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## Let Us Feast! The Long Tradition of the Feast and How It Has Featured through Time in Literature and Film

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## Let Us Feast! The Long Tradition of the Feast and How It Has Featured through Time in Literature and Film

Anke Klitzing

**Abstract:** Why do we celebrate so often with good food? Festive meals are as ancient as they are contemporary, and have featured in books, films and stories since we began to tell them, from *Beowulf* to *Big Night* (1996). Feasts strengthen interpersonal and communal bonds, but also offer the chance to showcase wealth and generosity; however, being a host can be a challenge as well.

**Keywords:** *Feasts; food in literature; food in film; commensality; gastrocriticism, food studies*

Beneath a clear starry sky, tables and benches circle a roaring bonfire. A boar roasts on a spit, glistening with fat and juices. Celebrants partake lustily in the roast while jesting and recalling the adventure they just had. Such a festive scene concludes each of the by now forty issues of the Asterix and Obelix comic book series. At the customary feast, everything is right in the world again – quarrels and struggles are forgotten, everyone is reconciled and in favourable disposition to one another. Why did the creators of this popular series, author René Goscinny and illustrator Alberto Uderzo, choose to end each adventure of their Gallic heroes with this recurring motif? Why is it important to us to celebrate together with good food?

The origins of this phenomenon must be sought in our more or less misty prehistory, as humans, or more precisely Homo Erectus began to hunt together about 800,000 years ago – and to cook together. If you hunt and cook together, then you also eat together, because the food is ready at some point and tastes best when freshly cooked. When the hunt was successful and you share a piece of big game together, that already is a feast in itself. The cooking fire not only keeps wild animals away but also the dark of the night, and by and by, communication turns into language, language into stories, stories into myths, and myths into culture. And all that because we kept meeting around a fire to eat good food. And the food *is* good, because roasted meat tastes better than raw meat, as the tongue and palate know, even though Louis Maillard only describes this process with such terms as acrylamide and glutamine in 1912.

Feasts are an age-old tradition. Long before Asterix and Obelix, they were captured in the great epics of various civilisations. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, there are more feasts than fight scenes; the same goes for the *Iliad*. At those Ancient Greek feasts, the focus was usually on

strengthening relationships and forging alliances – networking, as we say today. In *Beowulf*, the old English epic poem from the year 700, the eponymous hero is celebrated with a banquet after vanquishing the anthropophagic monster Grendel. The feast symbolises the return to calm and order in the community – it is unclear, though, whether spit-roasted boar featured in the celebrations. In the Song of the Nibelungs, the famous Middle High German saga, the celebratory atmosphere is a façade – instead of joy and harmony prevailing, tragedy strikes. Against the customs of the day and their host Kriemhilde’s express wishes, the Burgundian guests do not leave their weapons at the entrance and thus abuse the fundamental trust of hospitality. The banquet ends in bloody, even cannibalistic chaos.

As Homer already knew, the communal meal serves predominantly to strengthen bonds and foster collective consciousness – the sense of belonging and of having something in common. There are religious feasts with special dishes that specifically underline this, for example the seder that marks the beginning of the Jewish Passover holiday. Beside a dinner with traditional dishes, a plate of highly symbolic food items is prepared that are supposed to recall the exodus from Egypt, such as bitter herbs, symbolising the bitterness of servitude. Charoset, a mix of dried fruit and nuts, represents the mortar the Israelites used for building work in Egypt. Some feasts have religious roots but are less heavily symbolic. Many Catholic communities in Germany celebrate an annual parish feast, often on the patron saint’s holiday, which is replete with food and drink, though the beer and grilled meats do not carry religiously symbolic meaning.

Feasts often feature rituals – from toasts to set menus and traditional entertainment. Such customs often have a long history. The bridal table and seating order at weddings, in decreasing closeness and importance, are left over from the Middle Ages. At that time, it was the host to sit at the top table, and the distance in which the guests were seated equalled their distance to the favour of the host. But not only weddings are celebrated with a festive meal, so are other milestones in life, like christenings, birthdays, graduations, anniversaries, as well as funerals. Such occasions bring friends and family together. The rarer the occasion, the wider usually the circle of the invited. In this way, feasts produce and foster emotional and symbolic meaning.

The festive meal at the heart of the film *Big Night* (1996) is a milestone of a different sort. Brothers Primo and Secondo, Italian immigrants from Calabria, are seeking their fortune in New Jersey with a restaurant called Paradise. Younger brother Secondo (Stanley Tucci) serves the guests, while the older one, Primo (Tony Shaloub), is a gifted but perfectionist cook of traditional Italian food. Americanised dishes such as spaghetti and meatballs are unacceptable for him – a stance with which he offends the few guests that find their way to the Paradise. As the restaurant faces ruin, the brothers put everything on a final bid – a feast to which they invite a number of guests, including a famous musician. The meal culminates in a

*timpano*, a gigantic pasta-shell pie stuffed with aubergines, macaroni, meat balls, salami, boiled egg, tomato sauce and cheese. The pie, reverently caressed by both brothers before serving, is cut at the table as one might a roast; the guests heartily indulge. Even Pascal, the owner of the italo-kitsch restaurant in the neighbourhood that funnels customers away from the Paradise, cannot refrain from praising the dish. Not that this changes the fortune of the brothers – business is business. As such, the celebration is bittersweet, a final hurrah. But the communal meal lets the circle of friends celebrate once more what they consider important – good food in good company.

Also for the cook Babette in Karen Blixen’s “Babette’s Feast,” the titular feast is both a high point and a turning point in her life. A Frenchwoman exiled in Denmark, having fled Paris during the bloody quelling of the Paris Commune in 1872, Babette is taken in by two unmarried sisters in a fishing village in Jutland, where the community lives in strict piety. Babette takes over the kitchen and initially learns to prepare the humble local dishes such as bread soup and stockfish. After fourteen years in exile, she wins 10,000 francs in the lottery; however, she does not use the money to return home. Instead, she invites the villagers to an extravagant feast – serving turtle soup, caviar, quail, foie gras, truffles, delicate cheeses, champagne and cognac... By and by, the alcohol but also the good food raise the mood and defrost the stiff company at the table. The communal enjoyment leads to reconciliation and harmony.

A feast is in itself already a gesture that is both generous and patronising, because one has to be able to host a great number of guests, first of all. Unless of course it is a feast to which every participant contributes something, be it a birthday or a parish fest – these types of celebrations signal even more strongly coherence and equality among the community. Salads, bakes and cakes are also easily distributed in equal portions. What is served at a feast underlines the status of the host, often by the volume of offerings, but also by how expensive or hard to get the foods and beverages are. Scorsese’s *The Godfather* (1972) begins with an opulent feast, to which mafia boss Vito Corleone has invited on the occasion of his daughter’s wedding. Tables are laden with fruit and sweet pastries; there are rivers of wine and the guests may indulge in Italian imported specialities like prosciutto, cold meats and lasagna. In a famous scene of Scorsese’s *GoodFellas* (1990), the daily dinner in prison turns into a feast as the mafiosi prepare lavish meals together. Pasta, steak, fish, lobster, fresh bread and vegetables, salami, cheese, wine, whiskey – the men want for nothing, not even the leisure to finely slice garlic with a razor blade. This highlights the power of the gangsters who lack nothing in prison, not even professional cooking equipment.

The role of the host or hostess may be beset with pitfalls though. Some take their responsibilities very seriously, even too seriously. The perfectionist hostess Mrs Ramsay in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927) tries to serve the perfect meal, host a flawless

evening; the main course is supposed to be provencal braised meat (*boeuf en daube*). But some guests appear late, and Mrs Ramsay finds herself confronted with existential questions when she realises how much her life as housewife and mother of eight differs from that of her guest, the painter Lily Briscoe, whose life revolves around art. Cooking, especially at home, is certainly not recognised as art in this context – though the author undermines this claim subtly through exquisite descriptions of the meal.

Like Woolf, the Irish writer James Joyce is considered part of literary modernism, and the guests at his festive tables are similarly plagued by self-doubts. Joyce’s perhaps most famous short story is “The Dead,” which concludes the collection *Dubliners* (1914). The story describes the annual Christmas ball of the sisters Morkan, who always offer a generous feast. The seemingly joyous occasion is the scene before which play out relationships, doubts and longings of the guests – also representing, as often in Joyce, dynamics in Irish society. The table is generously laid out, with roast goose, ham and spiced beef; fruit and nuts; sweets; wine and beer. But Joyce uses the table landscape to showcase underlying themes of his tale – the meat dishes unusually do not sit in the middle of the table but separated at the ends, while sides and sweets have taken the central spot. Typical Irish foods and beverages are either sidelined – the beer sits on the piano, imported sherry and port on the main table – or they do not even reach the dining room, like the potatoes. In this way, Joyce cleverly plays with our expectations and the understanding that feasts exhibit social dynamics, whether existing or hoped-for.

The girls in Enid Blyton’s school stories also like to feast, though often in secret. The midnight feasts are a feature of all of Blyton’s school stories and they all have in common that they offer the girls an autonomous space in which they can decide what and how they eat, and with whom. Here they can rebel against the pressure of conformity exerted by the school routine. The goodies enjoyed at the midnight feasts are those which the girls have been sent from home. Often these consist of condensed milk, sardines, tins of pineapple and peaches, chocolate, ginger ale, cake and biscuits, and they are sometimes eaten in adventurous combinations – sardine on pineapple, for instance, or on ginger cake. The midnight feasts break the rules but foster community among the students.

For as long as anyone can remember, we have been celebrating community with festive meals, shown generosity as well as power and influence, fostered bonds and made new memories. Breaking bread together is a sign of peace and goodwill, and thus we celebrate the smaller and bigger things in life, whether with braised beef, sardines, truffles or pasta pies.