



Chef, Interrupted

Paul Liebrandt is young, talented and gutsy. So where's his buzz?

Photographs by JAMES MERRELL

Standing at the gleaming counter of his restaurant's kitchen, Paul Liebrandt reaches for a plastic cylinder of methylcellulose, an industrial chemical used to stabilize ice cream and thicken jarred sauces. The powder kicks up a cloud of dust as he pours it into a bowl of balsamic vinegar. The young chef grabs a wire whisk and whips ferociously, turning the translucent vinegar foamy and thick.

"It's just balsamic," he says, flashing a smile. "You see, we're doing simple stuff." When he dips a stumpy chicken croquette into the froth, the mixture clings to the breading, forming what looks like a cartoon mushroom cap. He repeats the process a few more times and sends the faux fungi off with a waiter. "Don't believe what you read," says the chef with a smirk. "We're not doing complicated food here. People construe it as being overwhelming. It's because they're not educated."

If Liebrandt sounds frustrated, it is not without reason. Five years ago, at age 24, he became the youngest chef ever to receive three stars from *The New York Times*. But his latest restaurant, Gilt, in the New York Palace Hotel—a lavish, \$4.5 million showcase for his experimental and, it must be said, often complicated food—has received an undeniably tepid reception since it opened in December. While New York scenesters crowd nightly into monster eateries like Buddakan, the food cognoscenti clamor for tables at Per Se and the Modern, and enthusiasts of avant-garde cuisine still book ahead at WD-50, the buzz is not there for Gilt. On a Saturday night in spring the dining room (the former home of Le Cirque 2000) is full enough, but there seems to be plenty of room for walk-ins, and the scene at the teardrop-shaped bar consists mostly of middle-aged hotel guests preparing to dine elsewhere. The restaurant even canceled its lunch service a few months after opening, when the crowds failed to materialize. This, despite a high-profile chef and an extravagant, inventive menu featuring foie gras foams, rhubarb gelées and rabbit thighs rubbed with powdered green tea. Surely not helping matters was the two-star review Gilt received from the *Times* in February, a crushing blow considering the obvious ambitions of a restaurant with a \$145 eight-course tasting menu.

"We didn't have the best opening," acknowledges Liebrandt. "It was rushed. There was no pre-opening, none. People knew about [Geoffrey Zakarian's restaurant] Country three years ago. Nobody knew about us until three weeks before we opened. How are you supposed to build a buzz around that?"

For a chef who was once heralded as one of the country's brightest culinary talents, such a comedown is hard to swallow. Atlas, the opulent, cutting-edge restaurant on Central Park South where Liebrandt made his name, had been praised by *Times* critic William Grimes as "one of the most exciting in the city."

"Don't believe what you read," says the chef with a smirk. "We're not doing complicated food here."

Paul Liebrandt outside his restaurant, Gilt, at the New York Palace Hotel

There, Liebrandt, an acolyte of experimental French chef Pierre Gagnaire (for whom he worked briefly in Paris), concocted dishes the likes of which New Yorkers had never seen before: wasabi and green apple sorbet, coffee and cardamom lamb, parsley and licorice soup. The “rude food,” as Grimes admiringly called it, was as controversial as it was acclaimed, and Liebrandt had his first taste of culinary stardom. “Overnight, we went from doing 40 covers a night to 140,” he recalls. “After that we had all the celebs come in, and all the other chefs—Eric Ripert, [Laurent] Tourondel, [Thomas] Keller.”

But a loner by nature, the Dolce & Gabbana-wearing chef never made much effort to ingratiate himself with other Manhattan chefs. In fact, he became known for his outsize ego and openly competitive attitude. “I’m not going anywhere,” he told a reporter for a restaurant trade publication. “That’s why I make all these chefs nervous. That’s why they slag me off.”

“He basically told everyone else they suck,” says one New York chef.

As it turned out, Liebrandt’s heady days as New York’s chef du jour were short-lived. Atlas’s critical acclaim never translated into clear financial success, and throughout, Liebrandt struggled both to manage his kitchen and get along with the owners. “I tried to run Atlas like a European three-star,” he admits. “I went in and I was very aggressive, very hard to work with.” The problems came to a head shortly after September 11, when the hospitality industry went into a citywide slump and the owners asked him to tone down the menu. “As soon as business slowed, they freaked,” he says. “We met a couple of days after 9/11 and I decided I didn’t want to put up with their b.s. anymore.” Nine months after Liebrandt walked, the restaurant closed.

The chef soon resurfaced at Papillon, a small tavern in the West Village. There, he continued in his avant-garde vein, hosting dinners where patrons sucked soup from baby bottles and sampled food blindfolded. But with business slow and the city in a comfort-food mood, Papillon’s owners also asked Liebrandt to head in a simpler direction. “Guess what?” he gloats today. “The people who’d been coming in for my cuisine didn’t come back.” He left Papillon in the fall of 2002 and spent the next three years consulting and cooking for private clients like Lady Lynn de Rothschild. He won the position at Gilt by cooking a 16-course lunch for the hotel’s owner, Prince Jefri Bolkiah of Brunei.

New Yorkers have been slow to embrace so-called molecular gastronomy, the experimental, science-based approach to cuisine most famously championed by Spain’s Ferran Adria. Aside from Liebrandt, the only other chef in town working in this style is Wylie Dufresne at WD-50. In the U.S. the movement has taken off only in Chicago, where Grant Achatz’s Alinea and Homaro Cantu’s Moto have attracted a steady stream of adventurous eaters. “People always say to

me, ‘Oh, you couldn’t put an Alinea in New York. People don’t want to sit down for that long,’” says Achatz, who offers a 24-dish tasting menu.

The menu at Gilt, while hardly conservative, offers more concessions to traditionalism than Atlas’s. “I did some stuff at Atlas maybe on purpose to piss people off,” admits Liebrandt, perhaps referring to one controversial dish of eel, red wine and chocolate. “At Gilt, the food is much more mature.” Conventional delicacies—beluga caviar, foie gras, Dover sole—are offered

alongside his flights of fancy, and the tasting menu can be as dazzling as anything at Alain Ducasse or Per Se.

Although other critics have raved about Gilt (*New York* magazine awarded it three stars), Liebrandt is still visibly smarting from Frank Bruni’s review. (It is, after all, the *Times* that holds life-or-death sway over a New York restaurant’s fate.) “I had six weeks to demolish, rebuild, hire and train an entire staff,” Liebrandt says. “I don’t know any restaurant on this level that attempted to do something like that...and I got reviewed after five weeks. I think it was a little unfair, to be honest.” He’s also quick to point to PR and marketing failures for Gilt’s false starts. (Gilt is owned by a group of anonymous London investors but managed by the hotel.) “They put full-page ads in the *Times* that they paid a lot of money for. It was this cheesy kind of stuff—like, ‘Come to Gilt for a life-changing experience’—that just doesn’t fit,” he gripes.

Although Liebrandt is still hardly the food world’s favorite son (“Chefs say s--- about each other all the time,” he says. “Smile one minute and stab you in the back the next”), he does have his fans in

the industry. “I thought it was going to be a three-star review,” says Jean-Georges Vongerichten, for whom Liebrandt worked briefly at Vong in London. “I think Paul delivers something pretty amazing.”

Restaurateur Drew Nieporent, a fan of Liebrandt’s cooking who at one point discussed opening a restaurant with the chef, expresses an equally sympathetic view: “When you set out to open a three-star and you only get two stars, how do you market yourself? A really good two stars?”

And Nieporent points out the restaurant’s fundamental challenge. “The question is, is this the sort of food people want to eat?” he says. “I think the jury’s still out.”

Meanwhile, the chef who once bragged to London’s *Sunday Telegraph Magazine*, “I wish to be—I will be—the youngest chef to receive four stars,” insists momentum is building. “I have one gentleman who’s been here 20 times,” Liebrandt says. “He says, ‘Just cook for me.’ We’ve built a trust with certain customers, and they allow us to do whatever we want.” And he’s dreaming of that next big step, a place that’s truly his own.

“Restaurants come and go,” he says. “Chefs—well, I’m still here.”

—JAY CHESHES

Gilt, the New York Palace Hotel, 455 Madison Avenue, New York, 212.891.8100



Above: Gilt’s wood-paneled dining room. Below: Liebrandt’s peekytoe crab with nori.

“He basically told everyone else they suck,” says one New York chef.

