therese Hojgaard Christensen (Martha)**

0 Creativity

12 total points

**More visual feast than compelling story, BABETTES GÆSTEBUD
(BABETTE'S FEAST) is an Oscar®-winning Danish film directed by veteran
Gabriel Axel. It's based on an English-language story by author Karen Blixen,
who wrote under the *nom de plume* of Isak Dinesen, for some reason preferring
readers to identify her as a man. Couched in the form of a parable, this tale of
Frenchwoman Babette Hersant's final testament to culinary expertise purports
to show mellowing effects fine cuisine and wine have on sensually repressed**

nineteenth-century religious ascetics. In spending her ten thousand francs lottery prize preparing a sumptuous banquet for aged devout souls, the former chef of Paris's elite Café Anglais is presumably granted a measure of divine grace. This same benevolence is also bestowed upon the pious assembly of twelve for whom her lavish meal has been cooked. How does this come about?

Many years earlier, two young women who eventually become hostesses for this special event reached marriageable age and attracted suitors from both inside their community and the larger world outside. The elder, Martine, effortlessly won attention from Lieutenant Lorenz Løwenhielm, then in residence with his aunt as punishment for unscrupulous gambling behavior. Since this elderly relative was part of a congregation held spellbound by sermons Martine's father delivered, Lorenz came to worship services as an escort. He rapidly found himself enchanted by youthful beauty of the pastor's elder daughter. She was ultimately made unavailable courtesy of a father who intended his girls to exclusively devote themselves to assisting him and his parishioners. Eventually Lorenz realized he was courting an unattainable ideal. He left for court and fame, married a lady-in-waiting to Sweden's queen, then tried to forget completely about Martine.

Not too long afterward, French opera singer Achille Papin arrived in this very village, having been advised for health reasons to spend time in a primitive coastal region where fresh ocean air would likely reinvigorate him. Somewhat disappointed initially, expectations inflated quite a bit upon hearing Martine's younger sister sing. His practiced ear determined immediately that the young woman had all necessary qualities for a successful operatic career in Paris itself. The singing star wasted no time visiting her father and obtained permission to provide Filippa music lessons. Falling under the spell of Mozart's ethereal melodies, tutor and pupil almost duplicate a fictional romance embedded in his arias. Filippa fears surrender to carnality and begs her father to stop Achilles' access to their home, breaking the showman's heart in the process. He, like the lieutenant before him, is compelled to leave without attaining his goal.

Years pass. Both suitors are apparently forgotten. Then one stormy day a foreigner arrives at the thatched cottage where Martine and Filippa live alone,

their elderly father having passed away. This distraught woman, who can neither speak nor understand their language well, has been sent from Paris by Achille Papin, whose appreciation of her artistry indicates a hitherto unreported passion for gastronomic adventure. An accompanying letter informs the sisters of their visitor's identity and distress. With relatives and husband deceased, Babette Hersant is being brought from the Commune Suppression of Paris to an obscure oceanside refuge in Scandinavia through Achille's intercession. Homeless exile Babette requests lodging from the sisters. In return she offers service as housemaid and cook. Filippa and Martine survive solely on meager pensions coming monthly from an unspecified source. They cannot pay their suppliant wages commensurate with those she enjoyed previously. In fact, they don't have enough money for any household servants. Yet charity demands provision be made for any outcast newly arrived on their doorstep. So Babette joins the household, over time economizing on expenditures to the considerable joy of employers. The sisters find themselves with more money to give away than ever before. Surely God is looking out for them.

One possession of Babette's left behind with Achille is a national lottery ticket. Years go by. One day, a letter reaches Jutland informing Babette she holds a winner and will receive a hefty payout in francs. What should she do with the money?

Of course. Why not use it to prepare a final glorious banquet for villagers who have adopted her as one of their own? Despite misgivings about alien viands from a Papist, Babette's employers are persuaded to allow her the privilege of serving them a grand French meal on the occasion of what would have been the centenary of their father's birth. Surviving members of his following are invited to attend. They are commanded by Filippa and Martine to avoid direct commentary upon food and drink. Hopefully, it will not prove toxic.

To this meal comes General Löwenhielm, older and married, a connoisseur of wine and cuisine who has spent years feasting upon elegant French culinary refinements, including those offered by the Café Anglais in Paris, where Babette had once served as chef. How will he and former fellow congregants react to Babette's offering?

Watch the climax and conclusion of this film to find out, but have something readily available to snack on.

Gabriel Axel's film vividly recreates sounds, colors, and textures of late nineteenth-century Jutland, contrasting their dull bleakness with brilliant sparkles of wine, succulent fresh fruits, resplendent medals, delicate infoldings of tiny quails entombed in fluffy pastry. Costuming appears to have been exhaustively researched. Props of both furnishings and foodstuffs are authentic duplications from period magazines and cookbooks. Heavy use was made also of reconstructed or preserved buildings commonly found throughout rugged stretches of rural Scandinavia during the times in which these events are set.

Further enhancement derives from superlative lighting allowing every detail of makeup, wardrobe, and properties clear delineation.

From cry of gull to crackle of quail skull, each minute sound is faithfully recorded and captured for auditors to relish, every alteration in soundscape being duly registered by the ears. A potent sense of being in the midst of both spiritual and natural stresses is communicated to audiences.

The restricted palette employed in the film's first half firmly establishes the region and its inhabitants as kindred influences upon each other, with customs, dress, and comestibles restricted to conform with surroundings. Babette's alien world of delicacies, metric precision, and sonorously graceful speech obtrudes meekly, yet effectively. Change arrives at last, insinuating itself into both stomach and mind, transforming guests, hostesses, even erstwhile unassuming servant.

This is achieved by understated music, broken lines of Per Norgaard's score surrendering at last to connected and connecting hymn melodies which have been previously left incomplete, not so much affirmation as reflex. Mozart's love aria rapturously underlines growing ardor between its singing pair, a most appropriate choice to accompany Achille's infatuation with Filippa and her balking responsiveness.

Finn Henriksen's editing reflects the terse economy of Blixen's original text, with no unnecessary side excursions or languors.

Though compositions are painterly and boxed with optimal positioning of focal points, there's a bit of dullness created by such a continual parade of

highly formal object placements. When variety is attempted, as when one of the sisters has a nightmare about Babette's upcoming French meal, the result is not riveting horror. What results is rather confusion about why such disharmony is suddenly injected into the film with no warning precedent. Too abruptly abandoning cautious objectivity of previous scenes, it shocks without generating a payoff in later developments, rather like a Resnais flareout trauma blazing into an Ozu picture. This shatters ambience, muddles expectations, suggests complexities of emotional revelations never realized.

Cast members are as thoroughly wrapped into their roles as wardrobes permit. Unfortunately, many seem lured into either archness or clichéd responses empty of content. Passionless platitudes pepper dialogue, mocking melodramatic conventions and religious orthodoxy, with no satisfactory replacement for either anywhere in sight or hearing. Characters change viewpoints according to preset timings formulated by the author, whose overbearing hand suffocates individual personalities in the name of a greater amorphous unity. A kind of conformist cheerful lassitude, contradicting Babette's assertion of genius and individualism, overtakes guests as confessions and desire bubble to the surface for a final temporary revelation before eternal burial. Martine and the General experience platonic love, attempting to express spiritually what neither dared to enjoy in material form.

Perhaps this is not what the author planned. Axel's inability to extract subtleties of expressiveness from players does serious damage to credibility in these scenes, here and at the feast itself, where long-sustained quibbles and prejudices should be gradually, not abruptly, thrown aside.

The film carries an official MPAA rating of G, probably because no one can seriously object to anything depicted or declared. Lacking political or social commentary, devoid of anything resembling profound theology, **BABETTE'S FEAST** is simply a vigorous sensory experience, asking audiences to revel in what is displayed, imbibed, and swallowed without thinking about relationships, causes, and effects. An epicurean fantasy with resplendent production design, this Danish film is truly a delicious soufflé. Nothing more. It's a safe viewing experience for any youngster old enough to read subtitles.

The Criterion dvd release includes a formidable battery of extras. These include the full text of Blixen's original story, a one-and-one half minute trailer, a nine-minute 2013 interview in Denmark with Director Gabriel Axel titled "Le Regard de Babette," filmmaker biographies, a twenty-four minute interview with lead actress Stephane Audran, a twenty-six minute featurette entitled "Table Scraps," a ninety-minute documentary by Director Christian Braad Thomsen called KAREN BLIXEN --- STORYTELLER, and a seventeen-minute 2013 documentary about French cuisine. There's also an essay about the film and story provided by film scholar Mark Le Fanu. This is certainly a good deal of material for the money, as is customary with The Criterion Collection.

Bon appetit.