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From Kitchen Wunderkind to Comeback Kid

By STEVE DOLLAR



HBO

Paul Liebrandt in a scene from the HBO documentary, 'A Matter of Taste.'

Reality TV kitchen competitions extract maximum drama from the manic preparation of a single meal. In real life, a chef's evolution progresses slowly, through a series of hard-fought victories and sudden, crushing reversals. It could take a decade to see what happens.

Paul Liebrandt, mastermind of the TriBeCa restaurant Corton, shares the roller-coaster trajectory of his career as a New York chef in "A Matter of Taste: Serving Up Paul Liebrandt." The new documentary premieres Monday on HBO, taking viewers into the tumultuous rise, fall and return of a British wunderkind whose ambitious style was a source of both glory and disaster.

Mr. Liebrandt, a devotee of the French chef Pierre Gagnaire, was the youngest chef (at age 24) to win a three-star rating from the *New York Times*, when he was at Atlas in 2000. But in the wake of 9/11, his avant-garde concepts ran askew of local tastes. In one of the film's most painful moments, Mr. Liebrandt finds himself reduced to serving hamburgers when his subsequent employer, Papillon, dropped the chef's bracing, outre fare in favor of comfort food. "You always see food films where it's about the chef and the food and that's it," said Mr. Liebrandt, now 34, "not how does it translate to the rest of life."

First-time documentarian Sally Rowe met Mr. Liebrandt in



Mae Ryan for the Wall Street Journal

The chef in front of the narrow window looking into the kitchen of his restaurant, Corton.

2000, when her husband was wine director at Atlas. She was fascinated, both by the young chef's committed verve and the elegant dazzle of his dishes. "It was before the whole food craze was such a big deal," she said. "You had to know in your gut it was a good story. But as a filmmaker I thought, 'There's all your production values—just look at that plate!'"

Though the documentary emphasizes the stress and anxiety that goes into making extremely fine, high-end cuisine, it also shows how Mr. Liebrandt's passion for perfection is balanced by his self-deprecating wit. A recent afternoon visit to his kitchen, which is visible from the cozy dining room through a long, narrow window, found a well-ordered domain humming with a dozen detailed activities, the lanky chef alert to everything even

as he focused on his own task.

"I'm not that kind of a hysterical chef who goes 'Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah' and starts throwing stuff at people and then I walk out," he said, during an earlier conversation. "I'm very direct and to the point. But at the same time, I'm there right next to them, showing them how do it. I was physically beaten when I was being trained. They don't do that in this country."

Instead, Mr. Liebrandt has taken some notorious thrashings from food critics. Much of the dynamic tension in "A Matter of Taste" develops as the chef partners with restaurateur Drew Nieporent to launch Corton, at the site of the former Montrachet, in 2008. Could Mr. Liebrandt win over even the most exacting of his antagonists? Ms. Rowe artfully constructs the footage into a backstage drama that's part "Rocky," part "Kitchen Confidential."

Corton is still open nearly four years later, surviving the Wall Street collapse that slammed its neighborhood just as the restaurant made its debut in October 2008 and scoring two stars in the Michelin Guide. Mr. Liebrandt's creative drive is as keen as ever, but he's guided by a more mature sensibility. "When I was younger it was more Dali-esque," he said of his cuisine, in which fresh, seasonal ingredients are transfigured into delicate, colorful geometries of discrete flavors—dining as an aesthetic adventure. "Now I'm moving more in the direction of Rothko or Cy Twombly. But I'm a craftsman, not an artist."

Hearing Mr. Liebrandt discuss, in rich detail, how he turns a fresh scallop into a sheet of pasta for ravioli—a daily ritual—or rhapsodize over the acquisition of "these insanely beautiful, fairy-tale eggplants," can feel revelatory, suggesting the way a jazz pianist can take a standard refrain and conjure unheard beauty.

"I know he's an underground inspiration for other chefs, too," said Ms. Rowe, who confessed she remains forever enamored of Mr. Liebrandt's cocoa gnocchi. "He's always changing. He is an artist, always thinking about what he's going to do next."

The chef, once again, demurred. "If you have a pristine piece of fish, it's still a piece of fish. You serve it in a way that represents that piece of fish the best," he said. "The food speaks for itself. Mother Nature is the artist here."

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