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A Matter of Taste: Serving Up Paul Liebrandt

Helmer Sally Rowe serves up iconoclastic chef Paul Liebrandt in slices in "A Matter of Taste."

By RONNIE SCHEIB

Helmer Sally Rowe serves up iconoclastic chef Paul Lie-brandt in slices in "A Matter of Taste." Checking back every few years with her subject, the director charts the highs and lows of his roller-coaster Gotham career while documenting his signature style at each stage and venue. Passionate and meticulous, combining incongruous ingredients with the visual panache of a culinary Kandinsky, Liebrandt works with an endearing mix of dedication and sheepishness that could lure theatrical auds despite the docu's 68-minute running time. But the HBO pickup works best as a tasty rejoinder to the cheery self-assurance of most televised cookery.

Liebrandt achieved success early, in 2000, becoming at 24 the youngest chef to receive a three-star rating from the New York Times. A talking-head montage of famous chefs and food critics attest to his cutting-edge brilliance, or at least his innovation; one lone exception refuses to expound on the reasons for his dislike.

Liebrandt quits his top-rated restaurant over a menu dispute, confident he can relocate elsewhere. But 9/11 seriously impacts the restaurant business, as people seek comfort food rather than foodie experimentation, and Liebrandt must settle for a stopgap stint. Given free rein at a neighborhood hangout, he gains two stars from the Times, the "upper limit a dump like that can hope for," according to William Grimes, the critic who awarded them. Rowe highlights a parade of highly conceptual dishes (chunks of cheese served on large wooden mousetraps) or visually stunning but customer-daunting platters ("Will you be out to explain this?" a waitress asks) that earn kudos from distinguished diners. But overall business drops, and eventually the "dump" has Lie-brandt gamely flipping burgers until he cracks and jumps ship.

Liebrandt is next hired by a hotel to run its upscale restaurant, unabashedly called Gilt, where he continues to evolve his highly inventive cooking and plating styles. But when the new Times critic, Frank Bruni, grants a mere two stars to Gilt's feted chef, Liebrandt again finds himself unemployed. Part-time gigs concocting gourmet marshmallows hardly fulfill his highest ambitions, but a new girlfriend seriously improves his hitherto nonexistent home life.

About halfway through the doc, Liebrandt partners with famed restaurateur Drew Nieporent on a posh new eatery in Soho. Rowe then switches to a suspense mode made familiar by countless TV

cooking shows: Will the restaurant be finished in time? Will the new staff meet the challenges of Liebrandt's eclectic menu? Rowe accords much screen time to kitchen interaction as sous-chefs are yelled at (par for the course, apparently) but also given considerable input into the creative process. Ultimately, success or failure rides on Bruni's review, as Nieporent studiously pores over reservations, hoping to ascertain what pseudonym their nemesis is hiding under.

Pic's lengthy timeline, spanning nine years, reps a major boon.

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