

Babette's Culinary Turn

An Essay

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This exposition suggests rewatching “Babette’s Feast” by Gabriel Axel with a view to the questions addressed by this book.

In the first episode of the Netflix series “Chef’s Table” by David Gelb, the Italian chef Massimo Bottura presented his risotto recipe as a “social gesture” – and not just in light of the Modena earthquake, which has posed a major threat to the existence of many regional producers. Bottura places a strong emphasis on supporting local businesses by incorporating their characteristic products into the menus at his restaurant “Osteria Francescana” in Modena. For the TV production, he once more encapsulated the principle of the so-called Nova Regio cuisine, which has drawn a great deal of attention to local rural culture and environment through referencing regional and seasonal products. David Gelb’s decision to show the three-Michelin-starred chef ambling around local markets, chatting to regional producers and shopping locally was therefore absolutely logical. And Bottura was happy to play along, assertively expounding his political ambition for ecological and economic sustainability in the context of culinary and gastronomical responsibility. The lavishly produced documentary highlights the unique nature of Bottura’s cooking, developed first in the chef’s mind, then in his kitchen. Traditional cinematographic audiovisual strategies place the visit to a restaurant in the same category as a trip to the opera, theatre or attending a concert, as guests can often look forward to an evening conceived, rehearsed and perfectly prepared over the course of weeks, an experience with a unique aura. A visit to sophisticated gourmet restaurants can take longer than a musical drama written by Richard Wagner: often up to six hours. In order to assert this cultural and aesthetic equivalence in the documentary format, David Gelb engages the artistic and aesthetic methods of those genres, towards which gourmet cooking is now moving and with which it is orchestrated: verismo (in the sense of a staged authentication), mostly symphonic music, theatrical editing (slow motion).¹

1 | David Gelb’s father was appointed General Manager of the New York Metropolitan Opera in 2006.

Elisabeth Raether addressed this aspect back in 2015 in a dossier on Kevin Fehling for German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*: “Haute cuisine follows trends and fashions, and this is something it really does share with high culture, with music for example, or painting.”² Until the end of the 20th century, top-level cuisine spared no pains to discover a new product, a new fruit, a forgotten “tuber one had to get their hands on”,³ in order to create a marked difference and perform a gesture of distinction in comparison to everyday cooking through the presentation of an innovative product. In the context of Nova Regio cuisine, it is no longer the exclusivity of a (foreign) product that is central, but “the work that has gone into a dish”,⁴ which involves the often international audience in a culinary and regional experience. David Gelb’s digital streaming format stages precisely this work and the knowledge of ingredients, cooking techniques and local agriculture: as a grand operatic production with the kitchen as its stage.

Gerhard Neumann has firmly established the “cultural topic food” in the debates held in literary and cultural studies circles. Drawing on Roland Barthes’ semiology, Neumann expounds critical analyses of filmed and literary portrayals of eating and food.⁵ When looking at the cinematographic dramaturgy of eating and cooking, he focuses on the Danish film “Babette’s Feast” (1987) by Gabriel Axel time and again. Karen Blixen located the narrative of her eponymous novella in the solitude of Norwegian village life, where the provost of a Lutheran sect watches sternly over his two daughters. In Axel’s version of the story it is the rugged landscape of Jutland upon which the former head chef of the “Café Anglais” irrupts with her culinary expertise, having escaped the political upheavals of the Paris Commune of 1871. In order to reconcile the feuding village community, the sisters Martine and Philippa plan a dinner, to be held on the occasion of their father’s 100th birthday. Babette, who has won 10,000 francs in the lottery, wants to cook a special menu for the event. In the end it turns out that it is one of the menus she used to serve to her guests in Paris: Turtle soup, Blinis Demidoff with black caviar, caillies en sarcophage with foie gras and truffle sauce, cheese from the Auvergne, Baba au Rhum with freshly candied fruit salad and a fruit platter with pineapple, figs, dates and white and blue grapes are served by a boy named Erik. Babette remains invisible to the dinner party at the sisters’ house as she operates offstage, in the kitchen. The only character able to read, decipher and appreciate the successive dishes is the General, who had eaten at “Café Anglais”. The General had fallen in love with one of the sisters, but she had declined his advances. He tells his story of the Parisian head chef as the mood at the table begins to relax, old conflicts are set aside and the dinner guests finally reconcile in memory of the provost and his sermons.

2 | Elisabeth Raether, Lucas Wahl (photos) (2015): “Die Poesie der Gurke”, in: *Die Zeit*, November 12, no. 46, pp. 17–19, here p. 18 (trans.).

3 | Ibid.

4 | Ibid.

5 | Cf. Barthes: 1961; Neumann: 1993a/1993b; Ott: 2011.

I am at this point interested in illuminating a further aspect that underlines the cinematographic dramatization of cooking and eating in a specific way. Jan Cocotte-Pedersen, head of the restaurant “La Cocotte” in Copenhagen’s Hotel Richmond from 1976 to 1990, cooked the menu for the film according to the description in Blixen’s novella. Or, more precisely, Gabriel Axel integrated the starred chef, very well known in Denmark, into his film in a documentary fashion. The actors in the film eat a menu whose ingredients and preparation comply with classic French cuisine. Cocotte-Pedersen served Blinis Demidoff with black caviar, the cailles en sarcophage filled with foie gras and truffles, candied fruits for dessert, tropical fruits with the cheese platter – and to accompany the food, Amontillado, Veuve Cliquot and Bordeaux. Axel’s cinematographic delivery takes great pains to present all of the food and ingredients for the feast as having been imported from France: Babette places an order with her nephew, a ship’s cook. Live quails, a hissing turtle, caviar and champagne confound the village community. Unable to read the signs of Babette’s lavish culinary art, the Jutlanders are quick to interpret the arrivals as potentially being the media of a “witch’s kitchen”. Yet in the context of its illegibility in the Scandinavian surroundings, the menu presented by Babette and Cocotte-Pedersen is further encoded on the narrative level of both the novella and the film: In Paris – as the General relates – he savored it in the presence of Colonel Galliffet. We learn that Galliffet, who was later promoted to general, was responsible for the violent killing of Babette’s family and her subsequent flight from her home country. Babette cooked for the man who in both Blixen and Axel’s versions of the story stands for death and violence and who drove a culinary discourse into political exile in Scandinavia, where it is neither read nor tasted in a spiritual or gustatory sense. In the film’s final sequence Babette resolutely explains to the sisters that she does not want to return to Paris – and not just because she used up her entire lottery winnings to pay for the banquet. She reveals that she “no longer has anyone” in Paris and that the time when she was able to make her guests at Café Anglais “happy” with her culinary art is over. In answer to the comment that she would now be “poor for the rest of her life,” Babette exclaims: “An artist can never be poor.” Philippa responds by saying that Babette will enjoy an afterlife in heavenly paradise, where she will be “the artist God the Almighty created you to be.” The expensive feast thus marks both the culmination and the end point of French cuisine in Danish exile. However, in certain sequences Gabriel Axel’s film stages Babette’s culinary expertise in an almost incidental way, in that her attention is drawn to local products and – this is at the heart of my argument – regionally anchored cooking techniques. Axel does not follow these few scenes up in a “culinary” sense, does not manage to integrate them successfully into his cinematographic narrative and its dramatic composition. For it is the “culinary turn” Babette accomplishes over the course of her forced migration in the asperity of Jutland that turns out to be the culinary transfiguration of the film’s central character. Indeed, even before preparing the final feast, Babette has already left her culinary provenience behind and prepared regional food, just dif-

ferently and better than the locals. In the film's opening sequence Axel already frames the sisters in a particular way, by showing them walking past dried fish hung on wooden poles outdoors. Martine and Philippa cook for the poor and sick in the village, bringing them soup and other dishes every day. While Axel certainly has an eye for the culinary sparsity of this food, he must at the time – in 1987 – have had no idea as to the unintended aesthetic connotations both soup and tableware would gain in our day, now employed by high-end Nordic cooking in contextualizing its regional roots: The crockery and soup look as though they had been designed and prepared by René Redzepi. Upon Babette's arrival in the village, Martine and Philippa show her how to soak dried fish and bread, then how to cut the fish and produce a bread soup fortified with just a very small amount of beer, which Babette then serves the poor. But Babette refines these foods and gives them a new emphasis in terms of taste – and while the film does not reveal how she does this, it does focus on the evidently displeased face of a sick man eating a soup prepared by the sisters when Babette is not there. After the sisters have explained their cuisine to Babette, she and the pair eat the bread soup in different rooms. Babette does not particularly like the soup. In what I regard as a central scene we then see her looking out of the window, watching a farmer walk through the dunes with a sheep; her gaze follows him intently and she then rushes to visit the village shop. I would go as far as calling this most important sequence of the film in terms of my line of argument the main character's "culinary turn." Stéphane Audran as Babette now goes on to discover the unique culinary character of the region which gave her exile. The sheep, which the farmer leads through the landscape and allows to feed, rings in a process of agro-culinary re-definition in Babette. This is accompanied by an economic optimization of the sisters' household: "It's rather astonishing: Since Babette has been here we have been spending far less money." In the village shop Babette smells two onions before buying them, she haggles over the price for fresh fish and another time smells a plant (a herb), then picks and cooks it. Axel stages her acceptance of her exile and its agricultural character as an emblem of Nordic cooking against the backdrop of a magnificently framed sunset. In her "Nordic Food Lab" Babette experiments, bringing together different regional microorganisms; in the cultural history of cooking she can be located between Nouvelle Cuisine and Nova Regio cooking. And it is the village's poor and sick who notice this culinary turn, not the sisters and their guests at the banquet. Babette's final French feast for the quarreling community in the film overshadows a chef's reinvention of herself, who departs from Jan Cocotte-Pedersen's style of cooking to the same degree as she moves towards Nova Regio cuisine.