

Film Review: A Matter of Taste (3 stars)

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The cult of the superstar chef has many gods: the chef as bully (Gordon Ramsay), lad-next-door (Jamie Oliver), wholesome teacher (Alice Waters) and molecular scientist (Ferran Adrià). In *A Matter of Taste*, Sally Rowe's documentary of Paul Liebrandt, which originally aired on HBO, we get the chef as misunderstood artist.

Rowe met Liebrandt at the beginning of his American chef career in 2000, while he was the chef at New York restaurant Atlas — and

where his signature amuse-bouche was a ball of apple wasabi sorbet sprinkled with Maldon salt. We meet Liebrandt mid-photo shoot, where he's clutching a pig's head and his chef's whites are splattered with red paint worthy of *American Psycho*'s fake blood. He seems abashed. "This is bound to attract the investors," he says ruefully.

Rowe's choice to film Liebrandt from his early days proved serendipitous — the doc is filmed over nearly a decade and through both triumphs and failed restaurant gigs. The bumps start after Liebrandt quits Atlas and his sophisticated culinary style waits out the economic turbulence in the wake of 9/11 and its comfort-food craze. He's counting on people one day craving his chocolate-covered scallops again.

Bill Grimes, *The New York Times*' food critic from 1998-2003, admits that back in 2000, when Liebrandt's unexpected ingredients were described to others with a straight face, they sounded "like a put-on." Nevertheless, Grimes bestowed the newspaper's "very good" three-star rating on Atlas, back in 2000, when Liebrandt was just 24. "It sounds precious and ridiculous but almost everybody who ate [that amuse-bouche] thought it was the best thing they'd ever tasted."

Michelin-starred chefs weigh in on Liebrandt's early penchant for courses like beer and truffle soup and espuma of calf's brain. Heston Blumenthal commiserates about unwanted interference from owners, while Thomas Keller praises his flavours and Eric Ripert will only say "I have no comment" while wearing a big grin. One foodie likens Liebrandt's manner of food deconstructivism to atonality in music — both took apart and reassembled the traditional, classical mode.

Rowe's doc begins as a portrait of the artist as a young chef. Liebrandt is frequently filmed doing the mise en place and garnish of the dishes himself, his lanky frame stooped over the white plates that are his canvases. ("You'd be surprised how many big chefs are never in their kitchen," he

later confides.) But as the film progresses the Zimbabwe-born, London-raised chef grows wiser and fuller of cheek, chastened by long lulls between jobs and eventually, as one backer puts it, humbled. This more mature Liebrandt finds himself second-guessing whether his menu is too “foodie” and realizing, as he tweaks the lighting over the restaurant tables, that his preoccupation is now telling a story with food, conjuring emotion with flavour compositions, colours on a plate and the whole “sensory experience.”

Rowe’s lens follows Liebrandt to Papillon, an unassuming bistro where he is free to dust food with powdered Fisherman’s Friend (yes, the throat lozenges) to cleanse and open diners’ palates. Barely a year later, Papillon’s owners change the menu and Liebrandt finds himself plating a hamburger with a side of fries. In December 2005, he makes a new start at Gilt. After weeks of 20-hour days and meddlesome menu changes from the hotelier owners, the all-important Times — now in the Frank Bruni era — bestows only two stars, citing too many layers of flavours and an overwrought concept. Liebrandt is let go a few months later. Vogue magazine is doing multi-page spreads on him but he’s unemployed — a chef without a kitchen — and turns to consulting for companies on their gourmet marshmallow and signature cocktails.

The tension mounts when Liebrandt gets what feels like his last chance: backed by Drew Nieporent, owner of many restaurants (including Nobu), they plan to open Corton in TriBeCa. Running through the menu days before opening night, things in the kitchen line get heated and Liebrandt berates line cooks for serving up “dog s-t.” But viewers hoping for Hell’s Kitchen will be disappointed: it’s really the only time the chef loses his cool. They open, and top starred reviews pour in from all sides. The Times is silent.

Early in the documentary, the younger Liebrandt flipped through the Relais & Châteaux restaurant guide, “the most prestigious guide in the world,” he said, wistfully adding “one day.” The stars aren’t an obsession of themselves, but the only tangible validation of days spent sweltering in the kitchen. We wait alongside his team for Bruni’s latest verdict and when it’s finally read aloud, it’s a moment to savour.

A Matter of Taste opens at the Bell Lightbox in Toronto Sept. 29 with a special presentation with the chef and filmmaker in attendance, and a Liebrandt-inspired menu.

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