



IMAGE FROM GETTY IMAGES

Sumptuous CINEMA

It makes perfect sense. People love film. People love food. Bring the two together and it stands to reason good things will follow. So sit back, relax and come with us as we take you on a visual tour of some of the best foodie films in the world

WORDS BY SUSAN WOLK

Food on film is big. Whether snuck on to the silver screen in a supporting role or taking centre stage; plunking itself down smack, bang right in the middle of the plot, it can be one of the most memorable features of a film. While the culinary movie experience is often a feast for the eye, a lavish and mouth-watering affair that will whet your appetite and have you heading for the nearest restaurant in no time, food on film is typically cast in symbolic, rather than literal, roles.

Less concerned with feeding your body than feeding your mind, film-makers are prone to assigning food the task of summing up the human experience, using it to depict every emotion from love, longing and despair, to loss, happiness and loyalty. The use of food as a key prop for directors dates back to the earliest days of the medium. For example the sustenance, or rather the lack thereof, is one of the most important themes of Charlie Chaplin's silent era (1925) masterpiece *The Gold Rush*.

Those who have seen the film will recall two classic scenes centring on the hunger of the main character, a tramp, and his fixation with food. In one, Chaplin cooks and 'eats' a boot, with laces playing the part of spaghetti and in the other he makes two bread rolls dance in a play for a girl - drawing attention to his poverty and his need for companionship. In a cinematic tribute to the master the latter scene was mimicked by Johnny Depp, sticking forks into two bread rolls and pretending that they are feet for the amusement of the object of his affection, in 1993's *Benny and Joon*.

In spite of the fact that food has been used for symbolic purposes since the earliest days of film,

it wasn't until the 1980s that film-makers began to regard it as important enough to use as an affirmation of life itself; celebrating it for its own sake. Previously, food had often been used to paint a picture of wealth and privilege, served at royal banquets and other lavish feasts and becoming a metaphor for wealth and riches from which the common man was excluded.

MEALS ON FILM ARE OFTEN CLOSELY LINKED TO FAMILY UNITY AND DISUNITY

Danish director Gabriel Axel's treatment of the subject in 1987's *Babette's Feast* marked a dramatic departure from that, however. By showing that food as pleasure is not merely the prerogative of the elite, Axel reflected a shifting social pattern in post Industrial Revolution Europe, a sociological shift away from the privileged classes and towards a world ruled by a meritocracy. Babette's title feast is classy but classless, haute cuisine that can be enjoyed by everyone, regardless of rank or financial circumstances.

More recently, *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994), *Big Night* (1996) and *Soul Food* (1997) have all featured food that ordinary people can recognise and relate to, using it as part of the cinematic experience. In these films, the meals are closely bound up with messages of family unity and disunity and the striving for perfection. A common thread running through all three films is that food is very much part of the characters' everyday lives.

The films also share an almost reverent treatment of food; with film-makers approaching it as an art form rather than merely a tool. On *Eat Drink Man Woman*, director Ang Lee took 18 hours to get the food on the table on the first day of shooting and the film boasted a cast of over 100 dishes. Likewise in *Big Night*, the star may actually have been an 11 kilo kettle drum pasta pie called a timpano, which took two people to carry and of which the food stylist had to create over 30 in total.



IMAGE FROM GRAPH EAST / CORBIS

Above: Cooking up a storm in *Babette's Feast*. Below: Penelope Cruz takes food, and life, into her own hands in Pedro Almodovar's *Volver*

The latter saw actor/director Stanley Tucci, eager to get away from the portrayal of Italy as a nation of mafiosos, use the main characters' great command of culinary skills to show a different side to the Italian people. The film cherishes the ideal of the truly professional, even perfectionist, chef and restaurateur dedicated to his art and to introducing the best of his homeland to the New World. The authenticity of the film is largely down to the dedication of its two main stars (Tony Shalhoub and Stanley Tucci) who, in a display of true character acting, trained for the cooking scenes for nearly a year in actual restaurants.

A central theme of *Big Night* is that, just as in *Soul Food* and Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (1990), food is used as a bonding cultural marker, depicting the struggles of minority communities, (Italian in *Big Night* and *Goodfellas*, African-American in *Soul Food*) and their attempts to assert their

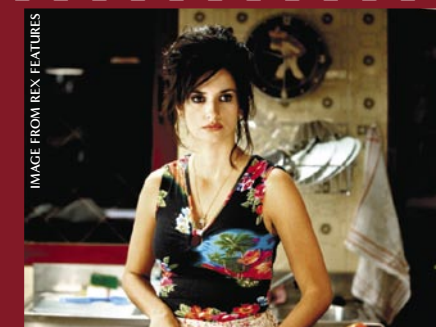


IMAGE FROM REX FEATURES





IMAGE FROM REX FEATURES

Above: The retired master chef and his family sit down for a meal in Chinese director Ang Lee's *Eat Drink Man Woman*

centre stage. Not only used to demonstrate the love the women of this family have for each other, it also proves to be the very means through which Penelope Cruz's leading character triumphs over adversity; via the successful restaurant she opens. Much like in *Fried Green Tomatoes*, the foodie element also comes with darker connotations, in this case involving the unorthodox deployment of a freezer.

Taking on a different guise, that of passion entwined with fantasy, food features heavily in Alfonso Arau's celebrated *Like Water for Chocolate* (1991). The film tells the story of Tita, the youngest of three Mexican daughters, who is forced to follow family tradition and forsake marriage and personal happiness to remain at home and care for her mother. Unable to be with the man she wants, who instead marries her sister simply to be near her, Tita expresses her love and frustration through the food she prepares for the wedding banquet.

Whether used to emphasise the strength of family ties, as a symbol of friendship or an expression of love, food has long played a starring role at the cinema. With a recent string of chef-centric films, (such as 2007's *Ratatouille*, 2001 German film *Mostly Martha* and its 2007 American remake *No Reservations*), no doubt inspired by the modern day cult of the celebrity chef; film-makers are unlikely to run out of ideas for how to put food to good use anytime soon. May they keep the foodie films coming. ■

identity in a foreign country or make their way in a society in which they are not yet fully integrated and accepted.

The ritual of the family meal and its function as an integral social and cultural element, holding a family or a group of people together, is also prominent in both *Soul Food* and *Goodfellas*, where it may be the only unifying and constant element available to this immigrant community. But it also serves an additional purpose; functioning as a sign of status and 'arrival', symbolising the fruits of the good life and an expression of mastery. Hence the fastidious attention the mobsters in *Goodfellas* pay to culinary perfection. Even in prison they insist on a gourmet menu that includes fresh lobster and garlic sliced so fine 'it liquefies in the pan with just a little oil.'

In *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), food is used as a manifestation of the lifelong friendship between two women in the American South and their enduring loyalty to one another (As well as in a somewhat more sinister way. Suffice to say that anyone who's seen the film would think twice about accepting the famed Southern hospitality in the particular form of barbecued ribs.)

Deployed to a similar end in Spanish director Pedro Almodovar's – ever the chronicler of women – *Volver* (2006), food once again takes

FOODIE FILM FEAST

If reading this made you want to make a dash for the nearest DVD rental place (and raid the isles of the closest supermarket while you're at it), here are the best of the rest:

THE DISCREET CHARM OF THE BOURGEOISIE

Luis Bunuel (France, Italy and Spain/1972)

THE TRAVELLING PLAYERS

Theo Angelopoulos (Greece/1975)

TAMPOPO

Juzo Itami (Japan/1986)

THE COOK, THE THIEF, HIS WIFE AND HER LOVER

Peter Greenaway (Britain and France/1989)

FESTEN

Thomas Vinterberg (Denmark/1998)

CHOCOLAT

Lasse Hallström (US 2000)

