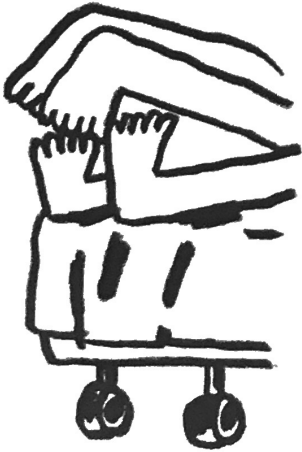


*A brief catalog of the multitudinous food metaphors
crammed down our film-consuming gullets*



Eat, Drink, ~~Fuel,~~ Die

by *Anthony
Bourdain*

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“A human being is primarily a bag for putting food into.”

—George Orwell

The first few moments of Ang Lee’s masterful *Eat Drink Man Woman* present what is probably the most dazzling display of professional culinary artistry on film. Throwing together a “casual” Sunday dinner for his three daughters, banquet chef Master Chu cleans a fish, neatly scores the body of a squid, peels the silver skin off a chicken gizzard, rounds up a rooster from the backyard, makes stock, fries and braises a pork belly, rolls out dough, fills and perfectly shapes dumplings, and performs about eight other tasks all in quick, logical order. We see how one ingredient, one function leads sequentially into another, culminating in what any restaurant goer would find an amazing Chinese meal. The scene is played (partially) for laughs. The joke is that it is an absurd amount and variety of food for a casual family meal. But never has the execution of a meal been so accurately depicted from start to finish. I suspect that a lot of professionals and former professionals like me thought for those first few minutes that this was a film about the joys of food prep.

In fact, the film’s real concern is communication—the struggle to receive and express love. In this case, food is used as a means for reticent, inarticulate, and otherwise dysfunctional people to say the unsayable to one another.

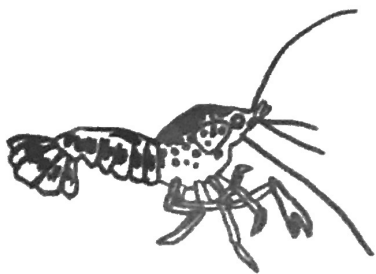
It is, frankly, an irresistible and quite beautiful film. Only a miserable, heartless rat bastard

could be immune to its charms and it supports, convincingly, the widely held belief that a plate of food has innate qualities, and that—depending on the history (personal or otherwise) that an eater might have with the dish—it can contain “heart.” Food can be a vessel for “love” or contain in some way the “soul” of the cook who

prepared it.¹

You hear this all the time on shows like *Top Chef*. A chef will claim to cook with “love” (2

¹ I get emotional over a bowl of cream of tomato soup and a grilled cheese sandwich on a rainy day but I doubt Master Chu or any of his three daughters would feel the same way. There is a cultural imperialism inherent in trying to universalize such values to particular dishes.



proclamation that I, as a judge, often found worrying, summoning, as it did, possibilities that the contestant had rubbed his knob around in the sauce). Again and again in food writing, we find simple dishes like boiled chicken or steamed root vegetables described as “soulful”—the practitioner said to be cooking with “heart”—to the point where the designation is nearly meaningless.

“I don’t have any memories unless I cook them into existence,” says one daughter overcome by an urge to cook. Another daughter falls in love over a bowl of stinky tofu. Master Chu, tormented by the knowledge that his grand-niece has to eat mediocre cooking at school, secretly prepares her lunch every day and is soon taking orders from her whole class. Nearly every important dramatic moment of the film happens over or around the preparation or eating of a meal.

The first fifteen minutes of the film reintroduce—beautifully and accurately—the labor and tedium that define what it really means to cook with love.

If *Eat Drink Man Woman* is about communication and love, then Gabriel Axel’s *Babette’s Feast* is all about sex. Sadly, there is no actual sex in the film. In fact, none of the characters seem to have ever had sex (other than Babette in an undescribed previous life). The film concerns two sexually frustrated spinster sisters living among a cult of aged, joyless, and sexless religious freaks on a bleak coastline in Denmark.

Days and nights are spent sitting around talking about God and how unimportant, wrong, and probably diabolical pleasure is. In flashbacks, we see how every possibility of happiness or artistic expression—every opportunity for the two spinsters to even crack a smile—has been suffocated. Naturally, the food in this bleak, cultural wasteland is appalling.

The sympathies of the filmmakers, though, clearly lie with those who would embrace pleasure. When Babette, the former chef of Paris’s legendary “Café Anglais” shows up as a refugee and is improbably taken in by the sisters, a delightful corrupting process begins. Babette wins the lottery. And with nothing else to do in a village that makes Salt Lake

City look like Sodom and Gomorrah, she decides to spend all her newfound loot on one delicious meal for the village. Soon, a cornucopia of ingredients arrives from France. The table is set. The guests take their places. And for her clueless, gastronomically illiterate guests, Babette serves a magnificent meal: first, a perfectly clarified and true “potage” of turtle with Amontillado. Then, *blinis demidoff*, tiny buckwheat pancakes heaped with crème fraîche and beluga caviar, accompanied by an 1860 *Veuve Cliquot*. *Cailles en sarcophage*—tiny, succulent, whole quails, stuffed with foie gras and black truffle, roasted inside *vol-au-vent* pastry shells with a *sauce Périgourdine* come with numerous bottles of a legendary 1845 vintage *Clos de Vougeot*. Only the guest of honor, a general and one-time attaché in Paris, recognizes the extraordinary nature of the meal. There is more.

Endive and walnut salad, French cheese, a bounty of imported exotic fruits, and finally, a *savarin au rhum avec des figues et fruits glacées* with some healthy sized glasses of *Marc* just in case the prudish rubes aren’t hammered enough. “Enlightened” by the magical powers of good food and wine, the stuffy, priggish old



fucks are soon licking their lips, sucking down the vintage wine, and giving one another lustful looks, the implication being: "Let the boning begin." They end the evening by staggering off to their hovels, pausing to join hands and praise God, mistaking the effects of alcohol, perhaps, for epiphany. Broken hips to follow.

Food, then, in this view, is both standalone pleasure and a highway to libertine behaviors. The overt implication, under a thin veneer of transparently misguided spiritual twaddle, is that the careful application of good food and alcohol leads directly to "loosening up," and probably unprotected sex. Good food makes you "smarter," it opens up the mind, unblocks the tubes—it's "sexy."

But is it? I'm not so sure that food is inherently sexy—though the body provably reacts similarly in anticipation of both sex and a good meal. I've been to a lot of places and eaten a lot of food said to have aphrodisiac qualities, but never encountered a single bite of food that made someone look more attractive over the course of an evening. (Liquor—even box wine—on the other hand, can successfully do that.)

I like food. And I like sex. But I don't want them together. Ever. I like chicken leg, but there is absolutely nothing "sexy" about bringing a chicken leg to bed. People who describe having "foodgasms" on dining websites create a picture in my mind of a tragically obese person, fingering themselves in front of a laptop with one hand while mashing the tiny keys with the greasy, oversized fingers of the other. Watching someone have an orgasm can be interesting. A "foodgasm"? Not attractive even in the best of circumstances. Anyone who coos enthusiastically about chocolate cake and raspberry sauce in bed gives new meaning to rolling over into the wet spot.

Yet *Babette's Feast* tries (and succeeds brilliantly) at having it both ways. It says you can stay true to your religious principles, eat really, really well, get all kinds of fucked up on fine food and wine, and return home for some properly pious anal.

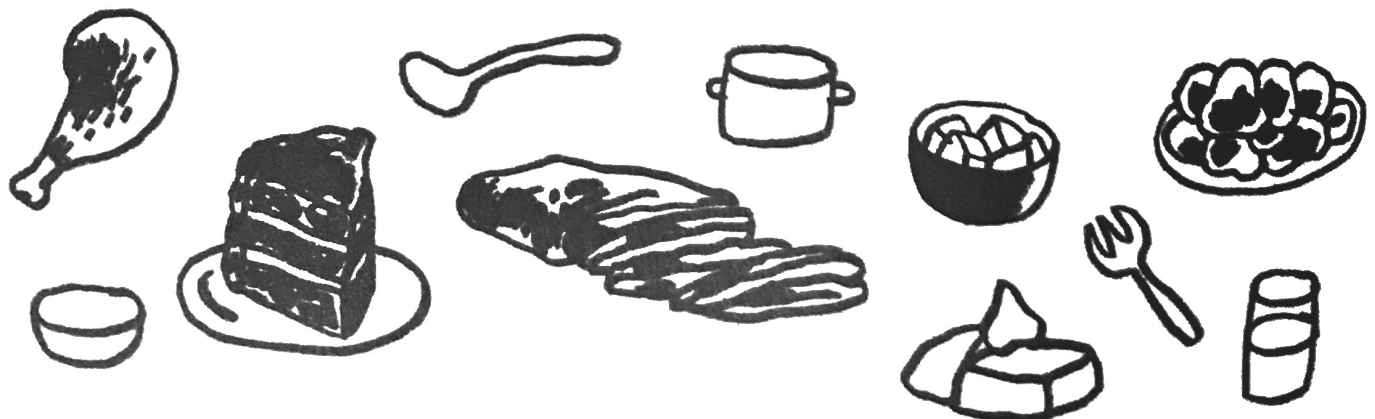
One classic of "foodie" films seems to have flown under the radar: Steven Spielberg's culinary classic, *Munich*,

which has a food-centric sub-plot that noted gastronome Christopher Walken just made me aware of.

Eric Bana plays Avner, a Mossad officer and the team leader of an ultra-secret hit squad targeting the men behind the massacre of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics. He's also an enthusiastic gourmet cook who enjoys preparing lavish meals for his team.

He makes a mean brisket of beef apparently, and doesn't skimp on the sides. An early meeting with an asset takes place while they shop for ramps. Another meeting of the team inspires what looks like a traditional Provençal *aïoli*. Between assassinations, shootouts, and bomb detonations, it's food, food, food. Even secondary characters like Papa, the former resistance leader who deals in information and logistics for whoever pays his price, appears while carefully preparing *rognons de veau*. At the end of a lavish meal, he bids goodbye to Avner with a gift of artisanal *boudin noir* and *andouillette*—an odd choice, one would think, for an Israeli.

What is going on here? What is the "message"? I've viewed the film over and over, trying to discern



a theme, a subtext: Is Spielberg saying that all that delicious-looking food is a “salve”—a means of assuaging the fear, tension, and guilt of the professional killer? It doesn’t seem so, as no one is really depicted as being particularly comforted by Avner’s efforts. Is all that chow simply “fuel,” the stuff that dedicated servants of the state require to perform their jobs well? Or is the director putting an apron on Avner and surrounding his characters with family-style meals in a cynical attempt to “humanize” what might otherwise appear to be remorseless killers? And why bou-din?! Why the andouillette?! What is the significance of these choices? Of all the great “foodie” films, *Munich* is the most maddeningly confusing as to its intentions.

Marco Ferreri’s transgressive, shit-spattered masterpiece, *La Grande Bouffe* is, without a doubt, the antidote to all other films with food and cooking as their subjects. Its depictions of food and cooking are impeccable and neverending: soft-shell lobsters as a first course, Charolais beef, guinea fowl, *poulets*

de Bresse, baby lamb, mammoth crayfish à la Mozart with *sauce Aurore*, pâtés, oysters, cockerels, wild boar. They all end up gloriously presented on the table—much of it after being prepared on camera. You could hardly ask for a more enticing display of both classic and nouvelle French cuisine. Yet *La Grande Bouffe* is not about the joys of the table. The film outraged and scandalized France, and caused audience members to spit on its director at Cannes (and reportedly drove festival judge Ingrid Bergman to vomit uncontrollably). Food, here, is a means of destruction.

Marcello (Marcello Mastroianni), Ugo (Ugo Tognazzi), Michel (Michel Piccoli), and Philippe (Philippe Noiret) are four successful bachelors who retreat to a well-appointed mansion in the suburbs of Paris for what appears, at first, to be an epicurean getaway. It soon becomes clear from the relentlessness of their appetites that they have a more fanatical agenda—to eat themselves to death. Bored, infantile, filled with contempt for themselves and the world, they’ve planned to go out on a culinary high note, but soon

find themselves (literally) wallowing in their own shit. Eating and fucking themselves to death might have sounded like a good idea, but even the whores they hire to entertain them—who have surely seen some ugly behavior in their lives—become too horrified and nauseated by what they see to stick around (and they manage to leave long before the toilet explodes).

The four protagonists regress and regress, their bellies billowing out over loosened trousers, cheeks becoming florid, subject to epic bouts of flatulence. And yet they continue to cook—and eat—as one after the other dies, one of them literally stuffed to death on the kitchen table by his obliging friend. It ain’t pretty.

Food, no matter how beautiful or well prepared, inevitably becomes shit in this withering, merciless satire, whose loathing for the human body and its appetites makes Pasolini’s *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* look like a Disney film. If you find yourself fetishizing food, spending too much time thinking about it—or have ever used the term “foodgasm”—this film will provide a useful sobering perspective. ♦

