

**CHEF AS ARTIST: THE RELATIONSHIP OF ARTIST,  
ART, AND AUDIENCE IN *BABETTE'S FEAST***

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Isak Dinesen's novella, *Babette's Feast*, reveals to us what happens when diners eat a meal where the chef proclaims her food to be art. *Babette's Feast* explores, among other things, the either/or dichotomies that limit our experience, and shows how the chef is capable of reconciling seemingly oppositional realities, such as spirit and body, through the artistry of food. This analysis examines the implications of food considered as art and the chef considered as artist, focussing on the relationship that comes into being when food-as-art, the chef-as-artist, and diners-as-audience all intersect. A close reading of the text, placing it in a number of different contexts, including an exploration of the influence of physical taste and the social construction of taste, illuminates these issues.

**Keywords:** *Babette's Feast*, food, art, aesthetics, taste, culinary, cooking, artist, audience, aesthetic, ascetic

**Subject Terms:** taste; food as art; art, artist, audience, *Babette's Feast*

In memory of my father,  
who instilled in me a love of food and literature.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*Yes, I ate fire, I ate its goldness, its aroma and even its sparkle as the burning hot waffle crunched between my teeth. And it's always like this, through a sort of enjoyment of luxuries, such as dessert, that fire reveals its humanity. It doesn't confine itself to cooking; it makes crisp. It gilds the crust. It materializes men's feasts. As far back as one goes, gastronomic value surpassed alimentary value, and it is in joy rather than need that man discovered his spirit. The conquest of the superfluous offers greater spiritual excitation than the conquest of necessity. Man is a creation of desire, not a creation of need.* (Weiss 15)

Weiss' description of eating a waffle gives us an appreciation for an aesthetic encounter with food. To participate in such sensory perception makes available to us many forms of learning, such as a new awareness of the alchemy of fire or the profundity of an aesthetic response. The relationship between food and the diner reveals the potential for a set of complex interactions that can take place during the eating of a meal. Isak Dinesen's novella, *Babette's Feast*, reveals to us what happens when diners eat a meal where the chef proclaims her food to be art. Even though we cannot participate in the actual experience of eating and drinking when we read *Babette's Feast*, we are privy to the reactions of each diner as she/he embarks on a journey of discovery through the eating of food and the drinking of wine. The effects of the meal are not necessarily universal and we have no guarantee that we would have the same experience if we were to eat Babette's dinner. What Dinesen does provide for us, though, is an opportunity to examine the significance of declaring food an art form and how connecting with

such art-making and art consumption can profoundly change our perception of life.

The story of *Babette's Feast* provides us with an opportunity to challenge ideas pertaining to aesthetic experiences, especially the common perception that physical taste cannot lead to aesthetic appreciation and that food cannot qualify as a form of fine art. The arguments for and against the thesis that food is art are not the focus of the present work. Rather, in this analysis I want to consider a particular dialogue about food as art, and of the chef as the artist developing food as art. Specifically, I want to explore the relationship that comes into being when food-as-art, the chef-as-artist, and diners-as-audience all intersect.

*Babette's Feast* is intended, among other things, to expose the either/or dichotomies that limit our experience, and show how the artist is capable of reconciling seemingly oppositional realities, such as spirit and body, through the artistry of food. How can this be? Babette's awareness of herself as artist, and her public declaration of her artistry, provide us a window into her art. Through this window, we are given a glimpse of the mechanisms through which both food and art can function to reconcile oppositional realities and move us beyond our conceptual frameworks into a new space of possibility.

In this way, I propose, the dining table in *Babette's Feast* becomes a space where the diners come to know the world in a different way. Through the act of eating together, the Lutherans and the General are taken beyond their conceptual limitations to a new realm of experience. If the way we know the world is predicated on how we experience it physically, affectively, and cognitively, then I suggest that the participants at Babette's meal experience an epiphany through food and through the communal acts of eating and drinking. The taste, look and

feel of the food and drink all work to transform the guests' perspective momentarily into something entirely new.

This paper explores the importance of the feast wherein, as Capra says, the participants become "aware of the unity and mutual inter-relation of all things, to transcend the notion of an isolated individual self and to identify themselves with the ultimate reality" (Capra 24). The emergence of this awareness is not the result of an intellectual act but of an experience—an experience that involves all the emotions, sensory experience, and the powers of the imagination. Through this, we see that the intellect must be transcended for this awakening to occur.

Dinesen's choice of food as the medium with which Babette practices her art is unusual, as she more commonly creates characters who engage in music making or story telling as artistic production. In the summer of 1949, Dinesen found herself in need of money after returning from a trip to Venice. When she voiced her concerns to her friend Geoffrey Gorer, he challenged Dinesen to write a story for *The Saturday Evening Post* as a means of breaking into the American magazine market. Dinesen accepted the challenge, but ignored Gorer's advice to write something "tongue in cheek," (Thurman 329). Gorer had suggested Dinesen write something about food as "Americans are obsessed with food" (329). Ironically, at the time of writing *Babette's Feast*, Dinesen was in the final stages of syphilis contracted from her husband. The disease destroyed her digestive system and Dinesen endured intense pain and was unable to eat. This history gives us insight into Dinesen's selection of food as the medium with which Babette practices her art. In fact, there are a number of intersections between Dinesen's life and the novella and although I do not intend to develop such a comparison here, it is interesting to note that parallels do exist between

Dinesen's life and the story of Babette.<sup>1</sup> The fact that Isak Dinesen is a pseudonym for Karen Blixen, who was herself an aristocrat suggests an interesting position of the author. Dinesen the writer and artist, is linked to Blixen the aristocrat. Isak Dinesen knows the different social positions that the artist and the aristocrat inhabit through first-hand experience and these positions are illustrated by food in its manifestation as local cooking and foreign cuisine.

After being rejected by various publishers, Dinesen's story was finally accepted for publication in *The Ladies Home Journal* in 1950. Dinesen herself claimed that the story was written with a lighter hand than previous works; however, this lightness of effect belies the weight and import of the story's themes (329).

In my analysis, I will locate Dinesen's novella within a number of different contexts. I will examine the meal from the Lutheran perspective. I will consider the narrative relative to a traditional model of the hierarchy of the senses, such as that described in Carolyn Korsmeyer's investigation into the philosophy of physical taste. I will apply some ideas from Pierre Bourdieu's commentary of the social construction of taste to explore the types of taste and food represented in the story. Finally, I will discuss the role of French haute cuisine in the late nineteenth century in relation to the differences between cooking and cuisine as outlined in the text. Through these contextual perspectives and a close reading of the text, I will investigate the relationships that emerge among art, artist and audience during a shared dining experience.

To facilitate the understanding of my analysis of the novella, I provide a summary of *Babette's Feast* below.

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<sup>1</sup> See Judith Thurman's biography of Isak Dinesen for further details.

## **Babette's Feast: A Summary**

Dinesen's story begins with a description of the small community of Berlevaag, located on the shores of an isolated Norwegian fjord. In a yellow cottage live two sisters, Martine and Philippa, whose pious existence reflects their Lutheran upbringing. Their father, now dead, was a "Dean and a prophet" (Dinesen, 21), who founded a Lutheran sect, which was "looked up to in all the country of Norway" (21). The sisters are loyal to their father's austere Lutheran creed to "renounce the pleasures of this world, for the earth and all that it [holds] . . . but a kind of illusion" (21). They continue their father's work by providing leadership to the ageing population of the small Lutheran community, which has been overcome by small schisms and quarrels.

Martine and Philippa are very beautiful and many young men have sought them out; however, while alive the Dean instills in his daughters the "ideal of heavenly love" (22) and discourages marriage. The sisters dutifully stay by his side and remain unmarried; nonetheless, "two men enter their lives when they are young and afford them a glimpse of romantic pleasures" (Korsmeyer, *Making* 204).

Martine's encounter with romance takes place when she is eighteen years old. A young soldier, Lorens Loewenheilm, has been sent to his aunt's house to reflect on his dissolute habits and better his ways. He meets Martine in town one day and is immediately mesmerized by her beauty and recognizes something within her that offers "a higher and purer life" (Dinesen, 23). Loewenheilm gains entrance to the Dean's house with the help of his aunt and is struck dumb by the ascetic household. Unable to declare his love for Martine, the young soldier leaves Berlevaag frustrated by his lack of courage and aware that his dissolute lifestyle makes him unworthy of her. He is resolved to look forward not back as

he has learned that “Fate is hard, and that in this world there are things which are impossible” (24).

One year later, the great operatic singer, Achille Papin, arrives in the small fjord town. He is kind-hearted and honest and is affected by the awe-inspiring natural surroundings. Indulging in a solitary vacation, Papin hears Philippa sing during a church service and is impressed with her beautiful voice. He offers his services as singing teacher, professing to the Dean that Philippa would come to sing for “the glory of God” (26), but secretly wishes to introduce her to the Paris stage. As part of his instruction, Papin teaches Philippa the seduction duet from Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*. Caught up in the passion of the music, Achille Papin is carried away and spontaneously kisses Philippa and leaves transported. The ecstasy that Papin feels is short lived as a letter arrives from the Dean declaring that Philippa no longer wishes to proceed with the singing lessons. Papin returns to Paris while the sisters continue to tend to the needy and superintend the worship of the community after their father’s death.

Fifteen years later, a “dark [and] deadly pale woman” (Dinesen 28) arrives on the sisters’ doorstep bearing an introductory letter from Papin, who appeals to their mercy to welcome Babette, as she has survived the massacre of the Paris Commune. The sisters are horrified at the prospect of welcoming a French foreigner into their household; however, Papin reminds Philippa of the musical career she once refused and his longing to hear her voice once again. This touches her artistic sensibility. A short, blunt statement follows, proclaiming, “Babette can cook” (30). Martine and Philippa resign themselves to help Babette but make clear to the Frenchwoman that theirs is a simple Lutheran life, to which she must confine herself.

Babette can indeed cook and life improves for the sisters and the small Lutheran congregation. Babette is proficient at reducing the housekeeping costs while magically transforming the plain soup-pails and baskets into something with a “new [and] mysterious power to stimulate and strengthen [the] poor and sick” (32). The community comes to appreciate Babette’s excellence, although they are unable to communicate their thanks verbally, as Babette never learns to speak Norwegian and the sisters know little French. As a result of Babette’s efficiencies, the sisters find that they have money to spare for the poor, “time for the confidences and complaints of their old friends and peace for meditating on heavenly matters” (33). Life continues in this way until one day, when Babette informs Martine and Philippa that she has won the French lottery, consisting of ten thousand francs. The sisters assume that Babette will return to France, but instead, Babette makes a bewildering request. She asks if she may prepare a feast to mark the Dean’s hundredth anniversary. The sisters hesitate, because they had not planned to serve a meal; however, Babette appeals to their souls as she states that it is her prayer that they grant her wish and fulfill her joy. It will be a French feast and with some trepidation the sisters agree to her request.

The French dinner looms ominously in the sisters’ minds. Babette seems to them “like the bottled demon of the fairy tale, [who] had swelled and grown to such dimensions that [they] felt small before her” (39). Babette makes a journey to procure the food, and a turtle arrives in the kitchen. Martine suffers sleepless nights after the turtle’s arrival, and its “snake-like head” induces thoughts of a “witches’ Sabbath” (40). The sisters share their worries with the small congregation and after discussing the problem, the diners all agree that they will “be silent upon all matters of food and drink” (41) at the Dean’s dinner. Resolved

to eat but not to taste, the Lutherans prepare themselves spiritually by singing hymns of praise before taking their seats at the dining table.

On the night of the feast, an unexpected guest arrives. Loewenheilm, now a General, is visiting his aunt, and he writes to ask permission to attend the feast. Having obtained all that he had striven for in life, the General finds that he is still left unsatisfied. Had he made the right choice those many years ago, when he was unable to declare his love in the Dean's house? He is resolved to attend the feast and to "dominate the conversation round the same table by which the young Lorens Loewenheilm had sat mute" (47).

Babette's dinner consists of quintessential French haute cuisine<sup>2</sup>. Everything for the feast has been purchased from France: the table service, the wines, and the food. The meal begins with an Amontillado—a sherry of such quality that it is recognizable only to the General. He is shocked and surprised to find such a sherry in a place where he expected codfish, rye bread and water. His astonishment increases as the meal continues and he marvels at the exquisite flavours and the fine quality of the food and drink, which he alone is in a position to truly appreciate. Meanwhile, the Lutherans eat in silence. Babette's signature dish of "Cailles en Sarcophage" (50) is laid before the diners and suddenly the General recognizes who Babette is. He recalls a dinner with a friend in Paris, which had been created by "the greatest culinary genius of the age, and—most surprisingly—a woman!" (50). This, of course, had been Babette. No longer perplexed by the presence of such luxury in such an ascetic surrounding, Loewenheilm rises and dominates the room with a stirring speech about human choice and God's Grace. The Lutherans experience a rush of love for one another;

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<sup>2</sup> The one exception on the menu is the dish of Blinis Demidoff. The origin of this dish is Russian as opposed to French.

however, this is not because they have fully appreciated the General's speech. It is rather because the dinner is no longer a fearsome exercise in self-denial. The drink has loosened the tongues of the Lutherans and finally they allow themselves to find pleasure in the food. Similarly, the General's words open the congregants to the possibility that “[t]he vain illusions of this earth [have] dissolved before their eyes like smoke, and they [have] seen the universe as it really is. They [have] been given one hour of the millennium” (54). As General Loewenheilm leaves, he kisses Martine's hand and declares “that in this world anything is possible” (54).

After the feast, the sisters return to the kitchen to thank Babette and prepare for her inevitable departure. To their surprise, Babette declares that she will not be returning to France because she is now poor—having spent the entire amount of her winnings on the feast. The sisters are shocked at the sacrifice that Babette has made on their behalf. Unable to fathom Babette's choice, Martine and Philippa gently admonish her for having spent her fortune for their sake. Babette's vehement denial takes them aback: “For your sake? . . . No. For my own. . . . I am a great artist!” (58). Babette asserts that she has knowledge of “something of which other people know nothing” (58). She reveals that she was once indeed a Communard and had fought against the very people who had frequented the café where she reigned as chef. Indeed, the friend in Paris with whom the General had dined, a Colonel Galliffet, was the very person who had killed Babette's husband and son during the Paris Commune. Even so, Babette declares, these people (her enemies) paradoxically “belong to [her]” (58), as they are the only people capable of fully understanding and appreciating her art. The paradox is lost on Martine, but not on Philippa. Babette reminds Philippa that Achille Papin is also an artist who wishes only to do his utmost. In a rare

moment of understanding Philippa embraces Babette and repeats the words that Achille had written to her: "In Paradise you will be the great artist that God meant you to be! . . . Ah, how you will enchant the angels!" (59).

## CHAPTER 2: LUTHERANISM

The Christian elements embedded in Babette's Feast have received much scholarly attention. Dinesen situates Babette—whom the sisters take to be a Papist—in a Lutheran household. The placement of her protagonist in a deeply religious setting provides Dinesen with an opportunity to explore the intersections that occur between the spiritual and physical worlds. The author does not explicitly suggest that religious conflict will emerge given this situation; instead she gives us a glimpse into the way in which the Lutherans and Babette, respectively, live their lives. And through this filter or lens we are able to determine that religious practice informs much of Martine and Philippa's day-to-day existence, whereas religion is of little consequence to Babette.

The way Martine and Philippa know their world is rooted in religious precepts, which teach that the true or ultimate reality lies in the spiritual realm and only in the spiritual realm. The physical world and the senses are not to be trusted, as they reveal only an imperfect reality. We are allowed to see Lutheran practices regarding the denial of the sensual pleasure in life to achieve the divine and these are contrasted with Babette's delight in artistic creation that demands full use of the physical senses. Dinesen never tells us whether or not Babette is actually a Catholic; Babette never declares herself to be inspired by God, nor does she ever claim any spiritual belief. This is an important decision on Dinesen's part, as it allows her to explore the relationship of the artist with the spiritual realm without having to commit Babette to specific religious beliefs;

thus, Dinesen can explore the role of the artist in conveying universal truths through artistic pursuits.

Although Babette never avows a religious belief, Martine and Philippa assume she is Catholic, and interpret all her actions accordingly. The Lutherans in the story are incapable of conceiving the world outside of their religious context, and therefore feel compelled to impute to Babette a religious belief system. They assume Catholicism, and it is through this lens that they interpret Babette's behaviour, including the interpretation of her feast as a "sacrificial" act. Certainly, the Lutherans are cautious and a bit terrified of the supposed Papist in their midst; however, rather than using this to create conflict, Dinesen uses it to explore the role of the artist. Thus, it is through the eyes, and the fear, of the Lutheran that we come to know more about the artist. In forcing a Lutheran/Catholic dichotomic interpretation on Babette's behaviour, the Lutherans fail to perceive Babette the artist, and they fail to apprehend the primacy of art in Babette's life—that Babette is an artist first and foremost, independent of religious belief.

Dinesen gives us the narrative from the Lutheran perspective, and invites us to engage with the narrative from this point of view. We are privy to the past memories of Martine, Philippa, and the General, while we are unaware of Babette's past thoughts. Thus, Dinesen deftly moves us into the position of Lutheran spectator as we read the story, and we come to understand the Lutheran point of view much more clearly than we do Babette's. This structure supports Dinesen's subtle suggestion that it is easier to grasp the Lutheran perspective than the more mysterious, but possibly more profound, creative process. To better understand this point, and how it contributes to Dinesen's conception and representation of the artist, we can contrast the Lutheran and the

Catholic traditions especially those concerning the Lutheran notion of vocation or "calling," and the Lutheran celebration of the Eucharist.

The notion of vocation—answering to something bigger than the individual—is of some importance to Dinesen. Curtis Cate identifies this in *Isak Dinesen: The Scheherazade of Our Times*, and explains that the characters in Dinesen's stories are often motivated not by the pursuit of happiness but rather by fidelity to their role: "The heroic, larger-than-life world, in which the protagonists swear fealty to some ideal, to some vital mould greater and more enduring than their transient selves, inevitably seems a bit strange and alien to us, for we have lost this particular sense of life" (Cate 133). Dinesen is especially interested in the following question: "What is it we mean when we say that each of us has an allotted role in life?" (133). The notion of a "calling" as a task set by God, which gives worldly activity religious significance, and the imperative of being true to one's calling, is central to the Lutheran belief, as it is to Dinesen. No parallel notion exists for the Catholics. As Max Weber notes in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, for Protestants, "the only way of living acceptably to God was not to surpass worldly mortality by monastic asceticism, but solely through the fulfilment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world. That was his calling" (Weber 80). For Protestants, each person has a duty to fulfil the obligations set upon her by her position in the world; the real sin is not the accumulation of wealth but idleness and distraction from the pursuit of a righteous life (85-86). Martine and Philippa personify the centrality of "calling" for the Lutheran in their steadfast determination to carry on their father's work. Even when tempted by romantic love or artistic pursuits, the women remain loyal to their religious work.

When Achille Papin teaches Philippa the seduction scene from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Philippa experiences a moment of doubt as to what is her true calling. As a devout Lutheran, with her perspective entirely shaped by Lutheran religious dogma, this troubles her. She is "surprised and even frightened by something in her own nature" (28). In the end, she pulls back from her musical training, "all too aware of the fine line between art and life that pleasure can cross" (Korsmeyer, *Making* 204). Achille Papin, on the other hand, recognizes himself as a true artist. He reflects, "I have lost my life for a kiss. . . . Don Giovanni kissed Zerlina, and Achille Papin pays for it! Such is the fate of the artist!" (Dinesen 28). Achille knows that his knowledge of music allows him to understand truths about the human condition, and to communicate these truths to his audience, if they are prepared to receive them. He also understands that to pursue art wholeheartedly is to be true to one's self as an artist. His assumption is that while art imitates life it is not *necessarily* life. For a woman like Philippa, who has committed herself to life of asceticism, Achille represents the sinful pleasure of the emotions. He perceives the aesthetic in the music through the full use of his senses; Philippa denies herself the opportunity to realize this form of experience; she therefore rejects the calling of the artist in favour of her religious work. Whether or not Philippa has chosen to follow her true calling by rejecting a musical career is ambiguous. We can interpret Philippa's actions in two ways: either she has remained true to her religious calling or she has rejected her true calling as an artist. Either reading has merit in elucidating the position of the artist.

The Lutheran notion of "calling" also plays a role when Martine and Lieutenant Lowenhielm meet. Lowenhielm is immediately attracted to Martine's physical beauty and a subsequent vision of a "higher and purer life" (23).

However, even at the moment of his attempted declaration of love, the Lieutenant is unable to profess his feelings because he believes it will be impossible for him to live ascetically, detached from the physical world. Lowenhielm recognizes what Martine offers to him (a spiritually oriented existence) but his attachment to the material world, symbolized by the physical attraction he has for Martine, is too strong for him to act on the spiritual offer. Upon his return to the town where he is stationed, the Lieutenant quickly determines that he will devote his life wholeheartedly to a military career. Many years later when Philippa mentions the handsome young man who had made such a sudden appearance and "so suddenly disappeared again" (25) Martine "answer[s] her gently, with a still, clear face, and find[s] other things to discuss" (25). The inference here is that Martine's spiritual discipline has overcome her emotions, allowing her to choose to pursue a spiritual life. This, however, is not the case for the Lieutenant; he is defeated by his physical attraction to Martine and he leaves knowing that the spiritual world on which Martine remains focused is less compelling than the sensual one to which he returns. Lowenhielm comes away from this experience believing that "Fate is hard, and that in this world there are things which are impossible!" (24). He tells Martine he will never see her again. He blames fate for his disappointment; however, it is not life that impedes his relationship with Martine, but Lowenhielm himself (Branson 51). Again, Dinesen leaves us the option of considering either life choice (life with Martine, or a military career) as a viable calling for the General.

Another consequence of the assumed Catholicism for Babette is that it facilitates the view of the dinner as a form of Eucharist. As a sacrament, the Eucharist (from the Greek *eucharistia* meaning thanksgiving or gratitude) (New Catholic 8: 895) characterizes the breaking and sharing of bread and wine

amongst worshippers in commemoration of Christ on the eve of his death. Catholics believe that the bread and wine of the Eucharist literally instantiate the body and blood of Christ<sup>3</sup> whereas Protestants believe that the Eucharist is a symbolic memorial. Both communities take the Eucharist to be a communal act linking the worshippers to a past event that becomes their present experience.

For both Catholics and Protestants, participating in the sacrament gives worshippers access to an intimate union with the divine: "A sacramental perspective is one that 'sees' the divine in the human, the infinite in the finite, the spiritual in the material, the transcendent in the immanent, the eternal in the historical" (New Catholic 8: 895). While there is a shared sensibility of the Eucharist, Protestants fear that the Catholics take the sacramental principle too far, to the point of idolatry.

The feast Babette prepares at the end of the story has often been described as a kind of Eucharist conducted by the Christ-like figure of Babette.<sup>4</sup> It is important to remember that the Lutherans do not perceive the meal as a form of the Eucharist; however, Dinesen suggests links to a Christian interpretation. There are twelve guests at the dinner commemorating the birthday of the Dean—eleven Lutheran congregants and the General, evoking the Last Supper. The small congregation arrives to dinner beset with old resentments and Martine and Philippa fear that they have been "unjust stewards" (Dinesen 35) of their father's flock. The interpretation that Babette imparts a kind of grace onto the diners through her financial sacrifice in providing for the meal is understandable as the

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<sup>3</sup> The belief in the transubstantiation of bread and wine supports the idea of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Catholics believe that the presence of Christ mediated by the bread and the wine is prior to the faith of the congregation. Protestants reject the term real presence (Encyclopedia of Religion 5:2877).

<sup>4</sup> See Beck, Bower, Hanson, McFadden, Podles, Schuler, and Wright for a religious interpretation of *Babette's Feast*.

diners experience an opening of their hearts at the end of the meal. The once “taciturn old people receive the gifts of tongues [and] ears that for years had been almost deaf [are] opened” (53). When Babette tells the sisters that she has used all her money to pay for the meal, Martine and Philippa perceive this act as a genuine sacrifice (not a symbolic memorial), which aligns more with the Catholic interpretation of the Eucharist. Indeed, although Dinesen does not explicitly indicate that Babette is Catholic (in fact, she leaves open the possibility that Babette, as a Communard, could be an atheist), the Lutherans finally “realized that the grace of which General Lowenhielm had spoken had been allotted to them, and they did not even wonder at the fact, for it had been but the fulfillment of an ever-present hope” (54). It is possible to interpret Babette’s actions as Christ-like since the Lutherans assume that they have been bestowed with God’s Grace.

Although the text is certainly capable of interpretation as a Christian allegory in this way, I believe Dinesen constructed the text with a different reading in mind. Babette submits entirely to her calling as an artist, committed to performing her art even at the cost of financial security. What Dinesen draws out here is not only the sacrifice of Christ, but also the sacrifice of an artist remaining true to her vocation. The Eucharist, in this reading, can be seen in service to Babette’s artistic purpose, and what the Lutherans mistake as a sacrificial gift is actually the triumph of chef as artist. Disconnected from her past and financially disenfranchised, Babette cannot hope, after the feast, to practice her art in this way ever again; she must anticipate a new role in the future.

Structurally supporting the play of Catholic tradition against Lutheran practice is the contrast Dinesen shows us between the traditional austerity of the Lutheran meal and the luxury of Babette’s French feast. We are invited to

connect the rich aesthetics of the feast with the rich aesthetics of the Catholic Eucharist, where both involve sensory experience in the response of the participant. For these Lutherans, this feature of Catholic worship approaches idolatry. No wonder the Lutherans fear Babette's feast: magic seems to pervade the room as each of the diners partakes of a transformative experience while eating food.

## CHAPTER 3: TASTE

One of the central themes in *Babette's Feast* is the suggestion that we are shaped and influenced by different religions, and cultural backgrounds, and this will eventually define our relationship to food. Our attitudes towards food are part of our shared cultural values and as such we develop particular tastes including those connected to food. The idea that tasting a certain food item can lead to an aesthetic response much in the same way that listening to Mozart's *Don Giovanni* can lead to a sublime feeling is controversial. In *Babette's Feast*, the act of tasting the food and drink lead the diners to a new awareness about life previously denied them. In presenting us with this, Dinesen uses culinary art to examine the larger question of aesthetic response.

In the novella, the Norwegians prepare simple, seasonal, and locally available food. Given Berlevaag's location by the sea, it is no surprise that the Norwegian diet heavily favours cod. The dark rye bread commonly found on the dining tables of the townspeople suggests little money is available for luxurious fare—white flour, which is highly processed, is linked to the upper classes because it is perceived to be part of a refined dining experience. In contrast to this basic and locally grown food, Babette's Parisian cuisine is luxurious and complex and relies on foreign and exotic ingredients. Thus, Babette's cuisine is derived from the cultural norms linked to the eating habits of the upper class. In a sophisticated society Babette does not just prepare food, she engages in art

making, using culinary products as her medium.<sup>5</sup> In addition, her food involves complex commercial interactions in both preparation and consumption. The idea of the city—Paris—as a Garden of Eden where anything can be purchased is contrasted with the limitations of local produce that limits the cook in her culinary production.

There is a long history of disagreement over the question of whether food can be art. Western philosophers have long denied aesthetic legitimacy to taste (that is, the taste of the tongue). Critics of the idea claim that food is unsuitable for evaluation as an art object. The notion is that the body taints the object with its subjectivity. Since food is a substance that we ingest, we cannot remain objective about it, and therefore are not capable of evaluating it aesthetically. In presenting us with Babette, who is the example of chef as artist, Dinesen is revisiting the question of whether food and its accompanying tastes can count as fine art. Can food produce the kind of emotional response or insight we expect from an encounter with an aesthetic object? From the text, we would expect Dinesen herself to reply with an emphatic “Yes!” At the same time, since Babette declares herself an artist, Dinesen does not require us to agree. She needs us only to recognize that both food and fine art as symbolic systems share similar components.

Krishnendu Ray succinctly outlines the development of aesthetics in his article, “Domesticating Cuisine: Food and Aesthetics on American Television.” He writes that aesthetics as a field of inquiry, in the eighteenth century, was born out of a reaction to literal taste and became an established discursive field in the nineteenth century:

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<sup>5</sup> See Revel’s “From Culture and Cuisine” in *Cooking, Eating, Thinking. Transformative Philosophies of Food* for further discussion about popular and erudite cuisines.

For G. W. F. Hegel the five fine arts are poetry, music, painting, sculpture and architecture, which manifest the Absolute Spirit becoming conscious of itself. Natural beauty is not art, no matter how beautiful, because it has no consciousness. Similarly, literal taste is unconscious, subjective, and too intimate to allow for any discursive elaboration. (Ray 57)

In contrast, Carolyn Korsmeyer proposes that a philosophy of physical taste can be developed and that to do so is to challenge the low standing of taste in the hierarchy of the senses. Using Nelson Goodman's *Language of Art*, Korsmeyer argues for the "aesthetic potential of food as a fecund symbolic system where it can denote, represent, and exemplify a whole range of expressions, just like any other art form" (Ray 57). Korsmeyer does not make the claim that food is high art but she does maintain that food performs many of the same symbolic functions as works of art (Korsmeyer, *Making* 7). She states that her intention is "not to slight the pleasure of eating but to pull sensation and sense pleasure more fully into the purview of aesthetics by claiming that the pleasure they deliver is often an enhancement or even a component of their cognitive significance" (7). In Dinesen's novella, Babette claims that her culinary production is art and the emphasis in the novella is on how tasting in a particular circumstance and eating specific food items can lead to a transformative aesthetic experience. In this section, I will use Korsmeyer's analysis of the traditional hierarchy of the senses to discuss this aspect of the novella.

Korsmeyer challenges philosophy's preoccupation with the mind and its dominance over the body in the acquisition of knowledge. In her tracing of the history of aesthetic taste, Korsmeyer questions the rationale of a sensory hierarchy that places taste, smell, and touch in the lowest rankings. Historically,

the physical distance from an object was of prime importance for aesthetic appreciation because distance meant that the perceiver was comparatively free from the pull of the physical appetites. Thus, sight and hearing are higher senses because of the impression that they are the senses most distant from the perceived object. This distance fosters the division of the mind from the body and the potential freedom of the mind (14). For example, sight allows us to cultivate intelligence without engaging the lower regions of appetite and we can visually apprehend the world, which allows us to contemplate the divine regions of our beings as we engage with our minds (14).

The sisters in *Babette's Feast* perfectly instantiate this traditional hierarchy of the senses, in that they believe that the bodily appetites will lead them further away from the divine source of the soul. They feel they must cultivate a spiritual practice, which helps foster their moral development; therefore, they must manage their appetites and deny themselves any sensual pleasure. When Babette begins to cook for Martine and Philippa, they begin to discern a qualitative difference in their daily food. This discernment is not yet a full-fledged aesthetic response—we must wait for the Dean's anniversary dinner for that. Furthermore, Martine and Philippa remain unconscious of the fact that the increased tastiness of the food is having profound effects on the wellbeing of their little community. The sisters feel gratitude towards Babette only for freeing up their time and money, so that they may concentrate their energies on good works for the parish.

Using Goodman's cognitive theory of art, Korsmeyer argues that much of what we eat represents something else. She insists that food means more than itself and is dependent on the ceremonial or personal or cultural narratives to which it is linked:

[The food's] aesthetic qualities emerge from practice and are embedded in the . . . occasions in which they take on their fullest meanings. To try to compare a single meal or individual food with any given work of art is to yank that item from its context and impoverish its aesthetic import. It directs attention only to its exemplified qualities, and not even to all of those: the ones that remain to be relished free from ceremonial practices are just those *sensuous* exemplified qualities—the savor of tastes themselves—that for all their undeniable pleasures do not fill the terrain of deeper aesthetic significance that foods display in their practical contexts, including ritual, ceremony, and commemoration. On its own food is assessed only for a relatively narrow band of exemplified properties; art is assessed for all symbolic functions.

(Korsmeyer, *Making* 143)

Food may function as a minor art, according to Korsmeyer, but the idea that both food and art form symbolic systems with similar components<sup>6</sup> "though those components are not symmetrically related to the merits of the created products" (144) is of primary importance. By investigating the possibility of a philosophy of taste, Korsmeyer brings awareness to "an important part of eating, drinking and tasting [which] is precisely that they signify the bodily, the mortal part of

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<sup>6</sup> The components as outlined by Korsmeyer are representation and exemplification.

"Representation is the starting point of analysis and the standard example of representation is a picture. A picture represents something . . . only if it simply denotes it" (Korsmeyer, *Making* 115). Thus, Goodman calls attention to the relation of reference between the picture and its subject. "Representation is but one of the multiple symbolic functions of art. Another . . . is exemplification. Goodman compares the *expressive* properties of art with the literal *possession* of properties. . . But objects may also express properties both simple and complex that they do not literally possess" (Korsmeyer, *Making* 116). He categorizes such expression as "metaphorical exemplification."

existence. There is only a superficial irony in this claim: part of the importance of food, eating and awareness of tasting, swallowing, digesting is that they do direct attention to the supposedly 'lower' aspect of being human—the fact that we are animal and mortal" (144-145).

Korsmeyer's work explicates the aesthetic response of the diners at Babette's feast. They do taste the food and drink and are momentarily transformed by the sensual response to the dinner. The irony here is that the Lutherans are inexperienced in appreciating the aesthetics of the material world, yet do respond in an aesthetic way. Part of this response stems from their perception of the meal as a type of sacrifice and so, the meal is connected to the familiar ceremonial practice of the Eucharist. However, this does not address the physical response that leads the guests to a transcendent experience. To fully explain such a response, it is necessary to examine how an audience's reaction to food is based on a set of behaviours associated with social class.

## Social Construction of Taste

Many food scholars have turned to Pierre Bourdieu's 1979 work, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, for an explanation as to how aesthetic taste is socially constructed. Bourdieu examined French society and argued that taste and consumption behaviour is an expression of social class. This presupposition does "not depend on simple economic or materialist criteria" (Seymour 2), nor does Bourdieu argue that the construction of taste has a simple correlation to income. In terms of food, Bourdieu would argue that, although man is omnivorous, what we define as good to eat is culturally determined and can vary between cultures (1) and what we choose to eat is determined by our social status rather than any innate sense we might possess.

Bourdieu comments on the dual nature of taste: "The dual meaning of the word 'taste' . . . must serve. . . to remind us that taste in the sense of the 'faculty of immediately and intuitively judging aesthetic values' is inseparable from taste in the sense of the capacity to discern the flavours of foods which implies a preference for some of them" (Bourdieu 99).

Bourdieu proposes a concept of habitus—a set of dispositions (that is tendencies to do things in a certain way) that do not necessarily determine our practices but render it likely that we will choose certain practices over others (Seymour 2). The process of socialization teaches habitus by immersing a person in a particular social milieu. The dispositions acquired through a certain habitus are ways of doing and perceiving things as determined by those sharing a particular social position. The dispositions do not prescribe what we can and cannot do; rather they dispose a person to make certain choices. A person can choose a practice that resides outside of the habitus, but since habitus is socially constructed, choices tend to be the result of class rather than individual personality (3).

Bourdieu does not base class position on "possession or non-possession of the means of production as in Marxist materialistic conceptions of class" (3). Rather he bases his work on Weber's view of a hierarchical schema of class structure premised on the acquisition of capital. Therefore, Bourdieu categorizes differences in class according to different forms of capital. The use of an economic metaphor helps describe the cultural distinction because of its ability to convey the idea of conversion (that is, of one form of resource to another). He extends the notion of capital beyond economic means to suggest that people acquire cultural capital—that is, knowledge about cultural products. This in turn leads to knowledge of how to consume such cultural products. Cultural capital is

acquired by actual possession of something (for example, a painting) or by participating in an activity (for example, dining out at a fine restaurant).

Bourdieu distinguishes between legitimate, middlebrow, and working class culture and identifies the tastes associated with each category:

While it is possible to acquire legitimate cultural capital (i.e. the definitions and judgements of taste possessed by the dominant classes) through individual effort or education, such expressions of learned tastes do not have the same status and social standing as tastes which appear to be natural or innate [that is cultivated]. Cultivated individuals experience their own distinction as taken for granted and natural, as a mark of their social value. (4-5)

Each class has its own habitus, distinguished by its own taste and by different forms of capital that can be exchanged for other forms of capital. Nevertheless, the idea that taste and consumption are the same for all the social groups who share the same income is false. Bourdieu realized that people within the same economic class can have different consumption patterns and taste, but he thought that this could be explained by subtle oppositions within the classes, such as the difference between those who are richer in cultural capital and those who are relatively richer in economic capital:

These differences in the volume and structure of global capital give rise to different habituses and lifestyles within the broad class groupings which are expressed in different tastes in food consumption. However, the real principle governing these differences in tastes in food is the opposition between the "tastes of luxury" (or freedom) and the "tastes of necessity" (9).

For Bourdieu, tastes are shaped by the conditions of existence: tastes of luxury are the tastes of individuals who are distanced from necessity while the taste of necessity belong to those individuals who provide manual labour at the lowest cost. According to Korsmeyer, Bourdieu characterizes the eating habits of the "leisured bourgeoisie as the 'taste of liberty or luxury' and those of the working classes as the 'taste of necessity.' The latter favours food that is nourishing, filling, and bulky. The taste of luxury is for lighter fare, since it need not nourish a body engaged in hard labor" (Korsmeyer, *Making* 65). Bourdieu actually constructed a map of food space and made predictions about the kinds of tastes different social factions would have depending on particular combinations of economic and cultural capital (See Appendix 1). Thus, according to Bourdieu, the taste for a particular dish is a function of a habitus, or if you will, a lifestyle. It follows from this that there is no universal Taste that is untouched by class privilege. Korsmeyer suggests in her interpretation of Bourdieu's findings that "both kinds of taste are part and parcel of the same social forces. In fact the oral pleasures of tasting, primitive and infantile, subtend the developed preferences of aesthetic Taste and remain their point of reference" (65).

Bourdieu's hypothesis about taste can be applied to the food that occupies Dinesen's story. The simple Norwegian fare of split-cod and ale soup reflects a habitus that is low in economic capital. Furthermore, because of their religious beliefs, Martine and Philippa do not aspire to be rich, nor do they aspire to luxurious or exotic foods. To covet the latter would be contrary to their religious beliefs. The sisters do, however, possess some culturally refined sensibilities as is demonstrated by Philippa's regard for Achille Papin's superior knowledge of music and their ability to converse in French—they are, after all, the Dean's daughters. Nevertheless, they deny themselves the pleasure of cultural pursuits,

as these occupations would be inconsistent with their ascetic lifestyle. For example, the hymns they sing with their fellow brethrens do not reflect a particular joy in the music, but rather spiritual comfort in the words.

Babette enters the sisters' household financially impoverished but possessing a form of high cultural capital through her knowledge of French haute cuisine; however, she is limited in converting such capital in her new home. In the community of Berlevaag and especially amongst the Lutherans, Babette applies her cultural knowledge to her new surroundings. She must be content with practicing a form of cooking that is limited by the availability of food items and the limitations placed on her by the sisters' taste for plain food. To create the food that is closest to her heart as an artist she requires the economic capital once provided by the aristocrats that, ironically, she fought against as a Communard. The irony of her need for an aristocratic audience to finance and support her artistic endeavours is fully demonstrated in the final feast. Babette recognizes that the aristocrats are the only people who understand and appreciate her art; and at the same time, that they are also the people responsible for the murders of her husband and son. When Martine and Philippa question how Babette could "grieve" (Dinesen 58) over the loss of the very people who caused her suffering, she replies:

"Yes, . . . "I was a Communard. Thanks be to God, I was a Communard! And those people whom I named, Mesdames, were evil and cruel. They let the people of Paris starve; they oppressed and wronged the poor. Thanks be to God, I stood upon the barricade; I loaded the gun for my menfolk! But all the same, Mesdame, I shall not go back to Paris, now that those people of whom I have spoken are no longer there. . . those people belonged

to me, they were mine. They had been brought up and trained, with greater expense than you, my little ladies, could ever imagine or believe, to understand what a great artist I am. I could make them happy. When I did my very best I could make them perfectly happy. (Dinesen 58-59)

Bourdieu's theoretical framework provides an explanation for Babette's simultaneous dislike and need for the aristocracy. He describes the relationship between the artist and the patron of art as "highly ambivalent" (Bourdieu 316). The patron of art is also (at least in the nineteenth century) often a patron of business who "responds with a sort of paternalistic patronage to the symbolic provocation of artists" (316). This ambivalent relationship is evident in the novella. The fact that the General makes no attempt to discover (or validate) who is actually preparing the feast suggests a vast distance between the aristocracy and the artist. The General is interested solely in any artistic production in which he can participate; at the same time, his upper class "capital" regarding food and drink is evident in his response to the dishes laid before him:

General Lowenhielm, somewhat suspicious of his wine, took a sip of it, startled, raised the glass first to his nose and then to his eyes, and sat it down bewildered. "This is very strange!" he thought. "Amontillado! And the finest Amontillado that I have ever tasted." After a moment, in order to test his senses, he took a small spoonful of his soup, took a second spoonful and laid down his spoon. "This is exceedingly strange!" he said to himself. "For surely I am eating turtle-soup—and what turtle-soup!" (Dinesen 48-49)

No one else at the table understands Babette's great talent, and the miracle that she has performed in obtaining the finest ingredients and producing such as exquisite and luxurious feast, in such an isolated place. Certainly, the Lutherans are incapable of recognizing it, especially as this is their first experience of French haute cuisine. Thus, the General symbolizes the upper classes that Babette once cooked for. The conflicted nature of Babette's relationship with them becomes apparent; Babette acts as both Communard fighting the dominant classes and as chef serving them—the dominant class who determines taste, and who appreciate her art—without sharing their class-consciousness. Similarly, the aristocracy must maintain an ambivalent relationship with the producers of cultural goods—they *need* the artist to provide the cultural product. Bourdieu, describing this relationship, suggests that the aristocrats

cannot be entirely satisfied with the solution offered by 'their' ...artists (i.e. the . . . artists who occupy within the field of cultural production a temporally—and temporarily—dominant position, homologous to their own position in the dominant class); the very relationship to temporal power and to the associated profits which defines the . . . artist compromises the 'disinterestedness' which, even in the eyes of the dominant faction, specifically defines intellectuals and artists. (Bourdieu 316)

The General does not seek out Babette in the kitchen during or after the meal, as he is only interested in her artistic output and the effects that it has on him. For the same reason, Babette does not intrude on the dinner to gauge the reaction of the diners, as she is only interested in creating art. In the past, Babette depended on aristocratic patronage to appreciate, and therefore finance, her art. This time, however, she has paid for this meal with winnings from the lottery,

and she is free to practice her art without regard for the audience. The General, however (as discussed below) still requires the artist's intervention so that he may discover the truth that he has been searching for.

## The Feast

*Our French service is more elegant and more sumptuous. It is the model for culinary art. Nothing is more imposing than the sight of a great table set out in the French service. —Carême (Ferguson 50)*

On the night of the feast Babette lays a French table service. She transforms the dining room into another world comprised of fine table linens, dishes, glasses, candlesticks, cutlery, and decanters purchased in France. For the Lutherans, the bare parlour is the familiar world of Berlevaag, while the dining room represents the foreign soil of France. There is a sense of unease amongst the Lutherans, as they have been forewarned by the sisters that what they are to encounter at the dinner will probably be unfamiliar—and possibly wicked. To ease the consciences of Martine and Phillipa, the brotherhood agree, "to be silent upon all matters of food and drink (Dinesen 41). In fact, they intend to go even further than silence; they intend to deny themselves the response of taste. One Brother realizes the need for further action and addresses the members of his community about the evils of taste:

The tongue is a little member and boasteth great things. The tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. On the day of our master we will cleanse our tongues of all taste and purify them of all delight or disgust of the senses, keeping and preserving them for the higher things of praise and thanksgiving.  
(41)

The Lutherans attend the feast fearful of the food and pledge to control their sensory reactions. In accordance with the traditional hierarchy of the senses, the Lutherans suspect taste as a sense that only draws one into bodily pleasure as opposed to moving one to the divine. To strengthen themselves against the unknown wickedness that lies before them, the Lutherans engage in the singing of a hymn:

*Jerusalem, my happy home  
Name ever dear to me  
Take not thought for food or raiment  
Careful one, so anxiously  
Woulds't thou give a stone, a reptile  
To thy pleading child for food? (43-44)*

Dinesen is exercising a certain irony using this hymn. The sensual and the spiritual worlds are reflections of one another in the hymn; however, the Lutherans find sustenance only in the spiritual nourishment found in contemplating heaven. Music has once again moved into the story, but unlike the passionate Mozart duet that Philippa sang as a young woman, the hymn focuses our attention on the spiritual world. There is no strong emotion here; in fact, the hymn serves to calm the congregants and strengthen their resolve. The dissonance that they once felt as a group begins to dissipate as they clasp hands and raise their voices in song.

At this moment, the General arrives with his aunt. As he enters the parlour, Dinesen paints the following visual picture of "General Lowenhielm, tall, broad and ruddy, in his bright uniform, his breast covered with decorations, [strutting] and [shining] like an ornamental bird, a golden pheasant or a peacock, in [the] sedate party of black crows and jackdaws" (44). The aesthetic and the

ascetic are starkly contrasted in this description. The General enters the house with all the power he claims as part of the military and the aristocracy.

Babette has prepared a feast that is a gastronomic work of art; as such she requires an audience. However, as Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson suggests in her book, *Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine*, gastronomy requires knowledge on the part of the audience. For the gastronome knowledge of eating depends less on the moment of pleasure in consumption and much more on the conception of what the taste should mean (Ferguson 178). As noted earlier, the General's participation at the feast is favourable, for the General (as representative of the aristocratic habitus) is the only one capable of understanding the significant meaning of the food. The Lutherans (as representative of a religious ascetic habitus) lack the knowledge to eat with understanding. What plays out at the dining table is how an audience is affected by the artist's creation, in this case through the appreciation of fine wine and food.

## CHAPTER 4: COOKING AND CUISINE

### French Haute Cuisine

Papin's initial blunt statement that "Babette can cook" may have asserted the obvious, but in this statement resides much of the complexity that lies at the heart of the story. As Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson remarks in her book, *Accounting for Taste. The Triumph of French Cuisine*, there is a significant difference between "cooking" and "cuisine." Cooking, Ferguson claims, is simply a transformative process to produce food that we can consume (3), while gastronomy is a process that transforms the diner:

If *cooking* involves chiefly the producer of the dish, *gastronomy* . . . points to the sophisticated diner, to the embodiment of Brillat-Savarin's ideal consumer: "Animals fill themselves, people eat, intelligent people alone know how to eat." From eating simply to live, *gastronomy* moves us into the realm of living to eat. Comprehending producer and consumer, cook and diner, *cuisine* refers to the properly cultural construct that systematizes culinary practices and transmutes the spontaneous culinary gesture into a stable cultural code. Cuisine, like dining, turns the private into the public, the singular into the collective, the material into the cultural.

(3)

Babette is a gastronome, steeped in the tradition of French cuisine. Martine and Philippa see her merely as a cook; they are incapable of appreciating

the distinction, but Babette reveals herself as a great chef and artist at the Dean's dinner. What is the significance of this distinction between cook and chef? As cook, Babette functions as a person who merely produces edible food in an appropriate manner that conforms to Norwegian culinary traditions. Babette must learn how to cook the food that the sisters subsist on; however, her preparations are improved by her knowledge of French technique. Her ability to transform the plain food of the Norwegian palate comes directly from her training in how the simple treatment of food can achieve the aesthetic qualities of much more sophisticated dishes. She knows how to procure the best food items at the lowest cost and she is held in awe at the marketplace for her ability to deal with the "flintiest tradesmen" (Dinesen 32). The culinary knowledge that she applies to the daily fare affects the sisters and the Lutheran community as a whole. The "brotherhood include[s] Babette's name in their prayers, and [thank] God for the speechless stranger" (33) who has arrived in their midst. Through her cooking, Babette has successfully overcome the language barrier and through her ministrations to food, she has created a sense of well-being amongst the Lutheran congregation. She becomes the "cornerstone" (33) of the community and thus unconsciously acts as the Dean's replacement. Although she has a positive effect on the Lutherans in her role as cook, her most profound influence will come from the preparation of the feast that marks Babette as a chef artist.

The type of cuisine that Babette is most familiar with is that of French haute cuisine—the cookery of the elite. She is trained in classical French technique that "stands apart not simply as a set of culinary practices, but as a grammar, a rhetoric of that practice, a discursive space" (Ferguson 9). The main elements of French cuisine contain:

First, abundant, various, and readily available foodstuffs; second, a cadre of experienced producers (chefs) in a culturally specific site (the restaurant), both of which are supported by knowledgeable, affluent customers (diners); and third, a secular cultural (culinary) tradition. All of these elements—the food, the people and places, the attitudes and ideas—[come] together in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century France with a force hitherto unknown and, indeed, unsuspected. (Weiss 11-12)

In *The Invention of the Restaurant. Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture*, Rebecca Spang traces the history of the French restaurant and reveals how, in the early nineteenth century, eating became an artistic passion. With the widespread publication of gastronomic literature that placed “restaurateurs and pastry-chefs as the equivalent of theatre entrepreneurs and playwrights” (Spang 150), gastronomy emerged as a means of satisfying the hunger for aesthetic debates.

Food did not come from a farm or a field, but rather, emerged from an ornately decorated boutique. The primary preoccupation of haute cuisine was to “[transform] nature into culture” (Trubeck 8). During this period, the restaurant became a real cultural and social institution in its ability to stimulate and satisfy desire. The emphasis was on the product not the production process, and there was an assumption that all the food used in preparation was sourced in Paris. Restaurants were places where cornucopias of foodstuffs were available and this led to the belief that anything could be purchased for a price (Spang 235). Thus, the restaurant became a theatre-like space where the magnificence of the dishes and the aesthetic quality of food is emphasized. The reality most often was that the kitchens were “mouths of Hell” (236) where steam sputtered and cooks sweltered in subterranean kitchens. However, the diner was spared the

knowledge of such conditions. The customer played an important role as French haute cuisine entered the public sphere. Customers provided the financial aid and ongoing demand that kept restaurants in business. However, the social position and class of the diner is not the sole determinate of the taste and the shape of the food; chefs achieved significant influence in creating food in terms of its "hauteness" and as such, the chef could influence the diner by "establishing the desire" for certain dishes (Trubek 9).

The fact that France had created a national cuisine in the nineteenth century allows Dinesen to represent Babette as laying claim to a well-developed and sophisticated set of culinary practices that are transportable to other food traditions. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson presents an argument that cuisine (as opposed to cooking) is necessary for art-making in that cooking merely makes food ready for consumption while cuisine socializes it. Cuisine codifies cooking practices, and the intellectual and cultural changes that take place in food move us from perceiving food as merely instrumental. "Cooking gives us food for thought; cuisine offers thoughts for food" (Ferguson 21). Thus, the cook participates in a largely oral culinary tradition whose status is amateur and place is home; she relies on products at hand, and produces familiar recipes. (21) The chef, by contrast, is involved in innovative culinary preparation, draws on foodstuffs from all over, uses systematized techniques and engages in experimentation to develop recipes:

The tension between the two terms of the equation—haute cuisine and everyday cooking—pits knowledge against practice; it sets *savoir* against *savoir-faire*. Cuisine is an art, and nowhere more insistently than in France; but, as Michel de Certeau put it, it is at the same time an art of the everyday, an art of making do. (176)

Babette is limited as a chef when preparing the cod and ale-and-bread soup for the sisters. She certainly applies her knowledge of French culinary techniques to maximize the flavour of the dishes but she is restricted in her capacity to produce food of extraordinary quality and taste. The isolated town in which she finds herself is distant from the markets of Paris that provide consumables from around the world. Babette is also confined by the sisters' ascetic lifestyle, which proclaims bodily pleasures to be sinful, so that indulging the pleasure of taste is a denied experience. Martine and Philippa are dimly aware of some difference in the household management and the food that Babette prepares, but they are too focused on their spiritual duties to reflect on the physical appreciation of food and the effects of such pleasure. Babette is capable of elevating the everyday cooking of Berlevaag; however, this is not truly fulfilling to her as an artist. Later on in the story she takes the opportunity to practice French cuisine, allowing her full expression as an artist.

When Babette proposes that she prepare and fund a feast for the upcoming 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Dean's birthday, the sisters are filled with trepidation. They know that the meal will be "French," which they equate with "sinful." The section of the novella titled "The Turtle" explores the different ways of knowing about food, the perception of the chef as untrustworthy, and the way that the transformation brought about by the feast begins as early as initial preparations for the meal. In addition, Dinesen's description of how each character interprets Babette's preparations provides us with an insight into how groups of people participating at the dinner bring different ways of conceptualizing the world to the table.

To procure the foodstuffs she requires for the feast, Babette undertakes her first journey since arriving at Berlevaag. Since she is unable to buy the

necessary items for a French dinner, she arranges to meet her nephew who will be sailing to France and will thus be able to supply her with the items she requires. Babette is nervous in the weeks that follow, wondering if the goods will arrive safely. When they finally do, both Martine and Philippa notice a change in their servant. Dinesen calls Babette the “bottle demon of the fairy tale” (38) as she grows in genie-like dimension because of her culinary skill and awakening again to her artistic pursuits.

Martine steals a glance at the foreign foodstuffs arriving in the kitchen and is horrified when a large turtle shoots out a “snake-like” head. To Martine, the oversized turtle resembles the Devil in its countenance, and Martine secretly tells the members of the Lutheran community of the “horrors” that they are about to embark on. As mentioned earlier, the community agrees to try to withhold any physical response to anything served at the feast.

No one, including the reader, is privy to the elaborate preparations of the meal. Certain food and drink items are identified by their name and Babette’s knowledge of the delicacies serves to emphasize her sophistication in comparison to the cultivated ignorance of Martine and Philippa on matters of food and taste. When Martine queries Babette as to whether a bottle holds wine or not, Babette replies, “Wine, Madame! . . . No, Madame. It is a Clos Vougeot 1846! . . . From Philippe, in Rue Montorgeuil! (40). We are clearly to understand here that there are qualitative differences in the wine that is procured and one’s sophistication is based on a particular knowledge associated with food and its preparation. This section also speaks to Babette’s particular virtuosity in influencing the diner to experience something out of the ordinary. Babette is capable of transforming food ingredients and the eating experience into an aesthetic phenomenon. Yet, prior to the course of the dinner Martine and

Philippa specifically attempt to make the experience “spiritual” precisely by wilfully suppressing the influence of their senses at the meal. The turtle, which gives Martine nightmares, is one of a number of unfamiliar ingredients used to create the dinner. For Babette, the turtle has no meaning beyond its taste and usefulness as an exotic extension of her repertoire. For the Lutherans, though, the turtle represents all that is sinful, sophisticated, and foreign. The turtle embodies the irrational fear of the unknown or “other” and becomes a demonic symbol that must be withheld and overcome. During the dinner we witness the General’s astonishment at eating the exquisite turtle soup in such an incongruous setting as the Norwegian village. The incongruity of the experience panics him, and Dinesen uses this to prepare us for the series of surprising discoveries that unfold during the meal. Thus, the creature that has been so despised by the sisters becomes a part of a larger whole of the meal that brings about transformation for all those who partake in it.

## CHAPTER 5: THE DINERS

The narrative recounting of Martine's and Philippa's memories from the past prepares us for the revelation that accompanies the feast. Neither Martine nor Philippa sits at the dinner table completely ignorant of the sensual appreciation of life. They have each been touched by it as young women and, in accordance with their vocation as helpmates to their father, they have rejected the physical world for the ascetic world of spiritual contemplation and good works. Martine and Philippa have fostered a lifetime of well-developed spiritual habits and, thus are predisposed (but unprepared) for a spiritual discovery when they attend the feast.

What is ironic is the way that the sisters come to revelation at the feast, and Dinesen emphasizes this irony by contrasting the sisters with the General. The General returns to Berlevaag yearning for a glimpse of the life he rejected as a young man. In a parallel, but opposite, way, the Lutheran sisters arrive at revelation through a brief—but profound and intense—aesthetic experience grounded in the sensuality they have foresworn their entire lives. For Martine, Philippa, and the General, the revelation at the feast challenges the path, or calling, he or she has chosen. For the sisters, the irony is that a sense of union with the divine is ultimately achieved not through spiritual practice, but through the sensual experience of eating and drinking.

Just as the dinner commences, Dinesen underscores this point by providing one final image, to re-emphasize the Lutherans' commitment to

sensual self-denial in favour of dedication to God. This is the Grace offered at the start of the dinner:

*May my food my body maintain,  
may my body my soul sustain,  
may my soul in deed and word  
give thanks for all things to the Lord.* (Dinesen 48)

Lest we miss the point, Dinesen brings it home with the Lutherans' resolve to eat, but not to taste, the dinner: "At the word of 'food' the guests... remembered how they had vowed not to utter a word about the subject, and in their hearts they reinforced the vow: they would not even give it a thought!" (48). The Lutherans are committed to resisting temptation at all costs, and they bolster their spiritual defences by recounting the Dean's past miracles and good works. However, in the end they do not escape the pleasurable response to the food.

Dinesen is spare in her description of the diners' response to the meal; there is sensory reaction, but it is understated. One of the members of the community mistakes champagne for lemonade, and she interprets her light-headedness as having "lift[ed] [her] off the ground, into a higher and purer sphere" (50). As the meal proceeds, each member of the community experiences a physical reaction to food that is beyond his or her immediate comprehension. The General exclaims at the variety and sophistication of dishes laid before him, but the Lutherans are apparently unmoved by his exclamations of delight—although not so far removed that they can ignore them. Though they refuse to remark themselves on the beauty of the presentation and the exoticism of foodstuffs, they are not impervious to the collective spirit, which is dominated by the General's effusive appreciation of the food. The Lutherans notice that they do

not feel the familiar heaviness of meals as experienced in the past. In the characteristic fashion of French haute cuisine, this meal makes them feel “lighter in weight and lighter of heart” (50). As a result, they stop reminding themselves of their vow not to taste. Indeed, they begin to frame the experience quite differently, recollecting “when man has firmly renounced all ideas of food and drink . . . he eats and drinks in the right spirit” (50). Even though they are entirely ignorant of the magnificence and artistry behind the food experience—for example, the complexity of the turtle soup, and superbness of the Amontillado<sup>7</sup>— they cannot help but be affected by the physicality of eating, and they begin to enter into the sensual pleasure that accompanies the food. The congregants, previously fragmented by their small schisms, begin to experience grace and compassion towards one another. In this way, through their experience of food and the sense of taste, the Lutherans finally encounter the divine spirit (through their bodies), as “the vain illusions of this earth dissolve before their eyes like smoke, and they [see] the universe as it really is” (54).

Some critics have interpreted the Lutheran’s transcendence of the physical realm in Christian terms. In this analysis, the community members partake of a kind of Eucharist and reach God through the embodiment of the Grace God imparts on the meal through Babette<sup>8</sup>. I think that Dinesen intends a more complex reading, as offered via the General’s comments on grace. I think she is well aware of the irony that the Lutherans deny themselves the pleasure of food even while the Eucharist emphasizes communal eating and drinking. As Barkin points out, the relation of consumption to the consumed is one of the most intimate relations in the world and even if this act is translated into language it is

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix 2: *The Menu* for a further discussion about the meaning of individual dishes.

<sup>8</sup> See Beck, Bower, Hanson, McFadden, Podles, Schuler, and Wright for several religious interpretations of *Babette’s Feast*.

still based on an intimate knowledge of a response (Barkan 9). Babette transforms the eating experience and constructs a new relationship from the “carnal to the divine” (Barkan 9).

Grace, for the Lutheran Christian, is an outpouring of unmerited, even unappreciated favour, of transcendent and supernaturally charged existence, raising those who correspond to it to an elevated, transfigured place. Grace is poured out regardless of the right of the recipient to receive. According to Luther, it is Grace that saves the faithful, principally Grace as it is granted through the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, the Eucharist. (Podles 8)

The importance for the Lutheran communicant is actual participation in the eating of the Eucharist, not (as it would be for the Catholic) a transubstantiation of bread and wine into Christ’s blood and body. The emphasis for the Lutheran is on the communal aspect of the sacrament as signifying fellowship with all Christians and strengthening against death (as we see in “the bread guides us through death into eternal life” [9]). The guests at the dinner participate in such a collective experience. The General speaks about the truth that he discovers while eating amongst the brethren:

Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude. Grace, brothers, makes no conditions and singles out none of us in particular; Grace takes us all to its bosom and proclaims general amnesty. See! That which we have chosen is given us, and that which we have refused is, also and at the same time, granted us. Ay, that which we have rejected is poured upon us abundantly. For

mercy and truth have met together, and righteousness and bliss have kissed one another! (52)

The Lutherans “[did] not altogether [understand] the General’s speech, but his collected and inspired face and the sound of well-known and cherished words seized and moved all hearts” (53). What we seem to be presented with in the ceremony around the table appears to be a familiar Christian ritual. However, if we look more closely—if we look beneath the mask of Christian piety—we can detect something I think Dinesen really intends us to see: artistic mystery (Henriksen 393).

The “infinite Grace” to which the General refers is not some abstract Christian principle, but an artistic mystery brought about through Babette’s generous act. It is through Babette’s agency as an artist that the Lutherans (and the General) come to benefit from the art even without understanding it. The irony is that the villagers who “take themselves so seriously” and believe themselves to be above others because of their religious fervour are drunk as well as being spiritually elated (Branson 51). Dinesen shows us that this is the reason the villagers do not recognize the repeated words of the Dean’s former speeches:

The guests from the yellow house wavered on their feet, staggered, sat down abruptly or fell forward on their knees and hands and were covered with snow, as if they had indeed had their sins washed white as wool, and in this regained innocent attire were gamboling like little lambs. It was, to each of them, blissful to have

become as a small child;<sup>9</sup> it was also a blessed joke to watch old Brothers and Sisters, who had been taking themselves so seriously, in this kind of celestial second childhood. (Dinesen 63)

As Dinesen allows us to see, the “blessed joke” is on the Lutherans. The body knows something the mind does not, and it is through the physical consumption of the food and drink that the Lutherans are moved to revise their way of knowing the world, such that their criteria for, and conception of, truth is altered. This moment is especially interesting in that the Lutherans themselves are oblivious to the transformed relationship between their minds and bodies. Whether or not they can sustain transformation and integrate it into their worldview, will depend upon the dissonance that might arise when they return from their transcendent experience, but the suggestion is that the effects are only temporary. Experience alone is never enough to effect permanent change. Experience must be married to a decision and a commitment and then accompanied by action to institute such change. Otherwise, the experience is “just an experience” and is likely to be transitory. The little quarrels that exist amongst the Lutherans are healed momentarily during the feast, but the lack of any commitment suggests that there will be no permanent change.

Where the sisters discover the sensual pleasure of life through the meal, the General discovers a spiritual mystery and meaning previously absent from his life. The General returns to Berlevaag remembering his youthful past and discovers that, although he has prospered materially, he remains unhappy. Upon some reflection, he distinguishes two causes for his unhappiness: doubt at

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<sup>9</sup> See Matthew 18: 2-3 in *The Holy Bible: King James Version* for Christ’s invitation to become like children upon conversion. It is interesting to note that the Lutherans are becoming more Christian (for example, compassionate and caring in conversation) through the act of eating Babette’s dinner rather than through spiritual practice.

having failed to follow through on his love for Martine many years ago, and anxiety as to the state of his immortal soul. General Lowenhielm tries to console himself with the thought that he is a moral man, and thus his immortal soul should be in no danger; still, he is troubled by the thought that there are “moment[s] when it seemed to him that the world was not a moral, but a mystic, concern” (Dinesen 45). With this thought, he experiences doubt about the decision he made concerning Martine. Thus, he enters the sisters’ home determined to prove to himself that he had made the right choice back in his youth.

General Lowenhielm embodies the aesthetic experience achieved through understanding the complexity of the food and the meaning attached to it. He is part of the royal court, and thus represents the social values of the aristocracy. Lowenhielm values “good food highly” (Dinesen 45), but is plagued by occasional indigestion (for which he blames his wife and her lack of attention to his dinners). As Babette’s meal begins, General Lowenhielm is immediately struck, even made suspicious, by the quality of the wine in his glass. A reflective moment occurs here, as the General equates such fine liquor with the world he has left behind at the Royal Court. After a pause, “in order to test his senses” (48), he tentatively tastes the turtle soup, and again expresses amazement at the fine execution of the dish. We see that the General *feels* a queer sense of panic at such dishes appearing this incongruous context. He is used to experiencing this level of cuisine in the courts and elite cafés of Paris surrounded by people with sophisticated palates, not amongst a religious community with an aesthetic of sensual self-denial. I think it is significant that, even though the General is puzzled at the incongruence of such fine food in such a setting, he does not rise from the dining table and seek out the chef. The social boundaries remain intact

at the meal; the chef works away hidden in the kitchen and the diner has knowledge only of what is placed before him or her. To preserve the social hierarchy of aristocrat and artist, food production must remain separate from food consumption.

As the meal proceeds, the General dominates the conversation in a way he never could as a young man; for example, he speaks of how the Dean's collection of sermons is a favourite with the Queen. However, he is rendered silent as Blinis Demidoff<sup>10</sup> is laid before him. His incredulity at eating this dish in an isolated outpost of Norway is lost on the Lutherans, who quietly eat without any sign of approval or surprise. While the Lutherans quietly recall the Dean's good works, the General speaks (to no one in particular) about the exceptional quality of the food. The guests speak at cross-purposes with one another, although they cannot help but be influenced by one another's speech. The odd dance of conversation that occurs between the villagers and the General serves to underline the general incongruity and unconventionality of the feast.

The General is puzzled by the Lutherans' lack of comment on the meal, for he appreciates the Herculean effort put into its preparation, its cost, and the rarity of the food and wine. He alone moves beyond a purely sensual response to the food to an understanding of its aesthetic meaning. The food signifies creativity and beauty, and its artistry moves the General beyond a simple appreciation of its taste. For the General alone, the food becomes a medium capable of leading the body and mind toward a transcendent experience.

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<sup>10</sup> This dish consists of rye flour blinis topped with crème fraîche and caviar.

As Babette's signature dish of *Cailles en Sarcophage*<sup>11</sup> is presented to him, General Lowenhielm recalls a friend who once described Babette as a culinary genius. He remembers that this particular dish signified the "love affair of the noble and romantic category in which one no longer distinguishes between bodily and spiritual appetite or satiety" (51). And in fact, as soon as he eats, the spiritual understanding that the General has long been searching for arrives, as an awareness of the Grace that pervades the dinner: "See! That which we have chosen is given us, and that which we have refused is, also and at the same time, granted us"(52).

With this revelation, the General finally comes to understand what the Dean proclaimed thirty years ago—"anything is possible" (54). If we apply a Lutheran interpretation to his speech, the General receives a spiritual epiphany through the giving and receiving of grace. The recipient has only to wait in faith to receive the Grace bestowed by God. Given the Christian reading of this meal, I think this interpretation can be applied; however, again, Dinesen includes an ironic tone in this speech that invites us to a reading that offers more insight into the role of the artist. The General's speech concerns the mystery in being granted that which we have refused. As Robert Langbaum suggests in his book, *The Gayety of Vision. A Study of Isak Dinesen's Art*, life is not an either/or situation. Langbaum suggests that Dinesen is commenting on the inadequacy both of placing emphasis on a life that seeks advantage in this world, and on that which seeks advantage in the next (Langbaum 253). If this is so, then Dinesen seems to be recommending an imaginative apprehension of life, one which links the magical world of the artist (as represented by Achille Papin and Babette) with the

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<sup>11</sup> This dish consists of stuffed quails perched in a "tomb" of puff pastry presented with a wine sauce.

mystical vision of the Dean, uniting them into a single, integrated apprehension. The General once thought that to reject Martine was to reject the essence of the spiritual life that she represented to him. At the feast, however, he is granted a momentary vision of the spiritual world, and he sees that the spiritual world is in fact compatible with the world of the flesh. Lowenhielm believed he had rejected the mystic within him by pursuing a life of material success, but at this moment he realizes that the worlds of faith and the life he has led are inextricably intertwined. For the General, the dichotomy is resolved, and he is finally freed from his long-standing belief that he must choose either material or spiritual.

The transformative effect of the meal is not long lasting. Eating a meal takes place over time; however, once one has tasted and chewed and swallowed the sensation dissipates. What is longer-lasting is the experience of community and sustenance that occurs through eating together, and the shared perception of the unity of the sensual and the divine. In the momentary awareness of this twofold perception, both the Lutherans and General Lowenhielm come to "see the universe as it really is . . . and they [are] given one hour of the millennium" (Dinesen 54). The paradox is that the Lutherans move to a transcendent state through the sensory awareness of the food that they taste. The surface of their physical senses rejoins the outside with the inside spiritual world much like a Möbius strip that gathers the outside and the inside together in a new way of connectivity (Appelbaum 79). They are also influenced by the General's comments about the meal and his fine appreciation for the aesthetics of the food. Given their predisposition towards a particular Lutheran spirituality and an understanding of attaining such a state through spiritual practice, they discover unconsciously, in the act of eating, a new way to experience the divine. The General also experiences this new form of connectivity; his body transports him

to a new aesthetic that can only be achieved communally, so that he may experience God's mercy. Previously, he was rooted in the physical reality of his existence but in the presence of the Lutherans he becomes capable of moving into the mystical realm. For all of the participants, the meal becomes the central space where they come to know their world in a new and different way.

At the end of the meal, Lowenhielm is finally capable of making his declaration to Martine that "anything in this world is possible" (Dinesen 54). Upon his leave-taking, the General realizes that he has never been separated from Martine, nor will he be in the future, for they share a spiritual link that prevails over the need to meet in the flesh. Martine agrees with General Lowenhielm that indeed anything *is* possible in this world.

But is it really? Babette has sacrificed all that she has to create a Café Anglais meal in Berlevaag. There will be no other such feast. The General has been pleasantly surprised by the meal and genuinely recognizes its worth; however, he is not aware of the punishing cost to Babette of such artistry (Branson 51). The infinite grace to which the General refers in his speech is actually a direct result of Babette's generosity. And yet the generosity is in an important way driven by self-interest: Babette creates the feast for her own sake, since without the possibility of creating art the artist goes unfulfilled. It is a very interesting portrayal on Dinesen's part that an act so essentially self-centred can result in a gift of exquisite awareness for the guests, such that "time itself [merges] into eternity" (Dinesen 53). This is indeed grace, and it is the by-product of the artist's devotion to calling.

In this we see how the complex relationship of the audience to the artist is an ironic element within the story. Whissen elaborates on this, in a passage concerned to correct what he sees as a misconception about Dinesen's use of art:

It may seem to readers of Isak Dinesen's works—even to readers of this examination of her aesthetics—that she is, after all, merely moralizing and that she conceives of art merely as an expression of some traditional religious doctrine. This is a misconception that needs to be corrected before any honest consideration of her pronouncements about art can take place. It would be closer to the truth to say that she is offering art as a substitute, rather than as an apology, for religion. No one has been able to assign her beliefs to any known religion. All that can safely be said is that she believed in a creative force which, for the sake of convenience, she called God. (Whissen 8)

It is the purpose of the artist to make an impression on the audience, thus allowing the Divine to work through her in the creation of her art (11). Babette serves her art to an audience who will undoubtedly benefit from it, but is not likely to see the divine impulse within it. Still, there must be no compromise between the artist and the audience; each must submit to his or her role; through this understanding each comes into being because of the presence of the other.

Eric Johannesson recounts a conversation with Dinesen in which Dinesen expresses her “faith in the importance of interaction and her conviction about the great riches and unlimited possibilities that are contained in the correspondence and interplay of two dissimilar entities” (115). Dinesen goes on, “This surprise is the awareness, on the part of both artist and audience, of the harmony that exists in things that are apparently opposite, together with the conviction that there is nothing irrelevant in the universe” (119). The irony at play in the novella is that the Lutherans, who take themselves seriously and believe themselves to be superior to others because of their religious beliefs, come to know divine Grace

through the mundane effects of food and wine. Flesh and spirit come together in a moment of sublime epiphany, which, however, is facilitated by down-to-earth intoxication.

## CHAPTER 6: CHEF AS ARTIST

*I wondered if I was glimpsing Dario's secret. Fundamentally, he didn't want to be a butcher, and therefore if he had to be one—because of patrimony or family or simply because he had no choice—then he would be unlike any butcher you'd ever met. His was a calling, not a trade—he was an artisan, not a laborer—and his "works" were about history and self and being Tuscan and only indirectly about dinner. They amounted, ultimately, to a tortured response to grief, and the "works" had become Dario's way of remaining in touch, physically (those giant hands), with those who are no longer with him. When you came to his shop, he didn't want you to see a butcher—and wouldn't be able to say why—but he knew what you should see instead: an artist, whose subject was loss.*

(Buford 281)

A dramatic break in the social organization of France occurred after the French Revolution, which included the decline of the aristocracy and the rise of the bourgeoisie. However, even after the French Revolution, the nobles continued to hold great social and cultural power and so “other social groups looked towards them [the aristocracy] and regarded them as a kind of model to follow” (Trubek 73). During the late nineteenth century, the French cuisine found in both the courtly and the public spheres was similar in nature. Demand for French haute cuisine by the aristocracy and bourgeoisie increased, and the widely held view developed that only the French were capable of producing true haute cuisine.

Typically, only men were apprenticed to become chefs. Young boys (usually starting at age thirteen) were apprenticed out to a kitchen where they would start at the lowest position. An apprenticeship could last ten years or

more in the same kitchen; however, it was quite normal for chefs to move from one establishment to the next upon completing their apprenticeships. The hours were gruelling, the work physically tiring, and the kitchen hierarchy similar to a military encampment. Those in the lowliest positions suffered; however, for the determined young man a world of culinary knowledge awaited him upon gaining entrance into the elite domain of the diner (68).

As Trubek shows in *Haute Cuisine*, the invention of the steam-powered printing press in 1814 plus the rise in literacy rates amongst the French population (as a result of mandatory primary education introduced in the 1860–1880s) led to a proliferation of culinary publications that enabled chefs to “professionalize” the culinary trade. Chefs worked hard to fulfil the conditions for professional status; they formed associations (such as the *Société des Cuisiniers Français* founded in 1882), founded schools (such as *L'Ecole Professionnelle de Cuisine* founded in 1890), held conferences and exhibitions, and published journals (such as *L'Art Culinaire*). Journals such as *L'Art Culinaire* were the “community board for the elite French chefs during the heyday of their organizing efforts for the profession as a whole” (95). The journal offered an arena for chefs to air their views on culinary matters, share recipes and menus, and discuss the element of artistry within their profession. Achille Ozanne, the resident chef-poet of the journal *L'Art Culinaire* published a poem exploring the chef’s long struggle to attain the necessary skills to produce culinary works of art.

*It is in vain that with cuisine, a simple grill-cook  
Can think that he possesses a great talent:  
If he doesn't have within him, an ardent passion*

*That with his very first steps, they are done with confidence  
He will turn in a circle with his spirit held captive  
And matters of progress always out of reach.  
O you, who know our Art, embrace the career,  
Know that you must sacrifice almost your entire life;  
To become a talented cook:  
The start is barren, and success is slow. (95)*

And further on he continues . . .

*The great century appeared, where all sciences  
Shone by the light of their magnificence.  
Under Louis XIV, we see the great Vatel under  
The patronage of the Prince du Condé, that famous nobleman,  
The brilliant cuisine already renowned  
As an art whose valor was not contested  
And always in pursuit of the road to Progress.  
The culinary art thus became a French art.  
Already cooks were characters  
Whose real talents paid off with security  
When Beauvilliers appeared, who was  
The creator of cooks for the public, and named restaurateur. (96)*

As seen in this poem, the characteristics required of the chef artist are complete dedication to culinary production; mastery of skills in the pursuit of excellence and art; ardent passion; and the attachment to a history of progress, nobility, and distinction. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson suggests:

cooking can be regarded as an artistic occupation not because the chef is a star or because cooking is a fine art—the usual argument

for the connection—but because of the affinities of the occupation and the culinary market with artistic occupations. It is not the singularity of the chef, but, rather, the particularity of an occupation that places a premium on singularity. The significance of a signature dish for a chef corresponds to the identifiable style of the painter, the musician, or the writer (80).

Thus the chef artist becomes an exemplary figure for the emerging capitalism of the nineteenth century that prizes “innovation, creativity, and flexibility of work” (222). It is during this period that the chef moves from simply preparing food to creating “a meal beyond imagining” (Vazsonyi 342).

The nineteenth century portrayal of the chef is male; few, if any, women gained the title. Brillat-Savarin and Antonin Carême are men who became well known at the time for their publications on food and cuisine. Adolphe Dulgéré (the actual chef of Café Anglais in 1867) earned culinary artistic recognition when he produced the ‘Three Emperor’s Dinner’ for three royal guests attending the Universal exhibition in Paris. Although Babette shows all the characteristics of a chef (passion, dedication, link with tradition, etc.), men dominate the professional world of French haute cuisine in the nineteenth century—women are relegated to the status of cook. Given the dominance of the male chef in the late nineteenth century, it is noteworthy that Dinesen chooses a female character to take on the role of chef. The reason for this lies in the opposition between cuisine and cooking. If the Babette character were male, he would have to engage in a demeaning practice of food preparation—kitchen servant to the sisters. It is unlikely that a man who had already achieved the chef as artist reputation would take on such a position. Dinesen’s use of a female character creates an opportunity to explore the space between cuisine and cooking allowing her to

portray the continuum between haute cuisine and cooking, knowledge and ignorance. Babette functions as a unifying element who—by virtue of her art—is able to mystically bridge the extremes. As cook, Babette provides food that comforts and pleases but as chef she produces a culinary art form that offers the possibility of an aesthetic response. Perhaps Dinesen is being playful in that she found it easier to portray a woman as chef/artist than a man as cook/servant.<sup>12</sup>

## The Artist

The activities that Babette participates in as a cook seem otherworldly to the sisters, but are standard culinary practice:

[Martine and Philippa] would find her in the kitchen, her elbows on the table and her temples on her hands, lost in the study of a heavy black book which they secretly suspected to be a popish prayer book. Or she would sit immovable on a three-legged kitchen chair, her strong hands in her lap and her dark eyes wide open, as enigmatical and fatal as Pythia<sup>13</sup> upon her tripod. At such moments they realized that Babette was deep, and that in the soundings of her being there were passions, there were memories and longings of which they knew nothing at all. (Dinesen 33-34)

The position of the outsider is suggested in this passage and is reinforced by the sisters' bewilderment of Babette's recipe book. The sisters recognize there is

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<sup>12</sup> An other possible explanation presents itself: It is highly unlikely that the sisters would admit an unfamiliar man to live in their home given their conservative natures. Also, it should be noted that Judith Thurman tells us that Dinesen studied French cooking and toyed with the idea of becoming a professional chef.

<sup>13</sup> Pythia was a priestess who held court at the Oracle at Delphi (a sanctuary to the Greek god Apollo). She was highly regarded and it was believed that she channelled prophecies from Apollo himself while in a dream-like trance.

something more to Babette than her role as cook, but they are incapable of knowing what that role might be. Dinesen gives us a sense of the isolation that the artist (and chef) must bear, through the sisters' incomprehension of Babette's artistic nature and her gift of transforming food and affecting people. Although Babette-the-cook is recognizable to everyone in the Lutheran community as having effected small changes, only Martine and Philippa "were . . . to know that their cornerstone had a mysterious and alarming feature to it, as if it was somehow related to the Black Stone of Mecca, the Kaaba itself" <sup>14</sup> (33). Babette is an enigma: she transforms food, reveals little of herself, does not speak the language, and has been known to fight against authority. She has been accepted into the female household as a woman in need, but she stands apart as a mysterious woman with unknown capabilities.

Further on in the story, when the sisters learn that Babette has been renewing a French lottery ticket each year and hopes one day to win the *grand prix* of ten thousand francs, an image of Babette's old carpetbag transforming itself into a magic carpet strikes Martine and Philippa. They imagine Babette flying back to Paris on it. Babette's foreignness and prodigious power with food unsettle the sisters; they cannot comprehend Babette's artistic nature and in the section entitled "The Turtle" they perceive her as a witch performing her magic.

As stated earlier, the turtle functions as a symbol of the devil and the horror of eating such a creature causes Martine to suffer nightmares. She worries that the house will be overtaken by a "witches' sabbath" (40). The chef is

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<sup>14</sup> The Black Stone of Mecca is a religious relic that pilgrims kiss on their circular route around Mecca. The Kaaba is a small shrine located in Mecca that holds the stone. Muslims believe that the stone was given to Adam on his fall from paradise. It is purported to have originally been white and turned black over the years from absorbing the sins of the Muslims who touch it. It is also said that the stone fell from heaven and was delivered to Abraham and Ishmael.

perceived as having supernatural and exotic powers that are frightening in their enormity. Babette is associated with the supernatural powers of the genie, the allure of the infidel, the horror of self-sacrifice, and the pagan powers of the witch. In these roles, she remains outside of the religious practices of the Lutheran community. As Robert Langbaum describes her, she is the mystical force that reconciles the split between the sensuous aesthetic and the ascetic life (251). Her witch's ability to perform "magic" with "devilish" ingredients suggests an artistry that bridges the gap between mind, body, and soul. The idea that a conservative religious sect and a secularly, aesthetically-oriented aristocrat can reach spiritual heights in a similar fashion through ingesting food and drink is indeed heretical (to the Lutherans) and fascinating. Babette symbolizes much more than the chef artist; she is the link between the divine and the human and she offers food for the spiritual and the sensual development of her audience.

The light-headedness and well being that the Lutherans feel through eating and drinking are certainly facilitated by Babette's artistry. She is an expert in judging how to pace a meal. She is also, like any true artist, an excellent judge of her audience: she fills the wine glasses of the Lutherans (who are unaccustomed to fine food and wine) only once with each course, but tells her server to replenish the General's glass whenever it is empty. At the same time, she does not create her menu with the Lutherans in mind; if she had done so, she would have taken their simple diet into account and provided them with more familiar fare.

The meal that Babette creates is the meal<sup>15</sup> that she used to serve at the Café Anglais. It is a meal that fulfils her desires as an artist and it is composed of the dishes that *she herself* wishes to create. In this sense, Babette's endeavour is

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<sup>15</sup> See Appendix 2 for a closer examination of Babette's menu.

selfish—but it also gives us insight into the role of the artist. Babette creates the meal her artistic inspiration drives her to create. At the same time, Babette cannot know how her audience will respond, and so we see that Babette must submit herself to her artistic inspiration without any guarantee of approval (Whissen 36). Whissen suggests that the idea of receiving artistic inspiration without searching it out is akin to the Christian idea of Grace; that is, one arrives at Grace through the submission to the will of Providence (36). Babette prepares the meal in the hopes of realizing her culinary art. The presumed grace that the Lutherans and the General experience is a felt response to the creative work of a chef artist and the physical effects of food and drink. Ironically, the guests at the table bestow grace upon one another.

During the course of the meal Babette remains hidden from the diners. She is the source and creator of the feast, but she is not a participant. I find Babette an interesting figure in that she provides the context in which each participant is able to overcome the aesthetic/ascetic opposition, but she does not necessarily share in the transcendent experience of the others. Martine and Philippa enter the kitchen after all the guests have made their exits and find Babette looking pale and weary amongst the greasy pots and pans. The illusion of elegant food prepared in elegant settings vanishes. The kitchen is the chef's domain where grease and dirt reside. The sisters do make an effort to express their gratitude, but Dinesen brilliantly shows the extent to which they fall short of recognizing Babette's genius, and the magnificence of the occasion, by having the sisters thank Babette for a "nice dinner" (Dinesen 56).

When Babette informs the sisters that she has spent all her money on the feast, they find the extravagance incomprehensible, and they struggle, but ultimately fail, to grasp the immensity of the sacrifice they have participated in.

Lutheran doctrine does not preach against the accumulation of wealth; however, it does caution against needless and indulgent spending, and the sisters are aghast at Babette's indifference to money. To spend money on helping the poor or administering to the sick is acceptable to a Lutheran sensibility, just as it would be for Babette to return to France to live in financial independence. To spend 10,000 francs on *one* dinner counts as "squandering," and for the sisters is beyond comprehension. In this moment of shock, Martine recalls a story of her youth "told by a friend of her father's who had been a missionary in Africa" (57). This friend had saved the favourite wife of a chief and to show his gratitude, the chief treats him to a rich meal. Afterwards, the missionary learns that the meal had consisted of a "small fat grandchild of the chief's" (57). Martine shudders in horror at the recollection.

I find it interesting that Martine responds to her shock with a memory of a sacrifice and a cannibalistic feast. Does this represent Martine's failure to understand Babette's artistic needs? Or does it show how she responds to the unfamiliarity of the meal by equating it with the utter foreignness of a pagan ritual? I think the answer to both questions is "yes." Martine has just partaken of an experience that is beyond her comprehension. To make sense out of the experience, she must link this "unknown" to something "known." In Martine's case (and likely this is irony on Dinesen's part) the only similar "known" entity within her experience is an utterly pagan meal that is a horrible parody of the Eucharist. However, the result is that Martine is able to make a connection between all of the following: Christ's bodily sacrifice, Babette's artistic sacrifice, and the chief's cannibalistic sacrifice of his grandson. As a consequence of this, all these realizations co-exist when Martine understands what Babette has done. The oppositional forces of sensuality/spirituality, body/spirit, pagan/religious,

aesthetic/ascetic, and epiphany/sin are brought together. Martine partakes of a sensual experience and is driven to recollect the most sinful of acts. The saying, “we are what we eat” assumes new meaning for her, through a memory that is in no way religious.

When Philippa suggests that Babette should not have spent all her money for the Lutherans’ sake, Babette replies, rather scornfully, that she did not prepare the feast for them; she did it for herself. There is a paradox in this declaration. Although she has not sacrificed her person for the diners, she has still sacrificed her capacity to practice her art in the future. Without economic resources, Babette will be incapable of practicing the French haute cuisine that is her art form. This makes Babette’s gift of the feast seem almost an irresponsible action: we might have the impression that Babette has completely sacrificed herself to her art. I do not think this is the case. I think that Babette is not a martyr to her art; rather, she is true to her identity as an artist. Babette has sought freedom both as a Communard and as an artist. She claims that she has “something. . .of which other people know nothing” (58)—she is empowered by her calling as an artist. In providing the feast, she reclaims her identity as a true French chef, proclaiming it to the sisters at the end of the meal.

In her declaration, Babette speaks at length for the first time. She expresses her loathing for the evil that was committed during the Commune. At the same time, she confesses that she still longs for the people who committed these evils, as they are the ones who have been trained to appreciate her artistry and her talent for making them happy. What she yearns for is absolute freedom to practice her art. Babette points out that even Philippa’s former music coach understands that an artist “requires the leave to do [her/his] utmost” (59), and she acknowledges that the spirit of the artist is undermined by compromise.

Babette pities the sisters' lack of knowledge because they haven't been awokened to the Truth, as she knows it; that is, Art demands Truth. For Babette, the truth of her status as an artist is demonstrated by the fact that she created the meal without any expectation of the diners being able to comprehend what she had accomplished. An artist's destiny is to willingly submit to his or her role as an artist, without placing limitations on what that appointed role may be.

Ironically, even though Babette prepares the feast "for herself," she is the source of nurturance for the guests. Babette is the food giver; she brings a dimension to the preparation of food and the eating of it that transcends the physical. At the same time, she understands that in her role as artist she requires capital to produce the art for which she is known. Having spent her lottery winnings, Babette finds herself permanently restricted by lack of access to the resources necessary to perform her art. She has a location (the dinner table), but she will no longer have the capacity (luxurious French ingredients and money) to practice her art, as she knows it. Philippa acknowledges the significance of Babette's action and current situation. The younger sister shakes from head to foot as she enfolds Babette in an embrace—she comprehends what it truly means to be an artist. Something inside of Philippa is dislodged as she trembles against Babette, and she recollects Achille Papin's words, from long ago, that Babette will "be the great artist that God meant [her] to be! . . . [and] how [she] will enchant the angels" (59).

In this scene, Dinesen has Philippa suddenly recognize the life she might have had, but forsook, as a musician, and sees the lost opportunity to know and experience the world in an artistic way. With this recognition, and feeling the keen loss of her own artistic potential, Philippa sees that Babette will not be a great artist on this earth again, just as Philippa will never be the great singer that

she might have been. Philippa's way of consoling herself for her loss is to unite heaven and earth.

Philippa's solution provides no help for Babette, since the heavenly realm holds little interest for Babette, and to cook requires access to material, not spiritual, resources. I think this is why Babette stands like a "marble monument" (59) as Philippa hugs her. Philippa is full of hope for Babette's artistic development in the other world, but I feel Babette's resistance in this moment. As an artist, she has the power to unite with the creative force, but with the end of her art she faces a spiritual death, just as an end of food would mean a physical death. The "true tragedy [for Babette] is the [possibility of the] death of the spirit, the loss of art, the severing of the connection with the creative force, the beginning" (Whissen 61). One wonders whether Babette will be able to sustain her connection to the creative without material resources, or whether her impoverishment (with its independence from the aristocracy) could actually afford her an opportunity to discover another form of artistic endeavour. On the one hand, the art-making Babette has known is ending; on the other, she has a new-found freedom. I like to think that Babette's rigidity against Philippa's embrace represents a determination to remain true to her calling as an artist, and holds out hope that she will discover a new mode of artistic expression.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

*The preparation of a simple tomato is more difficult than the solution to the problem of god's infinitude.* –Antonin Artaud (qtd. in Weiss  
*Epigraph*)

The strength of *Babette's Feast* lies in its depth and richness: it is capable of sustaining multiple interpretations and multiple layers of meanings, mimicking in this way the depth and richness of our experience of the world. The dinner that Babette has prepared so meticulously thus becomes a metaphor for any creative act that allows for a variety of multiple reactions and interpretations. Each guest individually enters a space that gives him or her the possibility to know the world in a unique way. During this process Babette herself does not prescribe ways to interpret in her work; her generosity allows each guest the freedom to react in an individual manner and in effect makes it possible for them to act as co-creators.

Unlike the two sisters who have been unable to feel fully alive in the ascetic world of their choice, Babette creates an aesthetic experience that is potentially transformative, but only if the recipients choose it to be so. This is, of course, true of all art: the aesthetic experience of the audience depends essentially on the nature of the individual response to it. According to Richard Kearney, God's relationship to us, and His ability to transform us through Grace, depends essentially and entirely on our response to Him. This is true in exactly the same way for an aesthetic response to art.

There is an interesting parallel between the dual readings of the text (as a Christian allegory and as an artistic mystery). In each case, we can see two agents and one experience: In Christian religious life, the providing agent is God, the receiving agent is the congregant, and the experience is the congregant's religious communion with God. In the artistic mystery, the providing agent is the artist, the receiving agent is the audience, and the experience is the audience's encounter with the art. We see that Babette is self-sufficient in producing her feast. She is an artist, whether or not the audience is capable of responding. Likewise, God is taken to be all-powerful and self-sufficient: He is God, whether or not the communicant is capable of responding to Him. At the same time, we see that the actual experience depends a great deal on the capacity of the receiving agent. The meal has radically different meaning for the Lutherans than it does for the General; this is because the General has a sophisticated taste refined by years of experience and culture. Art means more to the refined sensibility. Likewise, a religious experience has a radically different meaning for a soul that has pursued spiritual discipline over many years; a spiritual encounter means more to the prepared soul. Although the artist is self-sufficient in terms of producing her art, as Dinesen shows us, she is limited in her ability to transform her audience by the limitations, capacity, and preparedness of her audience. Likewise, God might be all-powerful and all-sufficient, He might be limited in His ability to transform the congregant by the limitations, capacity, and preparedness of the congregant soul.

Dinesen makes clever and effective use of opposition and symmetry here to underscore this point. The Lutherans have no conscious access to an aesthetic response because they are ill-prepared for such a reaction to the material world; on the other hand, their souls are well prepared for an experience of God as they

have spent a lifetime developing their spiritual practice. Conversely, the General is well steeped in aesthetic appreciation of art, but lacks spiritual maturity. The partaking of a meal amongst a religious group at the dinner influences his reaction to the meal. General Lowenhielm has experienced a similar meal at the Café Anglais in Paris; however, it is not until he is surrounded by the group of Lutherans that he comes to his epiphany. The food that Babette prepares becomes the meeting place of artist and audience just as the religious experience is the intersection between God and the religious congregant.

We must keep in mind that Dinesen intended *Babette's Feast* to be read as a comedy, but it is a tribute to Dinesen's artistry that such a wealth of interpretation is available within the story. Babette's art is bodily art in that we must ingest it to experience the full effects of the creative product. It is a completely subjective form of art that brings us back into ourselves and taps into our awareness of our humanity. That a religious sect could encounter grace through eating and drinking, and still be unaware that they have been "exalted by their own merit" (Dinesen 53), is comedic. At the same time, the revelation of food as art, and the powerful aesthetic transformation we see in the diners moves beyond comedy. In *Babette's Feast*, Dinesen makes us see that grace is available to us from all corners—from the sublime to the ridiculous. The novella Dinesen offers us is as rich as the foodstuffs in the artist's feast itself.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Food Tastes and Food Consumption Patterns of Upper and Working Classes

Type of capital possessed and characteristic tastes	Relatively high consumption	Relatively low consumption
<p><b>Employers: high economic but relatively low cultural capital</b></p> <p><i>Taste for:</i> food rich in cost and calories-heavy, meals have many courses, with dishes containing rare and expensive ingredients</p> <p><i>Meal preparation:</i> time consuming, complicated dishes</p> <p><i>Opposition with subordinate groups</i> expressed in terms of lack of economic restraints rather than a change in tastes</p>	Cakes and pastries, wine and aperitifs, meat preserves (e.g. foie gras), game	Fresh meat, fruit and vegetables, restaurant and canteen meals
<p><b>Teachers: high cultural but lower economic capital</b></p> <p><i>Taste for:</i> ascetic consumption and originality, exotic cuisine, (e.g. ethnic restaurants/culinary populism) ('traditional' peasant dishes)</p> <p><i>Meal preparation:</i> simple, easily and quickly prepared dishes, making use of pre-prepared ingredients</p> <p><i>Opposition expressed by</i> the pursuit of originality at least cost and disapproval of the rich and heavy food habits of the upper and lower classes</p>	Bread, milk products, sugar, fruit preserves, non-alcoholic drinks, canteen meals, ethnic restaurant meals	Wine and spirits, meat especially expensive cuts, fresh fruit and vegetables, coffee, tea

Type of capital possessed and characteristic tastes	Relatively high consumption	Relatively low consumption
<p><b>Professionals: medium economic, medium cultural capital</b></p> <p><i>Taste for:</i> light, refined, delicate food, traditional cuisine, rich in expensive/rare products</p> <p><i>Meal preparation:</i> characterized by low calorie, low fat light food, time saving dishes</p> <p><i>Opposition with subordinate groups</i> expressed by distinctions in taste: economic constraints disappear but are replaced by social proscriptions forbidding coarseness and fatness, admiration for slim</p>	Meat especially expensive cuts (e.g. lamb, veal), fresh fruit and vegetables, fish, shellfish, aperitifs, restaurant meals	Meat preserves, cakes and pastries, sugar, non-alcoholic drinks, canteen meals
<p><b>Low economic and cultural capital</b></p> <p><i>Taste for:</i> cheap, high calorie, high fat, heavy cuisine (e.g. nourishing casseroles)</p> <p><i>Meal preparation:</i> cooked dishes needed high time investment (e.g. cassoulet and ouillette)</p> <p><i>Opposition with dominant classes</i> expressed by values about good living: to eat well, drink well, enjoy generous open hospitality</p>	Bread, cooked meats, milk, cheese, cheap cuts of meat especially pork	Fresh fruit and vegetables, restaurant and canteen meals, fish, shellfish

(Seymour 10-11)

## **Appendix 2:** **The Menu – Interpretations**

### **Babette's Feast**

*Appetizers: Amontillado/Turtle Soup*

*Veuve Cliquot 1860/Blinis Demidoff*

*Entrée: Clos Vougeot 1846/Cailles en Sarcophage*

*Dessert: Grapes, Peaches, Fresh Figs*

Much has been written about the symbolic significance of the food and the wine consumed during Babette's dinner.<sup>16</sup> Most scholars tend to focus on the significance of the wine, the turtle soup and the Cailles as symbolic of something greater than the individual dish or drink. Esther Rashkin explores the need to mourn on the part of Babette and the participants. She suggests that "Cailles en Sarcophage" represent Babette's loved ones or her lost life. The word "caille" means quail but it is also used as a term of endearment to refer to a loved one (i.e. "ma petite caille"<sup>17</sup> [Rashkin 6]). In this, the quails can be seen as serving as a symbol of the embodiment of Babette's husband and son, the French aristocracy, and the French life she has forsaken (6). Rashkin suggests that Babette's dish is a narrative of sorts in that the need to bury the dead in such a way as they can be:

physically devoured and digested and hence transformed into a tomb or memorial to their own disappearance: into a monument--

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<sup>16</sup> See for example, Wright, Rashkin, and Korsmeyer.

<sup>17</sup> Translation: "My beloved, my darling, or my dearest" (Rashkin 6).

which is what a sarcophagus, with its embellishing sculptures or inscriptions, is—that marks their absence and that not only permits, but also invites the memorialization or recollection of their presence in and through language. (6)

The Veuve Cliquot that Babette serves is a logical choice according to Rashkin in that the champagne gives language to Babette's loss as the name of the drink translates as "widow Cliquot" (6). The turtle also serves as another gastronomic symbol of mourning in that it carries its own "tomb" on its back and once it is prepared and served as turtle soup it leaves a kind of monument to its own memory (6). Thus the champagne, the quails and the turtle serve to instruct us how, through healthy "consumption" and "digestion" (perhaps standing for psychological reflection and integration) of loss, past loss can be made bearable, even palatable, and can in fact serve to enrich our present. In this reading, the meal acts as a kind of "last supper" for Babette, in which she can mourn the deaths of her husband, her son, and her former way of life.

Wendy Wright proposes a Christian interpretation of the dinner, which is a common approach in analyses of both the novella and Gabriel Axel's film. The feast is usually interpreted as a movement from death to resurrection as symbolized by the serving of "Cailles en Sarcophage." Here, Babette stands as a Christ-like figure—a servant providing a banquet in which the longings of heart and soul are fulfilled. The quail she serves are read as a form of manna from heaven, and the sarcophagus (meaning "flesh-eater") is thought to refer to Jesus' discourse in John<sup>18</sup> "I am the bread of life. . .this is the manna that comes down from heaven . . if you do not eat of the flesh of the Son of Man you will not have

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<sup>18</sup> See the Book of John 6: 22-65 in *The Holy Bible: King James Version*.

life. . . " (Wright 6). Wright follows many critics in interpreting Babette's creative act as imparting God's Grace onto the guests at dinner.

A feminist interpretation, such as the one offered by Susan Hardy Aiken, suggests that Babette offers up her own body as symbolized by the quails. It is a "woman's body, that is offered up, in displaced form, through her Eucharistic culinary corpus" (Aiken 254). Babette is found "deadly exhausted" (Dinesen 56) at the end of the meal, and having given away all that she had to create the feast, she is "emptied out, left again with nothing—in effect consumed by her own artistic production" (Aiken 254). Aiken sees the female artistic creation as inseparable from the "feminine sacrifice."

All the interpretations presented here are possible and legitimate readings of the text. However, as a matter of fact neither the General nor the Lutherans interpret the meal as anything but extraordinarily good food: from this we can see that to the diners, at least, the food does not hold any great symbolic significance. Also, it is extremely interesting, even striking, that in a novella crucially centred around the aesthetic and transformative powers of a single meal, Dinesen actually spends very little time describing the dinner, and she positively refrains from giving us detailed information of the food or dishes. In Dinesen's account of the feast, most—almost all—attention is focused on the responses of individuals in Babette's "audience"; the description of the dinner is sparse in the extreme, and in fact the menu itself is surprisingly short.

I do not preclude a symbolic interpretation of the food in *Babette's Feast*; at the same time, I see no need to privilege any one interpretation of the food over another, and I also feel it is legitimate to explore instead the effects of food on the diners independent of any symbolic reading of the food.

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