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BABETTE'S FEAST

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(ORION CLASSICS)

Color/1.85

105 Mins.

Cast: Stéphane Audran, Jean-Philippe Lafont, Jarl Kulle, Bodil Kjer, Birgitte Federspiel, Gudmar Wivesson, Hanne Stensgard, Vibeke Hastrup, Bibi Andersson.

Credits: Written and directed by Gabriel Axel. Produced by Bo Christensen. Executive producer: Just Betzer. Adapted from the short story by Isak Dinesen. Cinematography: Henning Kristiansen. Music: Per Norgard. Production designer: Sven Wichman.

Set in a remote 19th-century Danish village, this exquisitely detailed, sparkling gem about an exiled Parisian chef and her spinster sister employers is a delicious fable that should satisfy art house appetites. 88-57

Director/screenwriter Gabriel Axel has spent much of his career working in both Denmark and France and his lovely *Babette's Feast* exudes the best influences of both countries. With the precision, clarity and discipline one associates with Scandinavian cinema and the eccentricity, sensuality and style of the French, the film is a rigorous, ultimately joyful parable about love, creativity, passion and, dare we say it, the meaning of life—at least of certain individual lives.

Axel adapted his script from an Isak Dinesen short story published in *The Ladies Home Journal* in 1950. Stéphane Audran stars as Babette, a penniless French woman who has fled the war-torn Paris of 1870 and finds refuge in the home and service of two elderly spinster sisters living in a tiny Danish village on the remote Jutland Peninsula. The sisters (Birgitte Federspiel as Martina and Bodil Kjer as Philippa) provide shelter rather than pay. In return Babette cooks their simple meals. Via flashbacks we learn that in their youth the sisters had been quite beautiful but, dedicated to the religious pursuits of their vicar father, had spurned many an eligible suitor. Among the rebuffed gents was famous French opera star Achille Papin (Jean-Philippe Lafont), who became enchanted with Philippa's singing voice and with Philippa herself while vacationing in the village. As deeply smitten but also rejected was Lorens, a handsome young cavalry officer who met Martina while visiting his wealthy aunt. Even when the vicar dies, the sisters continue their self-sacrificing ways, dedicating their lives completely to ministering to the community. Years later, it is Papin who provides Babette with the letter of introduction to the two sisters. After 14 years as their loyal servant, Babette learns she has won a substantial sum in the French lottery. She asks the sisters if she can use her windfall to prepare a real French meal for the sisters and guests. The sisters are suspicious—such a meal borders on “ungodly” and they fear the lavish gesture will mark Babette's farewell. Reluctantly, they concur.

In the early scenes, Axel's unhurried pace complements the uneventful, stark lives of the villagers. His control and attention to detail recall Dreyer and Bresson. Early shots are often symmetrically composed, corresponding to the order and rigidity that rule his characters and rule out passion and pleasure. But once Babette's meal gets underway, the film becomes a cornucopia of unexpected delights. Fresh produce, livestock and rare wines arrive by boat from France. Babette attacks her culinary chores like a great master—which it turns out she is. The table is exquisitely set. The guests, who have made a vow not to utter a word about the meal, partake with great caution. But as the extraordinary meal progresses (turtle soup, quail and truffles in pastry shell, caviar, blinis, baba au rhum, etc., and all co-mingled with the best sherries, wines and spirits), the guests mellow. Axel's style turns sensual, subtly comical. The guests—first looking as dour and austere as the dark, severe subjects of a Rembrandt painting—take on the glow of the finest Bordeaux wines.

The messages here are simple but beautifully told (true love never dies, true artists are never poor). As *Babette's Feast* so effectively drives home its points, it will also drive filmgoers to the nearest three-star French restaurant.

—Doris Toumarkine