

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY**  
**2024/25 SEASON**



**THE TASTE OF THINGS**  
(Language: French)

Director: Anh Hung Tran

UK Release: 2024

Running time: 135 minutes

Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 2 October 2024

“Sumptuous, sensual and impossibly handsome, at first glance French-Vietnamese director Tran Anh Hung’s lavish foodie romance *The Taste of Things* looks like just another decorous prestige period drama. But in its elegantly restrained way, Tran’s film, which is set almost entirely in the kitchen, grounds and dining room of the country chateau of famed gourmet Dodin (Benoît Magimel) in 1880s France, is every bit as radical and risk-taking as some of the showier, quirkier awards contenders this year (it was France’s submission for this year’s international Oscar category, chosen over *Anatomy of a Fall*, but failed to make the final list).

Take its exquisite opening sequence. Starting with a wordless nod of approval from Dodin’s celebrated cook, Eugénie (Juliette Binoche), as the gardener hands her a gnarled, freshly exhumed celeriac root, the film then gets down to the serious business of cooking. Around 35 minutes, much of it dialogue-free, is dedicated to the meticulous preparation and appreciative consumption of a feast. In a fluidly choreographed dance of the camera and characters, Eugénie is joined in the kitchen by Dodin, kitchen assistant Violette (Galatée Bellugi) and Violette’s niece Pauline (enchanting newcomer Bonnie Chagneau-Ravoire).

Aside from the remarkable technical accomplishment of this sequence, you are struck by the audacious daring of easing us into a film with a tranquil, uneventful study of chopping, sieving, tasting and savouring that lasts for more than half an hour. Given the pressure from streaming platforms for film-makers to open their movies with full-throttle, audience-grabbing plot dumps, Tran’s decision seems defiant and almost subversive.

This luxurious, leisurely opening allows us to fully explore and feel our way around the relationship between Dodin and Eugénie. He is her employer, certainly, but it’s obvious from the outset that, both in the kitchen and outside it, they are equals. More than that, there’s an effortless intimacy in the way they move around each other; the way their heads almost touch as they confide over the precociously sophisticated palate displayed by the untrained but entranced

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kitchen newbie, Pauline. But it's not until the evening, when the plates have been licked clean and the last of Dodin's guests has waddled home that we learn not only that Eugénie and Dodin are long-term lovers, but also that the relationship is conducted on Eugénie's terms. Over a twilight digestif, accompanied by a chorus of cicadas, he asks her to marry him and she gently demurs: it's a conversation that has clearly played out on countless occasions over the past 20 years. Dodin persists nonetheless.

Tran, whose previous films include the similarly evocative and slow-burning *The Scent of Green Papaya*, makes a point of emphasising the parallels between the sensual experiences of food and those of the flesh. The grunts and moans of gratification emanating from Dodin and his foodie chums as they wear the traditional napkin over their heads to conceal the shameful decadence of scoffing an ortolan sound positively coital (a now outlawed delicacy, the tiny songbird would be force-fed, drowned in Armagnac then chomped down in a single mouthful). And while I adored the mischief of cutting straight from a luscious and inviting poached pear to a shot of Binoche's delectably peachy naked bottom, nobody could accuse Tran of being subtle in his symbolism.

Yet once again, *The Taste of Things* defies expectations. There is something refreshingly unconventional about its depiction of the tender, well-worn love between Eugénie and Dodin. It's not just that they are an older couple – Dodin describes them both as being in the autumn of their lives; Eugénie prefers to think of herself in a permanent summer – there's also the point in the relationship at which we join them. Cinema tends to be fascinated by the high-stakes drama and intensity of new love or the brutal evisceration of its final moments. Far fewer films explore the comfortable familiarity of a love that has endured and deepened over decades. Vanishingly rare are pictures that capture this kind of relationship so satisfyingly.

There's a serene emotional harmony between Dodin and Eugénie, but also an enduring, intensifying pleasure in each other's company. It's a pleasure that is expressed through food rather than words. Dodin's longing is folded into the paper-thin pastry of a dessert created for the ailing Eugénie. An omelette, cooked with love and eaten with a spoon, is as pure and heartfelt as a sonnet.”

**Wendy Ide, *The Observer*, 18 February 2024**

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“How exactly do you like your food porn? Actually, it doesn’t matter, because *The Taste of Things* will have you salivating within five minutes and will make everything you ever cooked or used for that purpose feel inadequate: your kitchen, naturally, but also the ingredients, your garden (if you’re fortunate enough to have one), and generally any and all culinary tools. Yes, these people dress up to eat, and you don’t question it for a second.

The setting of France, 1889, means the rest of us don’t stand a chance, not with Juliette Binoche serving up the foodie delights as Eugénie, the personal cook and lover to gourmet Dodin Bouffant (Benoît Magimel). And they have a perfect match in director-cowriter Trần Anh Hùng, who has such a sure eye for bourgeois naturalism that even a dirty cellar becomes scenery.

Such exquisite surroundings make it quite easy, even tempting, to read far more into the relationship of Eugénie and Dodin, which is supposed to give *The Taste of Things* its beating heart as it leisurely meanders through a plot that’s little more than an excuse to move from one mouthwatering dish to another. Perhaps if the film had kept its original title, *La Passion de Dodin Bouffant*, the disappointment in this area would have been less acute.

But *The Taste of Things* refuses to free itself from the mindset of the bourgeois, taking great care to depict them in all their casual benevolence. The harmony of this lush rural world is possible because everyone has a place and is content to stay within it, with Eugénie as the more obvious casualty. She has the kind of feminine modesty in which she demurely refrains from referring to herself as an artist, even if her every culinary creation refutes this, literally declining to leave the kitchen her male friends invite her out of.

She is more than a mere reflection of the man who wishes to overcome her misgivings on marriage, but if the film is unable to overcome its discomfort with discomfort, it’s not much consolation. At least we have the artistic triumph between production designer Toma Baqueni and cinematographer Jonathan Ricquebourg. They create a feast for the senses, if not the heart.”

**Andrea Thompson, *Chicago Reader*, February 15, 2024.**

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“Here is a beautifully shot movie from that estimable film-maker Tran Anh Hung – but it’s in a genre about which I am agnostic, the “foodie” vein, in

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which we are supposed to swoon over all the endless gastronomic detail and mouthwatering fare, and in which food tends to be somewhat glibly presented as a metaphor for sharing, for family and for friendship. (A recent conversation with a friend ended with him saying “foodie” films are no worse than the “filmie” films I roll over for, with their endless love-letter-to-the-cinema shots of the projector beams in the darkness and well-loved movie theatres poignantly closing after 80 years etc. Fair enough: á chacun son goût.)

*The Taste of Things* (originally called *The Pot-au-Feu*) stars Benoît Magimel and Juliette Binoche and set in the Belle Époque, is adapted by the director from the 1924 novel *The Life and Passion of Dodin-Bouffant, Gourmet* by the author, gourmand and boulevardier Marcel Rouff. Magimel plays Dodin, a passionate gourmet living in some style, partly based on the legendary real-life gastronome Jean Brillat-Savarin. Dodin is not running a restaurant – he’s just rich enough to do nothing all day but think about and eat top-quality food, and is looking pretty svelte on it.

Dodin’s expertise is known far and wide and he has a cook, Eugénie, played by Binoche, who is equally admired, and with whom Dodin is not so secretly in love. She brilliantly interprets every demand that Dodin lays down for her: like him, she has an instinctive, creative appreciation of the taste, texture, composition and fragrance of food, the drama and poetry inherent in the way it should be presented and consumed, and its central importance to civilised existence: the tiresome question of those who can’t afford to eat like this, or very much at all, is not mentioned and the absence of piety is probably for the best.

There are many static shots of these dishes being prepared and of Binoche and Magimel duly appreciating them, inviting our drooling at all this refined sensory luxury. I blasphemously longed for a single 25-minute shot of Magimel and Binoche trying to download the Deliveroo app on to their smartphones with only a 3G signal.

Dodin is in the habit of inviting a group of grand male friends round for regular spectacular dinners, while Eugénie shyly eats on her own in the kitchen with the maid and the maid’s 13-year-old niece, who is showing a prodigious talent for cuisine herself. One evening, a pompous foreign nobleman invites Dodin and his friend-group for dinner and tries to impress him with an absurdly over-lavish and unsubtle megafeast. Feeling compelled to return the favour, Dodin decides to invite this aristocrat back to his, but intends to serve merely the *Pot-au-Feu* –

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radically, inspirationally simple and honest rustic fare. (Again, some blasphemy from me: I found myself remembering and preferring Anton Ego's admiration for the signature dish in the Pixar movie *Ratatouille*.) But there is something else – poor Eugénie appears to be ill and Dodin may have to prepare for her an ultimate pot-au-feu of pure sincere love.

There is charm and delicacy here and Magimel and Binoche perform impeccably, though I wasn't entirely sure they go together as the ingredients of a love story. As a foodie film, it has a great deal to recommend it and I found it engaging, though perhaps as a Dr Jekyll to the Mr Hyde of Marco Ferreri's *La Grande Bouffe*. Perhaps there will be a 230-minute director's cut soon with a marathon washing-up scene at the end."

**Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 23 May 2023**