

A Cinema Guild Release



Step Up to the Plate

(Entre les Bras)

A film by Paul Lacoste

**Opens September 14th in NYC at
Lincoln Plaza Cinemas & Quad Cinemas**

89 minutes / HD / 1.85 / Dolby Digital / France / Not Rated

In French w/ English Subtitles

Stills available at: www.cinemaguild.com/downloads

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Short Synopsis

French chef Michel Bras, one of the most influential chefs in the world, has decided to hand over his renowned 3-Michelin-Star restaurant to his son Sébastien. Having worked with his father for 15 years, Sébastien is ready. But it's not easy to take over the family business when your father is a master in his field. Filmed in the gorgeous Aubrac region in the South of France, home to the Bras family for generations, *Step Up To The Plate* offers a rare glimpse into the Bras' culinary process while capturing one of the most closely watched transitions in haute cuisine.

Interview with Director Paul Lacoste

Ten years ago, you made a documentary about Michel Bras¹. Is *Step Up to the Plate* a follow-up?

Paul Lacoste: You could say that. In the first film, we saw Michel correcting his son's spelling of the word "shallot". Maybe that's how I got the urge to make this second one on Sébastien. At the time, I was drawn to this young man who had an interesting profile, although he didn't have the same personality as his father. I sensed in him a "vibe" which I had to do justice to, one day. He was just under 30 years old and he was a very precise, meticulous chef with a clear understanding of what destiny had in store for him. His position of brilliant second-in-command had affected me. To me, he was in a way the equivalent of a director of photography in cinema: they both work alongside a director and they make things possible. Ten years later, Sébastien is still a great technician, and his personal culinary expression is starting to explode. When I talked to him about this film, I suggested a sort of creative logbook. The idea was to get him to take risks – that's often what I seek to do in my films. I wanted him to take the plunge and create a new dish, but without knowing if he'd succeed.

But your film isn't strictly speaking about cooking.

P.L.: No, it's above all a film about the relationship between a father and his son. But I think the question is well defined thanks to cooking, which is at the heart of the filial relationship – after all, we feed our children, don't we? So, it's about alienation and liberation, about a given place: the Aubrac region.

Did you have trouble getting two such modest men as Michel and Sébastien Bras to talk?

P.L.: It's true that in the South of France, where I also come from, it's not so easy to have a psychological discussion with your father. You don't talk to each other, you don't tackle complex topics head-on. But I think that the film does, however, pay tribute to their complicity – if only in terms of body language. And there is boundless love and affection between them.

Technically, how do you film such a complex human relationship and such abstract ideas as heritage or the handing-on of knowledge?

P.L.: It's difficult. I tried to sincerely portray the handover: when a father steps aside and a son is born. So, you have to start by gaining the protagonists' absolute trust, so that they agree to commit to a project like this and to open up. You almost have to make them see

¹"Inventing Cuisine: Michel Bras", a film by Paul Lacoste (Documentary, 52 min, La Huit Production)

it as a job – even if it’s of course not an “acting job”. It’s this trust which is the hardest thing to gain, because I certainly didn’t want to “steal” anything off them. That’s why cooking made it easier for me. When you’re filming hands in extreme close-up, you just have to move the camera up slightly to see their faces and capture some very personal things.

Why do we never see you in the frame when you have such a close relationship with the Bras?

P.L.: I hope I’m still present through my view of them or my ability to listen! When Michel and Sébastien make cutting remarks, for example, you can tell that they’re more or less doing it on purpose. They know it’s being recorded. I’m not totally transparent; my technical equipment is often very present and causes certain reactions. You can clearly tell that they’re talking to me at times. And I’m convinced that my presence crystallized or perhaps even accelerated this handover that I went there to film. Sébastien said to me one day: “If you film this handover, it will be recorded more powerfully than if it had been at a solicitor’s.” For Michel, it’s the same thing. This film is the proof that things happened. Both needed it to move on, because this handover is still quite painful.

What does it change for you to go from directing TV documentaries to a feature film?

P.L.: First of all, it strengthens my conviction that cooking is an absolutely incredible spectacle: listening to a radish languishing in stereo, on a plate ten meters wide on a big screen is an amazing experience! But it’s true that with a feature film, I can’t just explore the stylistic mystery of a chef as I did fifteen years ago. I need a story, I need some Shakespeare, King Lear. In this film, I had to have things happen: Sébastien had to produce a masterpiece. It really was a leap into the void. Because Michel is Picasso, but we don’t know about Sébastien – yet. Will the son prove equal to the father? It’s the most universal dramatic motive there is, isn’t it?

Interview with Chef Michel Bras

Do you remember the first time you met Paul Lacoste over ten years ago?

Michel Bras: He'd sent me a kind of love letter or fan letter. I felt great "vibes," so I embarked on his film without really knowing what fate had in store for me. Of course I was scared, but I trusted him. When he wanted to continue his series², I gave him some help by suggesting a few names. Then, one day, he said he wanted to end it with Sébastien. It was quite flattering to my wife and me, in terms of what we had set out to accomplish. Because family has always been at the heart of what we do.

So, this new film is the logical continuation of the first...

M.B.: Yes, it's like a progression. It happened very naturally: "You want to make a follow-up, Paul? OK, why not? Let's do it..." My wife and I have always kept in mind the idea of a heritage, a handing-over. We knew that Sébastien and his wife Véronique were prepared to continue the story of Ginette and Michel. It was a daring gamble and an opportunity for us. Because we love this place, Le Suquet – it's like our third baby. But there was no question of us leaving it to them and saying: "Here, it's up to you to sort it out, we don't want to hear about it again." In our role as parents, we tried to support them over the ten years between the first film and the second. There's not really been a clean break if you think about it. Except perhaps on January 1, 2010 when I forced myself to leave my office... But if you'll pardon the expression, the transition between the two couples was like a dissolve in the movies – it came about naturally, gradually as each found their place and got their bearings. It's all been very smooth and relaxed. There was no power struggle, thanks to the level of understanding between the two couples.

There are some moments of tension between you though. You're known to be demanding, that's a fact, but we also see you come across in the film as absolutely certain that you know better than anyone, even your son, what should be done in a kitchen.

M.B.: I don't think I feel endowed with certain culinary truths. I have a style which at least exists – and which has the force of being built over a lifetime in a given setting. What I try to make Sébastien understand is that his culinary expression should be the logical conclusion of a lifestyle, a kind of outcome. To serve customers and give them the happiness they've come looking for, you have to understand the power of cooking. The strength of a restaurant is its soul. Maybe I'm very demanding in that way.

Have you never wondered if you're leaving your son a legacy that's too big for his shoulders?

² "Inventing Cuisine", documentary series by Paul Lacoste (9 episodes, 52 min each, La Huit Production)

M.B.: Sure. I've always asked myself that question and I still do. But that's my responsibility as a father. The challenge is admittedly enormous, but the business exists, it has a sound base. When I started, there were three of us. We now have 65 staff. And you have to remember that at the time, it wasn't easy to be a chef. In 1978-79, it was a hell of a job doing anything other sausage and aligot, tripe or stew. Can you imagine what it was like to "wander from the straight and narrow" by preparing mackerel with red currants or raspberries? It took me a lifetime to manage to get people to accept it...

Does that make it hard for you to be away from the place, even if it seems necessary?

M.B.: Yes, it is hard, it is difficult. When I left my office, it felt like a bereavement. It took me six months to get over it. But I came to terms with it, because I know I'm at a turning point in my life. I don't like to say it, but I know I represent something in the world of gastronomy. I'm finally reaping the rewards of all that past suffering, that "wandering from the straight and narrow", and those life choices. I'm paving the way, I'm leaving the foundations, perhaps even my genes to my son, my way of doing and seeing things... It's now up to him to take over and come up with his own expression. But I'm afraid of the reactions of a minority of the clientele, to the tune of "Oh, I knew your father well. In his day, etc." I've talked about things like that to my friends Pierre Gagnaire and Michel Troisgros who also spent part of their youth living in the shadow of a father who was a chef.

But both managed to move forward by symbolically killing their father. Is that also the case with your son?

M.B.: To be honest, I don't know. You'd have to ask him that, but I don't think so. Because we've always tried to look at the modern world without thinking of those old-fashioned codes, those old ways of doing things. There was never any question of him being a disciple or a spiritual son. Our life story is just that of two pals who light-heartedly jostle for first place yet remain very close. And that's our great strength.

Interview with Chef Sébastien Bras

Ten years ago, your father was at the heart of a documentary and culinary adventure alongside Paul Lacoste. Why did you, Sébastien Bras, feel the need to take part in another film?

Sébastien Bras: I didn't ask to do it. It was Paul who had the idea. After his first film on Michel, he suggested taking another "snapshot" of the Bras restaurant. To discover, for instance, that things had changed. I think his film will remain a special account of this turning point. Paul followed us everywhere, even to Japan, and we never stopped thinking of what had formed me as a chef, of this ongoing handover process. When you have your nose to the grindstone, you can't always think about the right way of going about things. So, having someone by our side on a daily basis helped us realize a number of things.

What were they?

S.B.: Michel and I have always been very close. He made me aware of the Aubrac region and of creative cooking at a very early age, but over the last ten years, things changed. He agreed to gradually give me a bit more ground and I proved myself. We had to think about this handover and family heritage intelligently. Neither of us tried to cut corners.

By the way, why do you call your father "Michel" and not "Dad"?

S.B.: Actually, I mostly call him "old man!" (laughing) It's a good question, but I don't know, it's always been like that...

We know that both you and your father are very modest. Is it a problem when you're in front of a camera?

S.B.: It's true, we're rather introverted by nature. We don't open up easily. It wasn't necessarily easy for Paul, but we've known each other for ten years and there's great complicity between us. During a shoot, there are times when you have trouble opening up, but as Paul is a friend, you end up overcoming your apprehensions and you let him capture what's in your heart. And you know, you end up forgetting the camera. I'm not a movie actor, I'm just myself...

So, is the main actor in this film, the lead role a family, the place, or the cooking?

S.B.: All three probably. The story of the Bras is that of a family, a place, and the handing-down from generation to generation. We inevitably have a relationship with the place we live in and with our forefathers, as well as a sense of wonder at elsewhere. It's a coherent, uncomplicated whole. I'm married to this job, because it's bound up in my childhood memories. I developed my personality with it and grew up like that. I chose this path, that's all. I don't really question it.

Even so, it's not easy to be an heir, especially when your father is Michel Bras...

S.B.: Michel is who he is. I'll never be him and I don't try to be. I won't be a clone, because I have my own experience, my own emotions. And that's what will allow me to keep developing my cooking in the ways I choose. Honestly, I don't let it get to me. I'm not going to say to myself: "Oh no, Michel did this and that at such and such a time, so I have to follow the same path, etc.", because I think that my parents and the Aubrac region gave me enough keys for me to be able to follow my own path. Obviously you have doubts, you're afraid at times – but those questions let you progress, make plans, and have hope.

There's a charming scene in the film when you let your "old man" taste one of your creations. But you immediately smile and say: "You're not allowed to speak!"

When you create a dish, it calls on emotions, memories, and encounters which belong to no-one but you. Even if Michel and I have very similar sensibilities, we don't necessarily do the same thing with three identical products. Creation is something very difficult and very personal. Maybe that's why I came out with that...

Paul Lacoste's film shows one of the most important stages in your life: the handing over of the restaurant from father to son. Will there be a third documentary in ten years' time?

S.B.: With my children? (laughing) I don't know... They're only 8 and 10 years old, and I already see them going through what I myself went through at their age, alongside my father: coming back from the market, being rushed off your feet during peak times... They're steeped in the same environment I was as a boy, but I don't put any pressure on them. They'll do what they like with their lives.

The three interviews were carried out by Sébastien Demorand (Journalist and culinary critic).

PAUL LACOSTE

Paul Lacoste has taught film directing for 15 years at ESAV (Ecole Supérieure d'Audiovisuel) in Toulouse, France. At the same time, he has directed shorts and medium-length works of fiction. In 2010, he wrote a play about religion and family, directed it, and adapted it for the cinema under the title *Les Eaux Fortes*.

As an amateur cook and lifelong fan of Michel Bras' work, Lacoste asked him if he could make a film portrait of his artistic creation when he received his third Michelin star in 1999. This marked the start of a documentary series about 9 major French chefs (*Inventing Cuisine*). In 2010, he approached Michel and Sébastien with the idea of creating a feature-length documentary about the handing-over of the restaurant from father to son. For the movie *Step Up to the Plate*, Paul Lacoste followed them for a year, filming this crucial time in their lives.

CREDITS

A film written and directed by Paul Lacoste
Cinematography: Yvan Quéhec
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Sound: François Labaye
Additional sound and sound editing: Florian Delafournière
Editing: Anthony Brinig
Sound mixing: Jean-Marc Billand
Color grading: David Sauve
Assistant director: Philippe Pangrazzi
Location Manager, Japan: Victor Listrat
Music: Karol Beffa

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