



TOP CHEFS:

BEST NEW RESTAURANTS
IN AMERICA, PAGE 79

HOW TO CURSE,

PRAY, CAJOLE, AND ENJOY
THE LANGUAGE OF MEN,
PAGE 124

MAN AT HIS BEST

NOVEMBER 2009

(KATE
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ATTACK OF THE DRONES:
THE FUTURE OF WARFARE,
PAGE 130



The Best Sex Movies of the Year

ENTER TO
WIN
ONE
MILLION
DOLLARS

SEE PAGE 35

LIFE AFTER
MADONNA:
GUY RITCHIE'S
3 SECRETS
TO LIFE,
PAGE 118



WATCHES,
PAGE 57
TABLE OF CONTENTS,
PAGE 13
BUT FIRST, A COCKTAIL,
PAGE 50

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★ A RESTAURANT FOR OUR TIME ★
AREA 31

MIAMI

270 Biscayne Boulevard
Way; 305-424-5234
area31restaurant.com



Key West pink-shrimp risotto.

If it seems as though this list has a bounty of seafood restaurants, the reason is that never have American chefs had such access to high-quality fish. In the case of Area 31, the access is via Fishing Area 31, a patch of ocean—stretching from the Gulf of Mexico to the western Atlantic, and from the top of South America halfway up the Eastern Seaboard—designated by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization for sustainable fishing. (You get an amazing view of this glistening blue sanctuary, with occasional storms coming in off the Caribbean, from the sixteenth-floor dining room.) John Critchley draws on this backyard abundance as he becomes Miami's most exciting new chef. He has a command of every species, knowing when to treat a fish with a skillful preparation—as he does with unusual pastas like the ricotta gnocchi with tuna “bolognese”—and when to leave it alone, adding only a gloss of olive oil and a little chile. Each day the menu lists the fish that arrived before noon that Critchley is dying to cook at dinner—corvina, mahi-mahi, red drum, dorade—and you choose from a list of dressings like salsa cruda or piquillo pepper and basil. It's uncomplicated, as it should be when your product comes from the waters outside your window.

CORTON

NEW YORK



Paul Liebrandt made his name creating eccentric dishes—eel with chocolate sauce, anyone?—that led some to praise him as an innovator and others to dismiss him as a prankster. Now at Corton, where he is partners with restaurateur Drew Nieporent (Nobu, Tribeca Grill), Liebrandt has toned down the sensational, exercising his fertile imagination within the precision of French cuisine.

“Being unique and interesting is not enough,” says the African-born thirty-three-year-old chef of his early antics, like feeding guests after blindfolding them and binding their wrists. “Food must be pleasurable and delicious. I want my cooking to be a total reflection of me but without the bells and whistles.” And without blindfolds. (“I only did that twice.”) These days Liebrandt's dishes focus on a few carefully considered ingredients. A turbot arrived crusted with almonds in a citrus-coconut broth with the addition of black garlic, its sweet, dried-fruit aroma like the perfume from an Indian spice market—pungent, elemental. This is food that has grace, as if given a benediction of flavor to exalt the main ingredient.

One evening I reminded Liebrandt that in 2002, Esquire declared him the chef most likely to change the way we eat in the twenty-first century.

“All in good time,” he said, in a voice as dry as gin.

239 West Broadway; 212-219-2777; cortonnyc.com

The Ascent of Paul Liebrandt



1976: Born in Rhodesia to British parents. Later attends boarding school in England.

1995–1998: Works for titanic London chef Marco Pierre White, then at Jean-Georges Vongerichten's Vong, and Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons in the UK.

1999: Moves to New York City, lands a job with David Bouley.

2000: Appointed chef at Atlas, an early example of avant-garde cooking. Liebrandt's concoctions include salsify soup with a float of Delirium Tremens beer and a dish with a sauce/foam of calf's brains and foie gras.

Earns three stars from The New York Times.

2001: Leaves Atlas for Papillon, where he serves scallops with chocolate sauce, onion sorbet, and beef smoked over hay.



Liebrandt with his father, 2001, at Atlas.

2005: At Gilt, in the Palace Hotel.

2006: The brother of the Sultan of Brunei, the Palace's owner, embezzles millions; for budget reasons, Liebrandt is let go.

2008: Opens Corton to excellent reviews. Food & Wine declares him one of the best new chefs in America.

