



Stockbridge Community Cinema

Programme Notes 19 JULY 2024

The Taste of Things

Belgium, France | 2023 | 125 min | Cert 12A

Director: Trần Anh Hùng

Screenplay: Trần Anh Hùng

Starring: Juliette Binoche (Eugénie), Benoît Magimel (Dodin), Emmanuel Salinger (Rabaz)



Spoiler warning: these notes are best read after viewing the film as they contain plot and character details.

This review by Catherine Wheatley first appeared in Sight and Sound Magazine in March 2024

Who would be a chef? From Boiling Point (2021) to The Bear (2022-), film and TV in the 2020s show the culinary arts to be a vicious, brutal vocation; one that tears apart families, destroys friendships and leaves both viewers and characters on the verge of a heart attack – literally, in some cases. Even the gentle charms of The Great British Bake-Off (2010-) belie a cut-throat edge, revealed in rapid editing, whip pans and close-ups that tighten the screws on increasingly agitated competitors.

Against this sweaty, sweary backdrop of contemporary cooking on screen, Trần Anh Hùng's *The Taste of Things* emerges as an endearing anachronism: a gentle love story and a paean to the pleasures of a carefully prepared meal. Benoît Magimel and Juliette Binoche – formerly a real-life couple – have a delicate chemistry as Dodin and Eugénie, a wealthy gourmet and his stoical sous-chef. Dodin is renowned throughout the world for the exquisite menus he invents; Eugénie helps him bring these ideas to life, working methodically in the cellar kitchen while Dodin hosts his wealthy guests in the salon above. The pair have lived and worked together, and occasionally slept together, for more than 20 years. As the film opens, they are preparing a multi-course menu with the help of maid Violette and her niece Pauline, who serves in the film's early stages as the audience's surrogate,

eyes widening as she takes in the sumptuous sights and smells that fill Dodin's well-appointed kitchen.

At first glance, the splendid production design and warmly lit atmosphere seem to place Hùng's film in French cinema's tradition de qualité. The setting (turn-of-the-20th-century rural France), soundtrack (whimsical birdsong and the creaking of crickets) and costuming (butter-yellow muslin frocks, straw boaters, and heavy linen aprons the bluish-grey colour of bone china) places the film in a lineage that runs from Marcel Pagnol to the 1980s boom years of Claude Berri, when his versions of Pagnol, *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des Sources* (both 1986), topped the international box office and sent British expats flocking to Provence in pursuit of a tumbledown cottage amid the lavender fields. Fittingly for a film about 'the autumn of life', the stars have aged beautifully into the parts. Binoche is fine-lined but flush-cheeked, her dark hair piled upon her head, tendrils floating down just so. Magimel, once so lithe and callous, now has the swagger and twinkle that we once associated with a middle-aged Depardieu. Little wonder that Hùng's film was picked over Justine Triet's spiky, stark *Anatomy of a Fall* (the latter won the Palme d'Or at Cannes 2023, but Hùng took home the prize for best director) as France's submission for Best Foreign-Language Film at the 2024 Oscars: *The Taste of Things* is a nostalgic reminder of French film at its most exportable.

That is one tradition in which the film stands. The other is what might be called the gastro-film, a small but significant genre which also had its heyday around the late 80s and early 90s, and which includes works such as *Babette's Feast*

(Gabriel Axel, 1987), Tampopo (Itami Jūzō, 1985) and Like Water for Chocolate (Alfonso Arau, 1992). These are films that you don't want to watch on an empty stomach – or if you do, you need to have good dinner reservations lined up afterwards. Among the dishes that *The Taste of Things* serves up are a perfectly clear consommé, its surface dotted with droplets of oil; a gleaming puff pastry vol-au-vent, piled high with pale green asparagus and thick cream; a roasted rib of veal, sticky-golden and smoking. There is much talk of wine here ('the intellectual side of a meal', says Dodin, who likes to speak in aphorisms), as well a charming picnic at a long trestle table that echoes Pierre-Auguste Renoir's 1881 painting *Luncheon of the Boating Party*. We're even treated to a sequence in which Dodin and his friends feast on the most esoterically Gallic of delicacies: ortolans, the tiny birds that are tricked into gorging themselves on figs and nuts, drowned in Armagnac and eaten whole, with a handkerchief draped over the diner's head (this is not, let it be said, a film for vegetarians).

Adapted by the director from the 1924 novel *The Life and Passion of Dodin-Bouffant* by Marcel Rouff, the film is partly based on the legendary real-life gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1755-1826). Hûng takes his time detailing the preparation and consumption of Dodin's meals. Seasons are marked by the garlands of flowers that decorate the kitchen, the bouquets of herbs and vegetables that he cooks with: tomatoes for summer, mushrooms for spring, pumpkin for autumn. The passing of the hours is marked by the shifting of the light through the windows of Dodin's chalk-washed kitchen and the waning levels of wax in the silver candelabras that adorn his dining table. In one particularly moving sequence, the camera twice makes a 360-degree pan, and as it does the shadows recede and the years fall away. It's elegant, subtle and all very tasteful.

Jonathan Ricquebourg's restless handheld camera brings a freshness to the genre, though. Weaving and hovering, moving in – almost shyly – to linger for just a moment and then shifting its attention elsewhere, it's both an observer of and a participant in the well-choreographed dance that Dodin and Eugénie perform around their kitchen, a pas de deux set to the clatter and scrape of cutlery on china plates, ladles on silver sauce

boats. There are not many salivating long takes of steaming dishes here (although the ones that do feature make quite an impression). Instead, the focus is on the process of cooking: the heft of a brim-full pan carried from oven to counter; the muscular hands that toss oil through leaves; the soothing vision of a spatula spreading vanilla cream across the grainy surface of a sponge cake. The male diners are given to expounding on the origins of dishes, and lovely little gastro-facts are dropped throughout. Did you know, for example, that the French refer to a Baked Alaska as a 'Norwegian Omelette', or that egg whites are the perfect insulator for ice cream?

More than simply a film about food, then, *The Taste of Things* is a reflection on artists, and the ways in which they communicate through their work, and the peculiar pleasures and anxieties that brings. Asked why she doesn't share the table with their guests, Eugénie demurs that her cooking is her contribution to the conversation. The cook, that is, like the writer or the painter, sends out a passionate utterance to the world and waits to learn how it will be received. In the film's most tender moment Dodin, who has prepared a bespoke menu for Eugénie, nervously asks to watch her eat. Since we have witnessed his efforts in the kitchen, the twisting of his body and scalding of his fingers and labouring of his breath, the request is imbued with a clear vulnerability. As the film progresses, it also reveals itself to be about grief, and rebirth, and what happens when there is no one to receive what we so desperately want to give – a theme that also shaped Hûng's earlier works *The Scent of Green Papaya* (1993) and *Norwegian Wood* (2010).

Of course, the temptation with writing about any foodie movie is to descend into metaphor, particularly when romance is involved. The scholar Alice Guilluy has written eloquently about the tendency among critics to dismiss romances as 'sugary confections', implying, of course, that they're akin to junk food: lacking substance or value. No doubt about it, *The Taste of Things* fits the clichés. It is a feast for the senses; the perfect balance of salt, heat, acid, fat; an exquisite delicacy and a thing of substance. But it is more than that besides. In a way, the food is the least interesting thing about it.