

## PLOW TO PLATE FILM SERIES

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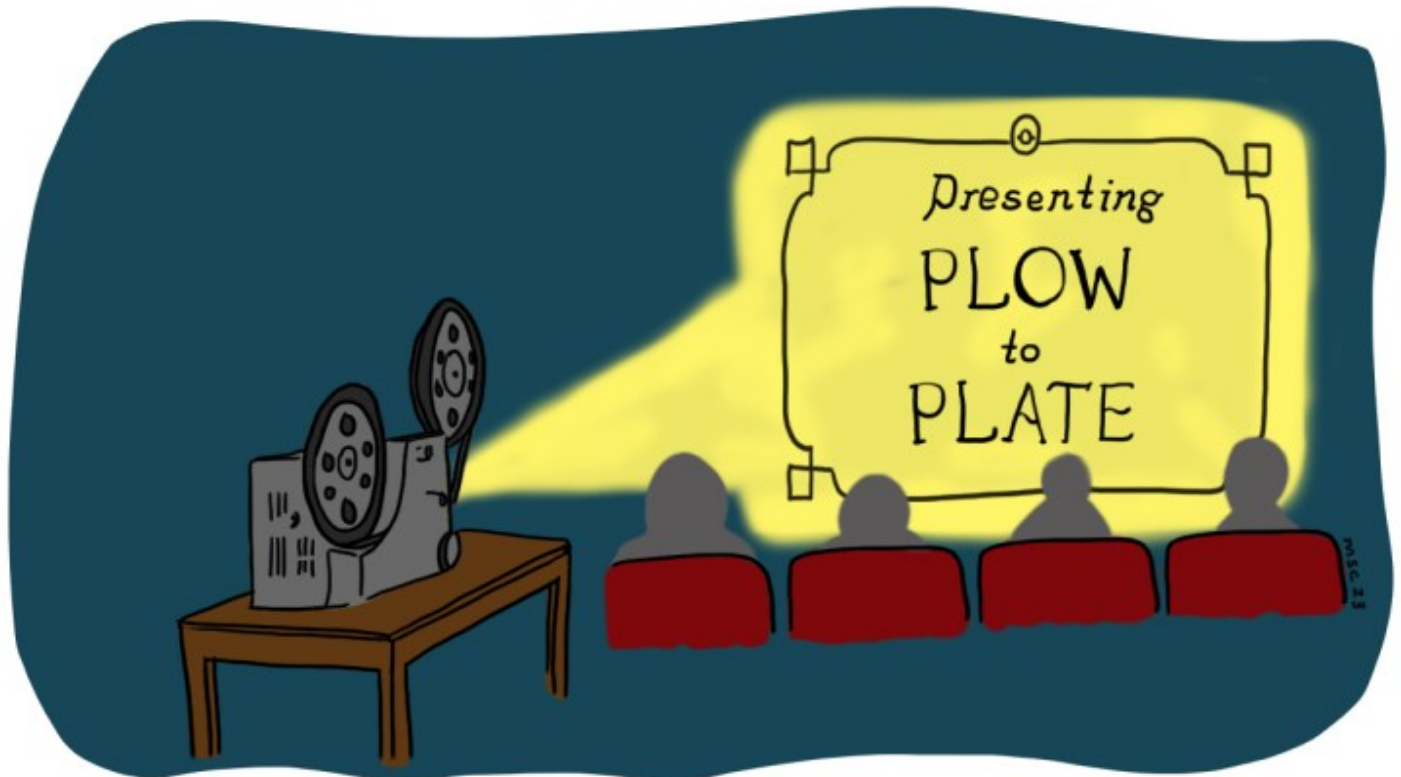


Illustration by Maggie Carson

### A MATTER OF TASTE: SERVING UP PAUL LIEBRANDT

*By Adam Rabiner*

The media feeds an image of the celebrity chef as cocksure and invariably nasty to their sous-chefs and other kitchen underlings. The 2011 documentary *A Matter of Taste* tracks the career of Chef Paul Liebrandt, the British transplant to New York who gained fame in 2000 (when he was only 25) for a three-star (excellent) review of his restaurant Atlas from *New York Times* critic William Grimes. By chronicling Liebrandt's ups and downs, hangups and insecurities, as well as his long road to redemption, the film challenges some of the easy assumptions about the life of celebrated and talented masters of food.

You first see Liebrandt in a kitchen photo shoot wearing a white double-breasted jacket stained with a bloody handprint. A pig head sits nearby on the counter in a pool of

blood beside a green apple. Aware that he looks like a lunatic murderer at a crime scene, Liebrandt says, "I'm not a nutcase, I'm just an artist." Liebrandt's dishes, creative and unexpected combinations of ingredients like chocolate-covered scallops and smoked bacon sorbet, plated beautifully with swirls of green, red and yellow sauces, resemble paintings by Miro. His one-of-a-kind creations, lacking reference points, mean that whether an invention is "good" or "bad" comes down to one's palate and whether a diner (or critic) likes it or not. One signature dish, a wasabi-apple sorbet amuse-bouche, sounds precious and ridiculous, but almost everyone who had it thought it was the best thing they ever tasted.

Liebrandt's self-identity as an artist has drawbacks chronicled in the documentary. - First, he quits Atlas over menu disputes and in December 2001 takes a job at Papillon, a modest French bistro and bar. Immediately he elevates the pub menu to haute cuisine, but in June 2002, due to a poor business climate, the owners are forced to return to more neighborhood-friendly burgers and fries. Liebrandt grins and bears it for several months, but you can see his unhappiness, as he glances at the clock on the wall and visibly wrestles with his underemployment. After three months of mounting frustration, "his brain going to jelly," as he puts it, he quits. Things aren't going great in his personal life either. "I am too nice," he laments about not having a girlfriend. "I get to the friend zone, not to the end zone."

*A Matter of Taste* picks up three years later, in December 2005. Liebrandt has opened his own business and is now making ends meet as a food and drink consultant working on varied projects like gourmet marshmallows. Eventually he lands a gig as the Chef Director of Gilt, located in the New York Palace Hotel, and quickly learns that working with hoteliers, as opposed to experienced restaurateurs, has its own set of problems. As he deals with the many rules that curtail his free expression, he constantly feels like his "balls are on the chopping block."

Despite these challenges he's determined to earn another three-star review from the *New York Times* whose new food critic, Frank Bruni, replaced Grimes in 2004. Much of the tension and a driving theme in the documentary is the striving and effort required

to get a three-star (or higher) review. Of course, the creativity and genius of the chef—and their ability to not just prepare an excellent dish but also to tell a story or evoke an emotion—matter. But so does the more prosaic stuff like 18-to-20-hour workdays, exacting perfectionism executed with military-like precision and efficiency, a clean and well-organized kitchen and to some degree the whims and tastes of the critic.

Liebrandt parts ways with Gilt in January 2007 and laments that his career seems to be going down the toilet and that he is not as economically stable as he should be at his age. The portrait being drawn is less about the stereotypical tyrannical chef barking orders and screaming at his cowering staff than about how even those with great talent still struggle to make their way in this extremely competitive and tough city.

Eventually Liebrandt's life gains some footing as he finds a girlfriend and teams up with well-known restaurateur Drew Nieporent to open up Corton on the site of Drew's famous Montrachet in Tribeca. Will they sway Bruni to give them that coveted three stars? Tune in to find out.

*A Matter of Taste*, June 13, 2023 @ 7:00 p.m.

*Screening link:* <http://www.plowtoplatefilms.com/events/>.

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