

Olympe Durant de Saint André

6520464

Bachelor Thesis Literary Studies

Supervisor: Kári Driscoll

Second Reader: Paul Bijl

2<sup>nd</sup> of February 2021

The Role of Food in Karen Blixen's "Babette's Feast" and Juzo Itami's *Tampopo*

## Abstract

Karen Blixen's "Babette's Feast" and Juzo Itami's *Tampopo* are structured around the importance of food in our daily lives. In this thesis, I argue that the story and film manage to elevate food from its physiological need by presenting foodways as a vehicle for culture, a vector for social interactions as well as a means for female emancipation. The two texts represent food in an innovative way as it transcends its commodification to play an active role in "Babette's Feast" and *Tampopo*'s narratives. Drawing on the theories of Stuart Hall, Roland Barthes and Barbara Welter, I show that "Babette's Feast" and *Tampopo* represent foodways as a marker of identity. First of all, food has a symbolic function as it is able to signify a person's traditions and intentions. Foodways also function as a form of communication inciting bodily interaction between individuals whilst signaling power relations. Finally, foodways allow women to liberate themselves from their domesticity as they use food to reclaim their agency.

## Table of Contents

### Introduction

#### Chapter 1 - The Cultural Role of Food: Aestheticism, Hedonism and Language

1. Oscillating Between Need and Beauty: The Function of Food in Scandinavia and Japan
2. The Act of Cooking and Eating as a Practice of Hedonism
3. Foodways as a Form of Transcendent Language

#### Chapter 2 – Food’s Sociability: A System of Communication, Power and Necessity

1. Using Food: The Importance of Sharing a Meal
2. The Power Relations in Food: Consuming Relations
3. The Multi-layered Need to Cook

#### Chapter 3 – Women in The Kitchen: Gender Roles, The Cult of Domesticity and Agency

1. Two Female Professional Chefs
2. The Use of Food to Redefine Femininity
3. Challenging the Idea of a Domestic Sphere

### Conclusion

### Works Cited

## Introduction

In the introduction to their book *Food and Culture*, Counihan and Van Esterik write how “food touches everything [...] marking social differences, boundaries, bonds, and contradictions- an endlessly evolving enactment of gender, family, and community relationships” (3). The plural role of food will be explored throughout the analysis of “Babette’s Feast” and *Tampopo*. In 1950, Danish author Karen Blixen published her short story “Babette’s Feast” in the American Magazine *Ladies’ Home Journal* under the pseudonym Isaak Dinesen. The short story was later adapted by Gabriel Axel in 1987 which allowed audiences around the world to witness the sharing of French delicacies in Norway. *Babette’s Feast* adequately represents Blixen’s story and will be analyzed alongside the short as the two works dialogue between one another. “Babette’s Feast” takes place in the town of Bervelaag where two protestant sisters Martine and Philippa rescue Babette, a widowed French cook who has fled Paris due to the “Bloody Week” occurring in May 1871. After twelve years of domestic service, Babette wins 10 000 francs at a lottery and decides to spend it on “a real French dinner” (Blixen, 37). The feast will be served in honor of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martine and Philippa’s deceased father. Thousands of kilometers away from Scandinavia, Japanese film *Tampopo* similarly focuses on a female chef. *Tampopo* written and directed by Juzo Itami in 1985 portrays the story of Goro and Gun, two truck drivers who help Tampopo, a widowed mother make her ramen noodle restaurant successful. These two works have been assembled together as they are both elevate food from its commodification. “Babette’s Feast” and *Tampopo* represent how food expresses cultural behavior whilst showcasing how practices relating to food such as preparation and consumption are able to unite individuals. The two works also focus on female chef protagonists and similarly explore how cooking can be used to liberate women from their domesticity. In this sense, Blixen and Itami support Counihan and Van Esterik’s idea of food’s omnipresent importance as food is

not only central to the two texts but functions as a tool able to reveal different cultures, social dynamics whilst questioning gender roles.

Through a critical feminist analysis of the two texts, this thesis explores the extent to which “Babette’s Feast” and *Tampopo* represent and challenge foodways as a marker of identity through culture and gender. Foodways refers to the intersecting practices of food through culture, society and tradition. The term foodways was coined by John W. Bennett, Harvey L. Smith and Herbert Passin in their report “Food and Culture in Southern Illinois” in the field of food and social studies. I will focus on the study of preparation, presentation, consumption and events of foodways. This thesis will compare two texts, “Babette’s Feast” which is from the West and *Tampopo* which is from the East. Blixen’s short story takes place in Norway as her story unravels in the heart of Scandinavian Protestantism. Meanwhile, Itami’s film is set in an unnamed Japanese city in the 1980’s. A period where the country was confronted and aware of the rise of activists promoting feminist ideas whilst its food culture was gaining international attention.

The thesis is divided into three parts which all focus on drawing parallels between “Babette’s Feast” and *Tampopo*. In the first part, I examine the important symbolic function of food in these texts with the support of Stuart Hall’s theory of representation to see how food functions as a semiotic system. According to Hall, constructionist representation is a practice in which meaning is constructed through the use of concepts and signs although “it is not the material world which conveys meaning; it is the language system [used] to represent our concepts (11). In this sense, the semiotic system of food culture functions as a language which permits the circulation and construction of meaning. The first chapter of this thesis will look at Blixen’s and Itami’s choices of representation to understand how “Babette’s Feast” and *Tampopo* manage to give food a meaning which goes beyond its universal and primal need. In the context of these two works, I will use Hall’s theory to argue that food functions as a

representational system to elevate itself as a form of art, a pleasurable practice and serves as a language.

In the second part, I turn to Roland Barthes's idea of food as a system of communication to look at how food has a role and impact on human relationships. In his essay "Toward a Psychoanalysis of Contemporary Food Consumption", Roland Barthes argues that food "is not only a collection of products" but "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior" (167). The use of food in "Babette's Feast" and *Tampopo* underlines the importance of cooking and sharing a meal by placing food at the center of social interactions. I will use Barthes' idea to understand how and what food communicates in "Babette's Feast" and *Tampopo*. My second chapter will argue that foodways are a form of communication as they express belonging and power dynamics. Additionally, food's communicative function allows people to interact with one another forming social relations.

In the third and final part, I explore the relation between food and gender drawing on Barbara Welter's term "cult of domesticity", a conservative approach to women's femininity and wellbeing. Babette and *Tampopo* both challenge and reinvent the Cult of Domesticity, a term coined in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is defined through its general preconceptions regarding femininity with which a woman "was promised happiness and power" (Welter, 152). Barbara Welter explores this idea a century later in her article "The Cult of True Womanhood". The scholar seeks to understand this prominent culture which revolved around the fact that a woman's virtue resides in piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. In my third chapter, I will use Welter's explanation to argue that Babette and *Tampopo* go against these womanly virtues. Instead of adhering to these societal expectations, the two women reach their personal fulfillments by using food to liberate themselves from their domesticity.

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Cultural Role of Food: Aestheticism, Hedonism and Language**

In this chapter I will compare and analyze the different representations of food in “Babette’s Feast” and *Tampopo* through Stuart Hall’s constructionist theory of representation. Stuart Hall touches upon the idea that “physical things and actions exist, but they only take on meaning and become objects of knowledge within discourse” (30). Both texts use foodways to produce meaning through a narrative and cinematic discourse. Not only do “Babette’s Feast” and *Tampopo* place food at the centre of their narratives but they elevate foodways through its symbolic function. The two texts represent food in a new light which confronts the audience’s expectations and it is this “marking of difference within language [which] is fundamental to the production of meaning” (16). In the first part, I analyze how Itami and Blixen value food as a form of art. In the second part, I look at the act of cooking as the representation and practice of hedonism. Lastly, I argue that the chosen texts illustrate foodways as a form of language capable of making people from different and even conflicting (West and East) cultures interact.

#### **Oscillating Between Need and Art: The Function of Food in Scandinavia and Japan**

##### *A Challenged Need in “Babette’s Feast”*

Both texts stress the importance in the representation and power given to food. Indeed, it is used as a vector for cultural and individual awakening. In “Babette’s Feast”, the central conflict revolves around the differences in Scandinavian and French cultures and religions which crystallize in food. Babette’s presence as the undercover “Cook at the Café Anglais” (Blixen, 49) transforms Martine and Philippa’s dull kitchen and dining room into her own atelier. This atmospheric metamorphosis serves her feast. Following the protestant tradition, Martine and Philippa’s “food must be as plain as possible” (33) underlining how their meal’s sole function

is to nourish the body. This austere supper is adapted by Axel who emphasizes the grim Scandinavian food culture by using Martine and Philippa's dining room as a reflection of their food. In the first middle two-shot, following the protestant tradition, the sister's dinner is lifeless. The plates merge into the table whilst the prominent use of dark blue gives a serious and cold atmosphere to the room (see Fig. 1). The sister's clothes mirror the colors and atmosphere surrounding them. This minimalistic setting reflects the emptiness of Martine and Philippa's appetite for life and their lack of pleasure and desire. Set in the same dining room, this scene will later clash with Babette's feast which conveys a spirit of abundance and pleasure through the amount of decoration, people and food (see Fig. 2). Indeed, the director's use of a middle shot, as opposed to a close-up, reinforces the communal act of eating, breaking down individualism. The feast transforms the room into a sanctuary. The use of the high angle gives a spiritual, almost godly perspective on the scenery, elevating the feast as a religious happening. In this sense, pleasure is the key ingredient to the feast. Babette achieves to transmit her transgressive art in a Protestant setting described by McFadden as "a community of people who had lived their lives by denying their bodily desires" (121). Babette awakens the Protestants' senses by introducing her food as this emancipatory transgressive art which connects body and pleasure.



Fig. 1: Martine and Philippa having dinner [00:36:44]





Fig. 2: Martine, Philippa and the congregation eating Babette's French dinner [01:21:05]

### *A Form of Art in Tampopo*

Whilst “Babette’s Feast” represents the feast as a form of transgressive art, *Tampopo* draws a link between a meal and a painting. The film’s narrative is occasionally intercut by autonomous vignettes representing foodways in an innovative light. I will analyze a vignette in which one of the truck drivers Gun is learning how to eat ramen to show how Itami represents a meal as a work of art. The sensei tells Gun that he must “[f]irst contemplate the ramen [...] observe the entire bowl” [00:03:43] to savor the meal with his sight before using other senses. As Gun is learning how to observe and recognize every ingredient, the ramen dish occupies the frame (see Fig. 3). Itami creates a *mise en abyme* as the audience, like Gun is being told to focus on the aesthetic dimension of the dish. The composition of the meal is carefully explained by the sensei who “studied ramen for 40 years” [00:03:25]. The dish is analyzed like a painting in a museum. The status of food is elevated to an artwork as “[t]he appearance of the dish is as important as the taste of it” (Hoff, 80). The use of an extreme close-up shot of the ramen (see Fig. 4) enforces the importance of food’s aesthetic composition. Itami’s uses food to transmit beauty. In this sense, people who cannot afford to go to museums to see “high-art” can recognize the artistic dimension of their food.

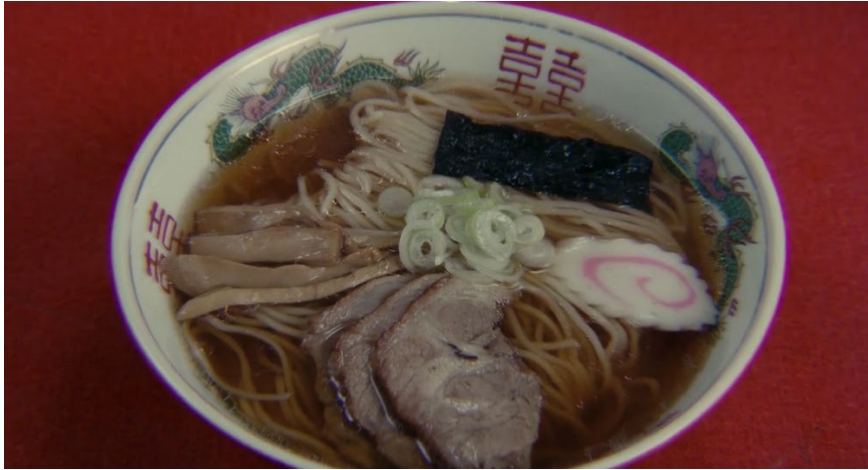


Fig. 3: A bowl of pork ramen [00:03:57]



Fig. 4: An extreme close-up shot of the dish [00:04:12]

## **The Act of Cooking and Eating as A Practice of Hedonism**

### *Cooking for Others*

The values of hedonism are present in “Babette’s Feast” and *Tampopo* through cooking and eating which are motivated by the desire for pleasure. Pleasure can be defined “as including or as included in all pleasant feeling or experience: contentment, delight [...] enjoyment [...] love, relief, satisfaction” (Moore, 1). In his essay “The Relation Between Jeremy Bentham's Psychological, and his Ethical, Hedonism” Sprigge states that “each of us always does what he thinks will produce the most pleasure” (297). To an extent, food culture is represented as an action which produces pleasure. It is important to contextualize “Babette’s Feast” in the strict religious context represented in the text. Protestants viewed eating and drinking as

dangerous and suspicious pleasures. Food's pleasurable dimension thus functions through transmission and transgression as the members of Babette's dinner "fall under the spell of the epicurean delights prepared for them" (Olivier, 29). The feeling of sensual pleasure and freedom felt by the congregation is triggered by the nature of their actions which is to an extent, sinful. At the end of their feast "one no longer [distinguished] between bodily and spiritual appetite or satiety!" (Blixen, 46). In other words, the guests have succumbed to their pleasures and quenched their human impulses and desires. Furthermore, Tampopo's fulfilment is associated with family and identity. She is initially portrayed as happily preparing a traditional Japanese breakfast for her son, and two friends Goro and Gun (Fig. 5). The frame reveals Tampopo smiling whilst the room's light illuminates her persona, elevating her status to that of a holy figure. Although placed in the background, her standing posture gives her power and agency (see Fig. 5). In this scene, food is a vehicle of life as well as joy. The breakfast is portrayed as a moment of intimacy and happiness.



Fig. 5: Tampopo preparing breakfast for Goro, Gun and her son [00:14:39]

### *Female Pleasure*

Although Professor Fürst states that in general "women seem to experience a special kind of joy in giving food" (448), Babette uses her cooking skills to reclaim her own pleasure. As Moore explains, "one's basic motivation is always and only pleasure; [it is] what is valuable

for one” (7). The representation of Babette’s pleasure is subtle. Towards the end of the feast, Philippa’s sister Martine tells her ““you ought not to have given away all you had for our sake”” to which Babette replies ““For your sake, no. For my own”” (Blixen, 50-51). Through these direct monosyllabic words, Babette shows that she does not cook for recognition but for herself. At the end of her feast, Babette reaches a state of *jouissance* as she repeats four times to the sisters that she is a “great artist” (Blixen, 51). Through the food she has prepared and her own verbal acknowledgment of her culinary expertise, Babette embodies her pleasure. Her capacities as a chef renders her bodily communication available. Similarly, in one of *Tampopo*’s autonomous vignettes, a yakuza and his partner are seen exchanging an egg whilst kissing (see Fig. 6). With no additional soundtrack, this scene focuses on an erotic and culinary exchange ending on the woman’s climaxing. This culmination of pleasure is represented by the tangible and visible explosion of the egg yolk on the woman and the man. In the shot, the color yellow and the woman’s red lips attract the audience’s eye. Itami raises awareness on the lack of representation of female pleasure through an erotic, sensual and colorful use of food’s liquid matter. Set in patriarchal societies which suppress the female pleasure, both *Tampopo* and “Babette’s Feast” portray women use food as a symbol of pleasure; to others and themselves.



Fig. 6: A yakuza and his partner embracing [00:49:45]

## Foodways as a Form of Transcendent Language

### *Speaking with Menus*

Throughout the two texts, the characters' relation to food is visible through the use of foodways which are represented as a distinct form of language functioning "as a sign, and [...] organized with other signs into a system which is capable of carrying and expressing meaning" (Hall, 4). Food functions as a language as it represents a characters' agency, their "free will or choice [...] knowledge and power" (Kockelman, 375-376). In one of Tampopo's vignette, a group of businessmen with their one assistant are having lunch in a prestigious hotel. When discovering the French menu, all the businessmen mimetically order the same meal, pointing to their ignorance of French delicacies. Yet, the assistant demonstrates his knowledge of French cuisine by ordering the appropriate dishes (Fig. 7). By placing this man on the foreground of the shot, the director ironically reverses the hierarchy, placing the assistant at the head of the table (see Fig. 7). He becomes the center of attention as he confidently holds the French menu which defines 1980's Japan as "modern and cosmopolitan" (Ashkenazi, 29). As a connoisseur, the assistant "knows the exact restaurants in France from which the chef has learned his trade" (Iles, 295), the food he orders not only informs his knowledge but showcases his agency in an environment in which he is usually socially inferior. Itami's interest in food as an expression of culture helps question social stigmas. In this sense, food culture is a medium of expression able to indicate a person's social and cultural capital.





Fig. 7: An assistant ordering food in a French restaurant [00:23:14]

### *A Sign of Culture*

“Babette’s Feast” uses meals to shed light on the different cultures between individuals. In the chapter entitled “The Turtle”, Blixen analyses the cultural dimension of signs. Through a semiotic lens, the chapter’s title works as the signifier which signifies an animal. However, in the context of the short story, the sign is not a live animal but a meal, a gastronomic French turtle soup. Blixen plays with the readers’ expectations in a similar way in which Babette awakens her guests’ tastebuds and surprises them with her culinary expertise. The reader is included in the sensorial experience that food has to offer. It is important to keep in mind Hall’s idea that “[e]ven when the actual words remain stable, their connotations shift” (9). In the Protestants’ eyes, the turtle becomes a sign of intrusion similar to a Trojan horse. Through her imported goods, Babette lets her French culture intrude the isolated town of Bervelaag. The cultural gap is illustrated when Martine is suspicious of the turtle which is described as a “a big, undefinable object” (Blixen, 39). Although Martine is able to identify the turtle, she is not able to link it to the meal as she lacks the culinary language and knowledge to do so. In this sense, Blixen presents food as a circumscribed cultural signifier by showing its complex nature and specific connotation.

## Chapter 2

### Food's Sociability: A System of Communication, Power and Necessity

This chapter departs from Roland Barthes' observation of food as a system of communication and argues that the preparation and consumption of dishes is a universal mode of interaction. The cultural object of food is used by "Babette's Feast" and *Tampopo* to promote the interaction between characters and for them to speak about themselves through foodways. As Quagiotto points out in *Food and Culture*, the mother who cooks "controls the symbolic language of food, determining what her dishes and meals will say about herself, her family, and world" (Quagiotto in Counihan 115-116). In this sense, food expresses one's intentions and identity. My first part delves into this communicative dimension of sharing a meal. In the second part of this chapter, I focus on minorities who claim their power through their knowledge and appreciation of food. Thirdly, I examine the parallel between the physiological need and social desire for food in the two texts.

#### **Using Food: The Importance of Sharing a Meal**

##### *Bodily Communication*

In her book *Food in Film: A Culinary Performance of Communication*, Jane Ferry touches upon the importance of sharing a meal as the "act of eating together expresses the quality of social relationships, and the day to day pattern of social interactions and alliances" (59).

Placing food at the center of a table triggers certain mannerisms which are visible through body language. While savoring Babette's seven course dinner, the congregation are able to communicate through their similar bodily experience. This expression of their satisfaction is repressed because of the religious idea that "on the great day [they] would be silent upon all matters of food and drink" (Blixen, 39). Blixen's mouthwatering descriptions of the feast is

visible in Axel's scene in which the members focus on their aliments. The only diegetic sound being heard is the cutlery, hinting on the character's appreciation of the course [01:18:46]. Their body language reveals their shared gratefulness for the food. Furthermore, Blixen presents food as defying norms. Whilst the guests "called one another Brother and Sister" (Blixen, 26), during the feast, labels are omitted. During the time of the meal, everyone shares an equal status around the table. In contrast to "Babette's Feast", *Tampopo* represents Japanese traditions through the portrayal of a respectful engagement with the food which is consumed in an informal setting. In Japanese tradition, it is common to finish a bowl of ramen with the soup. Not only is this considered the tastiest part of the dish but it is read as a sign of respect and consideration to the chef. Finishing a bowl of ramen is an indication that the meal was savoured and not wasted. Goro forefronts this rule when coaching Tampopo. She has to learn to care and observe her clients' every move [00:16:25]. The act of eating initiates a person's body to speak as they express their feelings regarding food.

### *The Bond Food Creates*

In her book *Writing the Meal: Dinner in the Fiction of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*, McGee refers to food's power to unite people. She writes how "eating together means that human interactions occur: important issues are discussed, revelations made, intimacies exchanged, and seductions attempted" (McGee, 5). As different individuals gather around a meal, a certain bond is created. A shared meal is a model of living together. The omnipresence of ramen in *Tampopo* and Asian food more broadly allows people to reunite. Food signifies communion and social interactions. In Japanese culture, it is common to share a same dish between people. This is illustrated in a scene where Goro and Tampopo eat out [01:16:30]. This reunion around food triggers an intimate conversation. Tampopo speaks of her husband and his relationship to food. He is described as man with an impatient appetite as in "restaurants, he ordered sake while walking to the table and ordered food while sitting



down” [01:17:53]. This is the only instance in the film in which Tampopo and Goro speak of personal matters. Itami uses food as a means to connect and bond his characters, a vector for links. By contrast, Blixen explores different locations where food is the main attraction around which her characters can interact. Throughout the short story, markets allow Blixen’s characters to exchange with one another, foreshadowing and building the climax towards the feast. Officer Loewenhielm “met Martine in the market-place [*sic*]” (Blixen, 27) and Babette adapts to the Norwegian culture as “in her broken Norwegian she beat down the prices of Berlevaag’s flintiest tradesmen...*in the marketplace*” (34, emphasis added). Additionally, after the main dish of the feast, the tensions in the congregation progressively disappear, “[t]he two old women who had once slandered each other now in their hearts went back a long way” (47). Not only does the consumption of food show the emotions of the consumer but the act of sharing a meal allows individuals to communicate with one another through body and soul.

## **The Power Relations in Food: Consuming Relations**

### *Food as a Tool of Power and Control*

Roland Barthes’ essay explains how habits and food techniques such as preparation and cooking are a way of communicating via food, “all food serves as a sign among the members of a given society” (Barthes, 24). In this part, I argue that food serves as a visible sign of power relations amongst the characters of *Tampopo*. First, the yakuza’s possibility to afford luxurious Western meals gives him the status of a powerful man. His character embodies “the rise of multicultural Japan” (Ashkenazi, 27) as he is always represented alongside dishes from Western countries such as France and Italy [00:00:54] [00:27:35]. His character differs from the Japanese vagabonds that Tampopo meets who unlike the yakuza, use food to communicate their national identity. These vagabonds cook traditional Japanese dishes from their finds in the dumpster insisting that “[t]o be Japanese is to eat Japanese food” (Counihan,

158) even if they can't afford it. Itami adopts a political perspective by presenting "the vagabonds [...] as the true *connoisseurs* of cuisine" (Iles, 292) as they prepare *omurice*, drink sake and prepare pork from Kagoshima [00:42:02]. This choice destabilizes the common social hierarchy, situating them as knowledgeable characters, as opposed to the "middle class [whom] pursue their roles as consumers of international products" (292). The art of cooking is a tool which conveys Japanese *savoir faire* and tradition. Itami shows minorities who obtain power through their knowledge of traditional Japanese meals which communicates their sense of national identity. In a similar way to the vagabonds, Babette's culinary knowledge allows her to express her recognition to Martine and Philippa. Blixen places this female servant in a flattering light as *she* decides what to cook which places her in a position of control. Although Babette is given very little space for verbal communication in the short story, her feast symbolizes a sensory monologue. Cooking expresses Babette's capacities as a female chef hinting at her past work as well as her respect to the congregation and her homage to French culture. Blixen manages to transmit the idea that eating with one another establishes a linguistic exchange.

### *The Language of Food*

When preparing food, Itami's and Blixen's characters show how dishes communicate a sense of community. The communicative dimension of food is powerful and possible as it is recognized by a large number of people. Although food differs from one culture to another, foodways are able to unite different types of people. Jane Ferry touches upon this idea as "[f]ood and the ritual dinners are coded means of communication" (11). In one of Tampopo's vignettes, a woman is teaching a group of young girls how to eat Italian pasta in an elegant and mannerly way. However, she is interrupted by a Western white man carelessly slurping the pasta (Fig. 9). This stranger challenges the teacher's instructions. This leads her and "her pupils [to] indulge their hunger without the least reserve" (Iles, 292) (see Fig. 8). Despite

hardly any verbal exchange, they are able to converse through a transgressive form of eating. Another analysis serves the idea that it is possible to speak through food. Babette's actual feast is a language on its own with seven distinct courses; a turtle soup, *Blinis Demidoff*, *Cailles en Sarcophage*, an endive salad, *Savarin au Rhum avec des Figues et Fruit Glacé*, cheeses and fruits and finally, coffee with cognac. The menu arranged by Babette is enforced by the rhythm which is created by "[t]he boy [who] once more filled the glasses" (Blixen, 45). The beauty of the feast allows the congregation to receive "the gift of tongues" (47) having shared a conversation together by the sole act of eating around the same table. In a social context, food signifies an individual's tradition and desires to the consumer and breaks down cultural barriers as it is recognized and appreciated as a universal mode of communication.



Fig. 8: A group of girls devouring spaghetti [00:24:45]



Fig. 9: A man devouring his spaghetti [00:25:48]

## **The Multi-layered Need to Cook**

### *A Social Event*

In a similar way to language, food is indispensable for every human being as physiological necessity. Itami and Blixen play with this fact by qualifying food as a “a kind of communication that is oriented toward the needs of the other” (Fürst, 445). Cooking is represented as a multi-layered need; a biological necessity as well as a social one. Foodways become an indispensable tool for our relationship and interactions. Ferry remarks how meaning “is not intrinsic to the object (food) but arises from the social process of experience and how people employ the object within their field of social interaction” (77). In “Babette’s Feast”, Martine and Philippa devote themselves to the poor who no longer have family as “[t]heir own food must be as plain as possible; it was the soup-pails and baskets for their poor that signified” (Blixen, 33). Food carries all of its meaning when it is given and shared with people. By ignoring the symbolic importance of the food they consume, Martine and Philippa lose touch with their bodily needs and desires. The two sisters do not communicate with themselves as their selflessness and piousness blinds them. Additionally, Blixen uses evocative metaphors of food and animals. Martine and Philippa’s beauty are compared to “flowering fruit-trees” (27), Babette’s arrival is described as her being “wild eyed like a hunted animal” (33) and General Loewenhielm’s uniform is compared to an “ornamental bird, a golden pheasant or a peacock” (41). Through the poetic and literary elevation of food and animals, Blixen presents the two as essential and omnipresent in the everyday life. In this case, food and animals are not only food for the body but food for the mind.

### *Cooking for Oneself*

Both of the texts analyzed in this thesis present hardworking women who embrace their cooking skills as an identity to assert themselves within society. Tampopo’s restaurant becomes her business; her noodle making being her source of income. This idea manifests

itself as “[b]oth Tampopo the person and Tampopo the place is refurbished” (Ashkenazi, 37). It can be argued that Tampopo’s noodles are a prolongation of herself and her identity. Interestingly, Tampopo gives her name to her renovated restaurant [01:44:44], as well as her signature noodles. Itami also exploits Tampopo’s name as a title for his film. These observations tie in with Hoff’s statement that “food [is] a signifier for identity” (75). One of the final scenes presents Tampopo as an artist in the inauguration of the gallery exposing her culinary creation [01:45:30]. This scene emphasizes Tampopo’s success as her restaurant allows her to embrace her Japanese identity whilst transmitting her culture to different customers. Although food is prepared in order to be immediately consumed, Tampopo’s hard work is not as perishable and paves her way to success. Similarly, the character of Babette uses food to survive. The sentence “Babette can cook” (Blixen, 32) signifies that not only is Babette useful in Bervelaag but her cooking allows her to escape poverty. Esther Rashkin would agree as she writes that Babette’s cooking is “self-rescue and self-preservation [...] an act of survival” (365). Whilst Babette survives the “Bloody Week”, Tampopo works to avoid the restaurant’s bankruptcy. Both Tampopo and Babette use food to communicate their potential, it is their way of asserting themselves within society and interacting with those around them.

## Chapter 3

### Women in the Kitchen: Agency, Gender Roles and The Cult of Domesticity

The characters of *Babette* and *Tampopo* share a fundamental trait: both women use cooking, a traditional domestic act as a tool for self empowerment. I will use Barbara Welter's reflections regarding femininity in the 19<sup>th</sup> to show how *Babette* and *Tampopo* go against submissiveness and domesticity. These characteristics alongside piety and purity were fundamental for women's assertion in 19<sup>th</sup> century society and remain relevant today. Such texts prove how women have continuously been shaped by societal expectations as their identity has been reduced to their gender, impacting their current representation.

In the first part, I argue that *Babette* and *Tampopo*'s status as professional female chefs allows them to emancipate themselves from a state of submissiveness challenging the idea that a woman "was to work only for pure affection, without thought of money or ambition" (Welter, 174). Secondly, I explore how "*Babette's Feast*" and *Tampopo* offer an inclusive representation of women who redefine femininity and "enlarge the scope of womanhood" (174) through their relation to food. Lastly, I will explain how the two works are hopeful regarding female domesticity and gender equality as *Babette* and *Tampopo* challenge the idea that only men can be seen as "the movers, the doers, the actors" (159) by asserting themselves as active figures.

#### Two Female Professional Chefs

##### *Babette's Active Presence*

In "The Cult of True Womanhood", Welter shares the idea that "[s]ubmission was perhaps the most feminine virtue expected of women" (158) regarding the essence of femininity. *Babette* and *Tampopo* reject this idea as they actively use their status as chefs to express their power. McGee underlines how *Babette* uses her cooking to claim her agency. Her admired feast

signifies her identity as it is not only named after her but portrays her signature food. In other words, Babette's is omnipresent through her cooking. Since "[t]he meal is in every way the centre of the narrative" so is Babette. The importance of the meal sheds light on Babette who "is completely in control" (McGee, 110). Furthermore, the culinary knowledge Babette has learned from working at the Café Anglais forges her independence from the other characters. I will return to the previously mentioned scene in which Babette uses the market as a place for cultural exchange as she "beat down the prices of Berlevaag's flintiest tradesmen" (34). Axel adapts this scene by portraying Babette confidently holding a fish between two men (see Fig. 10). Her central and active position represents her authority as she knows the value of the product unlike anyone else. In his adaptation, Axel emphasizes the fact that Babette has a dominant presence. She strongly distinguishes herself from those who are not only unable to cook but also do not appreciate the value of food. As "the greatest culinary genius of the age" (46) she is able to take over Martine and Philippa's house which was previously in the hands of their father, the Dean. Babette thus intelligently elevates her status as a servant by becoming the life and soul of the house whilst her excellence is progressively being recognized.



Fig. 10: Babette at the fish market [00:39:38]

*Tampopo's Emancipation from Patriarchal Norms*

When *Tampopo* was released in the cinemas, Japan was witnessing the emergence of activist groups reclaiming women rights which questioned the patriarchal structure of the country. In this context, Itami represents *Tampopo* as a symbol of change signifying the rise of feminist values in Japan. *Tampopo's* transformation mirrors Japan's awareness of women's place within society. Instead of being represented in the shadow of Goro, *Tampopo* stands as an independent cook. As Bennett states, "inside the kitchen there was room for change regarding identities and power dynamics" (154). *Tampopo's* character stands out as she is the only professional female cook in the entire film. Itami's decision to focus on a female cook who reaches the same status as male cooks is a political narrative calling for gender equality. *Tampopo's* restaurant was previously owned by her husband who called it 'Lai Lai Ramen Shop'. Her choice to rename the restaurant using her own name represents this active change in power. Swenson states how "[w]ithin the public sphere, the professional chef has long been male" (140) reinforcing the image of *Tampopo* as innovative and defying assumptions regarding what is considered feminine or not. Both *Babette* and *Tampopo* appropriate a formerly male dominated space to their own liking. It is through the reclaiming of these cooking spaces and their title as successful chefs that they are able to find their own individual fulfilment through cooking.

**The Use of Food to Redefine Femininity***The Feminist Witch within Babette*

*Babette* and *Tampopo* expose and redefine Welter's limited vision of femininity as they deviate from the traditional archetypal woman. Instead of adhering to the "ideal of the perfect woman" (Welter, 173), *Babette* marks a transformation from an abject figure to a female figure through her cooking. *Babette* is not immediately portrayed as a chef but "like some witch" using her food as a "familiar spirit" to poison the guests (Blixen, 40). This comparison



draws attention to Babette's power and capabilities as a feminist witch "whose advent could shake the foundation of patriarchy" (Whitford in Sempruch, 117). Indeed, Babette's cooking creates a disturbance in Bervelaag. In the background of a cloud of red smoke, Babette is seen handing the audience a glass of wine (see Fig. 11). In this still, Axel portrays Babette as the liberated *other*. Instead of being a witch who is "hidden and kept under restraint" (Sempruch, 117) Babette serves the phallic bottle of wine and breaks the fourth wall, inviting other women to claim their voice and liberation. In its religious context, Babette's character addresses Martine and Philippa's Protestant Anti-Catholicism piousness. The amount of red in the still represents the sisters fear of Babette's presence and intentions. The smoke signifies Babette's ability to stain the sister's purity. The wine stands for the food Babette will serve and its power to penetrate Martine and Philippa's bodies. The portrayal of Babette as a witch allows her to create a rupture with Welter's womanly virtues and embody an autonomous and courageous figure.



Fig. 11: The portrayal of Babette as a witch ready to share her poison [00:56:21]

*Old Women and Fresh Food*

*Tampopo* creates a parallel between old women and food to expand the image of femininity. The film addresses the fact that society tends to ignore old women as they lack food's freshness. In her essay "The Problem of Old Women", Gibson touches upon Simone de Beauvoir's idea that the silencing of old women is tied to "a struggle for power, which necessarily concerned only the stronger sex" (Gibson, 434). In this sense, old women are omitted from society and the media as they are considered powerless. *Tampopo* presents a scene which depicts an old woman in a supermarket holding a peach as if it were a mirror (Fig. 12). A long shot focuses on the fruit's texture and consistency which are similar to human skin. Additionally, as the old woman forcefully presses on all sides of the peach, a juice sprays out. This liquid symbolizes a certain freshness and sensuality which is envied by the old woman as Serper writes that "[f]or Itami, a peach represents a young woman" (89). The contrast between the fruit and the character is emphasized by the fact that the peach is wrapped in a white packaging whereas the woman wears a black veil (see Fig. 12). The peach is nicely packaged for future consumption whereas the old woman's veil fashionably hides her appearance. Through this scene, Itami represents old women's struggle to be represented in society as unlike young women, they are not as pure.



Fig. 12: An old woman squeezing a peach [01:22:21]

## Challenging the Idea of a Domestic Sphere

### *Tampopo and the 'Male Gaze'*

With regard to female domesticity, “Babette’s Feast” and *Tampopo* send out a hopeful message: women are able to subvert gender roles whilst trying to dismantle the power relations between men and women. In her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, Laura Mulvey theorizes the ‘male gaze’ which addresses how in cinema; women are systematically positioned and displayed as the subject of man’s gaze. The character of *Tampopo* reclaims the ‘male gaze’ in a scene where she looks through a door to steal a chef’s broth recipe (Fig. 13). Although *Tampopo* is being filmed by a man, the shot focuses on placing her in the position of a voyeur, a Peeping Tom who is actively looking (see Fig. 13). She is able to see and yet she is not seen watching. Her voyeuristic status allows her to reclaim her image. Most importantly, her focus is on the vegetables instead of the chef whose face is deliberately cut out from the frame (see Fig. 14). *Tampopo*’s desexualized gaze on the broth is thus a condition to reclaim power allowing her to leave the “proper sphere, her home” (Welter, 153) through the renovation of her restaurant. Lastly, the effort and work *Tampopo* puts into her restaurant anchors her in the public sphere where she is made visible. By working in an open kitchen, her gaze becomes omnipresent (Johnson, 128) echoing her ambition and presence in a non-domestic environment.



Fig. 13: Tampopo looks into her competitor's restaurant [00:35:07]



Fig. 14: Tampopo's competitor preparing his signature broth [00:35:20]

### *Solidarity between Men and Women*

According to Welter's research, a true woman's fulfilment could only be attained through her engagement with a dominant man. Instead of adhering to this conservative idea, Babette and Tampopo attempt to create an equality between men and women. This idea manifests itself through the collaboration these two women have with the opposite sex. In the story, Babette has imported ingredients from France. Blixen describes how Babette's "nephew and [...] an old man with a wheelbarrow" help the chef carry the ingredients "from the harbour to the house" (38). Axel adapts this scene exaggerating the male presence (see Fig. 15). In this still,

five men are seen helping her. This rewriting emphasizes the fact that “[t]he world outside ...came to acknowledge Babette’s excellence” (34) and support her. The camera is placed in such a way that Babette has the role of the leader as she occupies most of the space. Her feast sparks the help and contribution of people from different cultures and sexes. Tampopo is also supported by a team of men including her biggest help, Goro. As each member helps Tampopo according to their field of expertise, Itami shares an image of solidarity between men and women. Instead of having “to work in silence, unseen” (Welter, 160) and alone, Babette and Tampopo are encouraged and succeed in grasping their desire. However, Tampopo is not as independent as Babette who recognises herself as an artist. Tampopo does not have as much independence as Babette. In one of the last scenes of the film, Tampopo needs the approval of five men in order to come to notice that she has succeeded in making delicious noodles [01:40:03] informing on the limits of *Tampopo* as a feminist text.



Fig. 15: Babette leading the way to the kitchen followed by five men carrying her ingredients [00:54:30]

## Conclusion

In my thesis, I explored the different functions of food in Karen Blixen's "Babette's Feast" and Juzo Itami's *Tampopo* in order to understand how foodways are a cultural, social and gendered marker of identity. The two works are able to respectively represent Japanese, Scandinavian and French cultures by portraying the value each culture gives to food as well as the relation people build to and with food through cooking and eating. Food is also able to transcend its commodification as it is used by the characters as a tool of communicating power, pleasure and agency. The characters of Babette and Tampopo occupy the kitchen space in a new light as it encourages their creativity, emancipation and sense of community. I have shown that "Babette's Feast" and *Tampopo* succeed in representing food as a marker of identity through its omnipresent role and value in the character's lives.

First of all, the two texts allow food to transcend its vital function by representing it as a form of culture. Blixen's links food and pleasure drawing attention to the act of cooking and consuming food as the embodiment of joy and female pleasure whilst Itami presents food as an art and part of his character's sexual identity. Food also serves as a purpose for our interactions as a language expressing individual's feelings and cultural habits.

Secondly, food enforces one's social identity as it unites people around a table promoting a social and bodily exchange of ideas and flavors. In this sense, food functions as a system of communication capable of signifying power and intentions. After being a physiological need, food is a social need as it allows people to speak and interact with themselves and one another.

Finally, Itami and Blixen manage to redefine women's roles through their active choice to become professional cooks. These female characters' cook as a means of personal fulfilment and emancipation from patriarchal norms. Marginalized women such as single women, witches and old women challenge the notion of femininity through their political

engagement with food. Lastly, Tampopo and Babette challenge gender roles as they stand in public spheres alongside supportive men.

Throughout my thesis, food has proven to have a plural identity. In the same way in which the act of eating is able to unite people as they share this sensorial bodily experience, it is interesting to consider that food also has the power to draw boundaries between individuals. In the case of specific diets such as vegetarianism or intolerances, the sharing of a meal becomes more difficult and individualistic. Although this idea is absent from “Babette’s Feast” and *Tampopo* it is important to take it into account for the general understanding of food in relation to communities. Moreover, I have underlined the intricate relation between food and desire. My analysis of the egg scene in *Tampopo* illustrates the erotic dimension to food through the existing connection between food and sexual pleasure. This idea plays a considerable role in Sarah Sceats book *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction*. The work elaborates on the representation and effect of “eating as an erotic activity” (Sceats, 25) in contemporary literature. Such research consolidates my idea that eating is a carnal desire.

Works Cited

- Ashkenazi, Michael. "Food, Play, Business, and the Image of Japan in Itami Juzo's Tampopo." *Reel Food*. Routledge, 2012. 32-45.
- Babette's Feast*. Directed by Gabriel Axel, Nordisk Film, 1987.
- Barthes, Roland. "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption." Trans. Elborg Forster. *Annales, E.S.C.* 16 (September-October 1961):977-86. Rpt. in *Food and Drink in History*. Ed. Robert Forster and Orest Ranum. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.166-73.
- Bennett, John W., et al. "Food and Culture in Southern Illinois-A Preliminary Report." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 7, no. 5, 1942, pp. 645–660.
- Bennett, Katy. "Kitchen Drama: Performances, Patriarchy and Power Dynamics in a Dorset Farmhouse Kitchen." *Gender, Place & Culture* 13.2 (2006): 153-160.
- Blixen, Karen. *Babette's Feast and Other Stories*. Penguin Classics, 2013.
- Counihan, Carole, and Penny Van Esterik. *Food and Culture: A Reader*. New York and London: Routledge, 1997.
- Ferry, Jane. *Food in Film: A Culinary Performance of Communication*. Routledge, 2014.
- Fürst, Elisabeth L'Orange. "Cooking and Femininity." *Women's Studies International Forum*. Vol. 20. No. 3. Pergamon, 1997.
- Gibson, Diane. "Broken Down by Age and Gender: 'The Problem of Old Women' Redefined." *Gender & Society* 10.4 (1996): 433-448.
- Hall, Stuart, ed. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Sage Publications Ltd. 2013.
- Hoff, Katharina. "The Colonial Noodle Soup: Food and Cultural Identity in Juzo Itami's Tampopo." *Asian Journal of Literature, Culture and Society*, (2010): 74-83.



- Johnson, Louise C. "Browsing the Modern Kitchen—a Feast of Gender, Place and Culture (Part 1)." *Gender, Place & Culture* 13.2 (2006): 123-132.
- Kockelman, Paul, et al. "Agency: The Relation Between Meaning, Power, and Knowledge." *Current Anthropology* 48.3 (2007): 375-401.
- McFadden, Margaret H. "Gendering the Feast: Women, Spirituality, and Grace in Three Food Films." *Reel Food*. Routledge, 2012. 117-128.
- McGee, Diane E. *Writing the Meal: Dinner in the Fiction of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*. University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 2002.
- Moore, Andrew, "Hedonism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/hedonism/>.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1989. 14-26.
- Olivier, Bert. "The Pleasure of Food, and the Spiritual: Eat, Pray, Love and Babette's Feast." *Journal of Literary Studies* 28.1 (2012): 21-39.
- Rashkin, Esther. "A Recipe for Mourning: Isak Dinesen's "Babette's Feast"." *Style* (1995): 356-374.
- Sceats, Sarah. *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Sempruch, Justyna. "Feminist Constructions of the 'Witch' as a Fantasmatic Other." *Body & Society* 10.4 (2004): 113-133.
- Serper, Zvika. "Eroticism in Itami's "The Funeral" and "Tampopo": Juxtaposition and Symbolism." *Cinema Journal* (2003): 70-95.
- Sprigge, Timothy. "The Relation between Jeremy Bentham's Psychological, and his Ethical, Hedonism." *Utilitas* 11.3 (1999): 296-319.

Swenson, Rebecca. "Domestic Divo? Televised Treatments of Masculinity, Femininity and Food." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26.1 (2009): 36-53.

*Tampopo*. Directed by Juzo Itami, Itami Productions, 1985.

Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1966, pp. 151–174.