

BIL DONOVAN  
CHUCK CLOSE  
**GRETA GERWIG**  
MARILYN MINTER  
PAUL LIEBRANDT  
ROBERT WHITMAN  
AND MORE

# as i

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# *the* outré *limits*

PAUL LIEBRANDT

*Food Photography by Evan Sung • Portrait and Interview by Tatijana Shoran • Paul Liebrandt styled by Stacey Jones*



**Brioni:** suit, shirt, tie and pocket square • **Bally:** Carryall bag • **Graff:** 42mm rose gold ChronoGraff





*Scallops/Porcini/Black Rice*

Although he has made his name at the terrific Corton in New York, Paul Liebrandt is, like me, a London boy. Paul and I took very different routes up the ladder of our profession. I'm a self-taught chef, whereas he undertook apprenticeships at various establishments—L'Escargot, Marco Pierre White's legendary The Restaurant, Pied à Terre, Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons, Pierre Gagnaire, and Bouley. He's good on the crazy nature of restaurant life: the dodgy dorms, drinking binges, sleep deprivation, camaraderie, and quirky personalities, and the infernal heat in poorly ventilated kitchens that had him periodically tipping an entire bottle of water over himself. He's thoughtful and eloquent on the downsides of culinary life that can make it hard to take: the repetitive drudgery, the pressure of proving yourself day after day, the isolation.

Although we cut our teeth in different ways, when Paul came to eat at The Fat Duck, I quickly recognized a kindred spirit—someone who, culinarily speaking, speaks my language. For me, good food is ultimately about emotion. Of course, you have to practice, develop, and perfect the necessary techniques, otherwise there are likely to be limits to what you can achieve creatively. But eating is a multisensory experience, and a large part of the deliciousness of food comes from its appeal to the five senses: taste, smell, sight, touch—in terms of our appreciation of different textures—and even sound. And this appeal in turn triggers all kinds of memories and associations that can enormously enhance the perception of flavor. This is something that Paul understands. Early on in his apprenticeship, he says, he realized that in cooking there was "a simple animal attraction to the tasks that appealed to my senses." It's this sensual appreciation that gives his cuisine a strength of character. Thus his dish "The Marine," with its oyster, apple, onion meringue, and shallot cream, grown out of Paul's fondness for the heady saline scent of sea foam. His Smoked Caramel and Pomegranate picks up on the caramel flavor of the Butterkist popcorn he relished at the movies. Many people think that this emotional aspect of cooking doesn't fit well with a technical, scientific approach. To me this attitude never made much sense, and Paul takes a similar viewpoint. Working with pastry in the early days of his apprenticeship showed him the value of precision and consistency and, like me, he saw no reason why that shouldn't apply to savory dishes just as much as sweet ones. This has become part of his signature style.

Cod Cheek with Smoked Bone Marrow and Black Trumpet; Beet-Hibiscus-Glazed Foie Gras with Trevis; Black Sesame Crème with Purple Potato Ice Cream and Cashew Paste—these are beautiful, precise, well-thought-out plates of food. But from the way Paul talks about his cooking, you can also understand the emotion that has gone into them—how his Rhubarb, Strawberry, and Cucumber Royale is infused with memories of his Sussex boarding school. How the dress-shaped white-beer gel in his Summer Crab Composition reflects Paul's Sundays spent girl-watching in the pub. And how his take on "The Bagel" and the skyscraper shape of his "Gold Bar" dessert both reflect his excitement on first arriving in New York as a twenty-three-year-old looking for work.

—HESTON BLUMENTHAL, chef

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*Pheasant Egg and Razor Clam*



*Ruby Red Shrimp and Reindeer Lichen*



*Kampachi Jamon*



*Kampachi/Huckleberry/Rose/Daikon*

**AS IF: Your dishes are visual masterpieces that never upstage the taste of the dish; they elevate the experience of eating it. Do you follow a set of rules to create that balance time after time?**

PL: Paul Liebrandt: Yes and no. The rules are based on classical foundations, and we don't make up flavors and visual aspects; they are based on things that I know will work. I like to take classic foundations in a different direction. For example, I take certain ingredients that work well together, such as cheese and tomato, garlic and onion, then I try to interpret them in a different way. My food is familiar, yet there is always a twist.

**AS IF: Your blue potato ice cream was quite magical and yet so simple because it actually tasted like potato; there wasn't anything masking it.**

PL: I wanted to do something with potatoes that hadn't been done before, but at the same time keep the quality and taste of the potato intact and pure.

**AS IF: Was there a certain dish or food experience growing up that inspired you to become a chef?**

PL: I grew up in London's Chinatown where the streets were full of fishmongers, and there was

Berwick Street Market in Soho, which had butchers selling game. I was reacting, I suppose, from a food point of view, to what I saw.

**AS IF: When you first started to cook was there a certain cuisine that intrigued you most?**

PL: French. I always loved the beauty and classicism of French cuisine.

**AS IF: Is that the basis of your cuisine today?**

PL: Absolutely. For me, French cuisine is the building block of technique. But as I've gotten older, I've embraced other cuisines, such as Japanese. I like the sensibility and minimalism of Japanese cuisine.

**AS IF: How have you evolved as a chef?**

PL: Rather than the idea of creativity for creativity's sake, I'm more concerned with the quality of what I'm doing. I've learned to slow down a little bit and take the time to look deeper into what I am doing. I am still, and will always be, finding and defining my voice.

**AS IF: Have you proved yourself?**

PL: I'm still proving myself every day. I don't think I'll ever stop doing that.

**AS IF: Do you have a weakness in your skill set or cuisine that you'd like to work on?**

PL: I want to improve everything. As you get older your ideas change, the way you approach things change, and your palate changes. When I was younger I liked playing with levels of sweetness in the food, whereas now I am much less about sweet. I guess it's similar to periods in a painter's evolution as an artist, like Picasso's Rose and Blue periods. I'm going through a constant arc of change, and I am always looking to improve myself.

**AS IF: Where do you see yourself in fifteen years?**

PL: I would like to see myself in a position where I'm a little better known, a little more developed in terms of my cuisine and who I am as a chef. I would like to have a definitive brand; I feel that I'm still clarifying who I am and what I stand for. Most ambitious chefs come into their own at my age, mid-thirties, and in the years leading up to and into their forties, they usually will develop into what they will become when they reach their mid-forties—a renowned chef, like Thomas Colicchio, who is now in his late fifties. I spent my twenties and early thirties learning my craft and developing my “voice,” and now the next ten to fifteen years will be spent pushing it, branding it, and expanding it so more people can enjoy what I do. I want people to enjoy my food, experience it, and

hopefully get something more than just a nice meal out of it.

**AS IF: What has been your most valuable mistake?**

PL: Lack of humility. You have to have an ego in this business, which is fine, but ego can be detrimental to yourself and your business. Recognition and fame came to me when I was quite young. I was twenty-four when I was in the *New York Times*. That's very young to have that kind of press and stay humble. I would intentionally be rebellious and say or do things I would never do today. I used to feed into that sort of “enfant terrible” idea.

**AS IF: On your personal website you have a variety of dishes and recipes. The amount of dedication and detail that goes into one dish, and the multitude of stages and cooking time is so precise and intricate. How do you do this night after night?**

PL: It's not hard to do it if you give yourself the means to do it. To the untrained eye it may seem overwhelming, but it's what we do. It's what I've done my whole life and that's the value in what I do. This is not a typical style of dining, but it's the style I do very well. You'd be surprised how hard it is to find a chef who can come up with a really good sandwich; it's easier to do technically challenging

dishes. It's not easy to cook this way night after night, but this is what I do.

**AS IF: What's your goal as a chef?**

PL: To elicit emotion, which is important to me. Food should be emotional. Eating is something that everyone has to do, and therefore food is an amazing common denominator among people. You don't have to look at art, or listen to music, but you do have to eat. Emotion is very important when creating new dishes. I think of flavors and ideas and telling a story. Each dish is a story.

**AS IF: Do you go through dry spells? If yes, how do you manage them?**

PL: Of course I do. Creativity and production don't really go hand in hand, so when I am experiencing a dry spell, I'll make sure the production and execution is absolutely perfect, and I'll focus on that. Through focusing on that, I loosen up. I'm not the kind of guy who says, “I want to be creative now!” I approach it more by focusing on one thing at a time, like execution, which often gives me ideas, so I'll try them out and adjust them until they start to take shape. Finding your creative voice has a lot to do with maturing as well.

**AS IF: What is your benchmark for success?**

PL: Success doesn't have to be exposure in terms

of commercial success or financial success. To me, success is being happy with what I'm doing, being happy with the people I work with, and having a customer say, “I came all the way from Russia to taste your food”—that's the success! The benchmark of success is producing something that people enjoy.

**AS IF: What excites you most about food?**

PL: Something that I've always loved is the unknown. I'm always seeking out new ingredients and always trying to learn what I can do with them. That's why I'm always excited to work with food.

**AS IF: Is there one ingredient you can't live without?**

PL: Sea salt! It's fantastic! It's so natural, so basic, yet so necessary.

**AS IF: Are you a perfectionist?**

PL: I would like to think that I am.

**AS IF: What drives you?**

PL: Failure. I don't want to fail.

**AS IF: What is your signature trait?**

PL: I would say it consists of a lot of little things that lend to my personality as a chef. I don't follow trends, I don't try to be someone that I'm not, I'm





*“Emotion is very important  
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*From the Garden*





Wild Alaskan King Salmon



Lamb neck, Black eggplant paste



Corn, Lobster, Vadouvan Spice

very honest about who I am. I'm very open; I throw it all out there. I give it my all.

**AS IF: What is your pet peeve?**

PL: Dishonesty. If you're in an agreement with someone, follow it through; if you can't do it, say so. Be honest about it. I don't like dishonesty, and this business is rife with it.

**AS IF: You once said, "Food is the medium of all senses." Explain what you meant by that.**

PL: Let's take green food as an example. Green is a very creative color, and it's a color that calms people. It's the color of spring. So the feeling of green, for me, would be in balance with the different flavors, shades, and textures of green foods. Like the snap of a beautiful French sorrel, or the slight lemon-citrus flavor of a wood sorrel. They're both sorrel, they're both slightly different in their color and texture, but each is unique in its own way, and I like playing on that and layering it. I was playing with the notion of reinventing Chicken Kiev by manipulating the different levels and intensity of garlic—confit garlic, fresh garlic, green garlic, white garlic, garlic ramps, spring garlic, red garlic. I took these many variations of one flavor and subtly balanced them with the chicken to create a different take on this well-known dish. Trying to attain the wild nature of that aggressive garlic flavor and balancing it in the dish was exciting.

*"Something that I've always loved is the unknown. I'm always seeking out new ingredients and always trying to learn what I can do with them."*

**AS IF: What inspires you?**

PL: Travel, culture, meeting new people, art. It's never one thing.

**AS IF: Tell me about your latest project in Brooklyn called The Elm.**

PL: It's in Williamsburg, and it's a much more approachable and informal dining experience than Corton. At The Elm there are no tablecloths, and it's a la carte pricing, and we don't have a traditional appetizer and main-course style menu. Instead, the idea is to share dishes, and it's the sort of food you can eat two or three times a week. Have one small dish or five small dishes. We give the customer a choice, and we do it with great execution, great ingredients, and at an affordable

price. You can come in and have a well-polished meal that feels very special, but without pomp and circumstance.

**AS IF: It's AS IF you could express the work of your favorite artist in a dish. Who would the artist be and what would the dish be?**

PL: Joan Miró, Cy Twombly, and Mark Rothko. If I were to take Miró, I would do my garden dish, which is abstract in color and form. Each ingredient is chosen for the taste, shape and color, and is patterned around the plate. Cy Twombly would be my skate dish I made at Corton, which was skate rolled in a nettle paste, fresh green spring nettles, and razor clams, and a pesto made from nettles with macadamia nuts and baby pickled turnips. I make a beautiful milk from the juice that comes out of the razor clams that has a delicate salinity and marries well with the herbs and works well with the skate. There are little lettuces and anise, as well, so it's very dainty, free flowing, and layered—like a Twombly. The Rothko would be my ayu dish. Ayu is a sweet river fish. The plate is very structured with swaths of color and flavor. It's made with spinach and garlic, huckleberry, and red wine. It's very acidic, very vegetal, with a big round garlic flavor. The ayu is delicate and light with a subtle melon-like flavor. Each flavor plays off the other, but they're not intermingled; they're lined up on the plate.





*Saffron Vanilla Fudge*



*"The Gold Bar"*