

RALPH BRENNAN

Brennan's

New Orleans, LA

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[00:00:00]

Sara Roahen: This is Sara Roahen for the Southern Foodways Alliance. It's Tuesday, January 18, 2016. I'm in New Orleans, Louisiana, in the French Quarter at Brennan's Restaurant, and I'm sitting here with the restaurant's current proprietor. I'll let you introduce yourself. Could you please tell us your full name and your birth date?

[00:01:35]

Ralph Brennan: My birth date. It's Ralph Owen Brennan, and I was born on December 13, 1951.

[00:01:41]

Sara Roahen: Thank you. And you were born in New Orleans?

[00:01:45]

Ralph Brennan: Was born in New Orleans, yes.

[00:01:47]

Sara Roahen: What part of town did you grow up in?

[00:01:49]

Ralph Brennan: Oh, gosh. You know, we kind of lived all over town. I started—my parents had a duplex on Claiborne Avenue and they lived upstairs there when I was very young. And then we moved off Napoleon Avenue, a street called South Miro. Then

about mid-school, seventh grade, maybe, I moved to Lakewood North, out the old Lakewood Country Club property that was developed after Interstate 10 cut through the golf course; lived out there until college. In college, Mom and Dad moved back to Versailles Boulevard. In fact, across the street from where my mother grew up.

[00:02:27]

Sara Roahen: Can you tell us your parents' names?

[00:02:31]

Ralph Brennan: My mother is Claire. Claire Louise Lally, was her maiden name. And my father was John Thomas Brennan.

[00:02:40]

Sara Roahen: What were they like? Well, maybe you can start by—yeah, I'd like to know what they were like, personality-wise.

[00:02:47]

Ralph Brennan: Wow. Well, Mom was very supportive of us, very much of our champion growing up. She taught us a lot of lessons about how to treat people, and she was very kind and, as I said, very supportive of us. Dad was the silent disciplinarian. If he talked with you, you knew you had a problem, that you'd done something very wrong, but he was also very supportive too. Both of them were.

Dad always worked through my childhood, and he used to take us along. That was one of the things I always enjoyed. When he had his wholesale food company, and then when he was involved in the restaurants, too, we were always allowed to go along with him, and it gave us all an exposure to business and what he did.

[00:03:40]

Sara Roahen: We're going to talk a lot about your dad's family, but before we dig into that, your mom. What was her heritage?

[00:03:47]

Ralph Brennan: My mother, she was—what was her heritage? Mom grew up in New Orleans. Her father was Irish and her mother was Italian. Philomena Vaccaro was her name, and that family was in the produce business here in New Orleans. And my grandfather also worked for that company for many, many years.

[00:04:14]

Sara Roahen: So did you have Italian food in your gatherings?

[00:04:21]

Ralph Brennan: We did. My grandmother always cooked Sunday dinner for us, and it was always Italian food. She was a very simple cook, so many times it was spaghetti and meatballs. And she made a great, great red gravy. And then occasionally she'd throw in

some different items. Like Creole— something like jambalaya. But primarily it was Italian food, but not very ambitious.

[00:04:45]

Sara Roahen: So was your grandmother—so were her parents from Italy? Like were they the generation that moved here?

[00:04:51]

Ralph Brennan: Her parents did move from Italy, and I'm told there were about twelve children, and she was the only one born in the United States. They came from Sicily.

[00:05:01]

Sara Roahen: So you had Irish and Italian.

[00:05:04]

Ralph Brennan: Irish and Italian, yeah.

[00:05:06]

Sara Roahen: Now, your dad was part of the original generation of the Brennan restaurant family.

[00:05:14]

Ralph Brennan: Yes.

[00:05:15]

Sara Roahen: Tell me about—but he didn't only work in the restaurants.

[00:05:20]

Ralph Brennan: Right.

[00:05:21]

Sara Roahen: What was his career like?

[00:05:22]

Ralph Brennan: Well, my dad was at LSU when World War II came along, and he went into the service and he was a pilot in the navy. Then when he returned from the service, he went to work with his brother at the Absinthe House, and then Brennan's across the street. Dad was more the back-of-the-house guy. He did a lot of purchasing back then.

And then some point in, I'd say, after I was born and Mom and Dad were married—sometime in the early 1950s—he and my grandfather, Ralph Lally, put together a company that ultimately sold food to restaurants. It was a restaurant supply company before they had the big Syscos of the world. They were a specialty small company that took care of a lot of small restaurants here in the community.

[00:06:08]

Sara Roahen: I think I read in his obituary that he patented some sort of potato-cutting device?

[00:06:15]

Ralph Brennan: [laughs] I'm not sure that he patented it, but one of the things they did before frozen French fries: he would actually take fresh potatoes and cut them and prepare them for French fries, and then he'd deliver them to many of the seafood restaurants. I can remember when I was young and I used to first ride on the trucks and then actually spent a summer or two delivering, like to West End, to Fitzgerald's and Brennan's and all of those restaurants. You know, they'd buy, oh, gosh, thirty, forty, thirty-five-pound sacks of these prepared potatoes that they could then use for French fries.

[00:06:49]

Sara Roahen: That were not frozen?

[00:06:50]

Ralph Brennan: Not frozen. This is before frozen food. And that's really one of the reasons why he moved into more restaurant supplies and canned goods and kitchen supply-type materials: because frozen French fries put him out of business. I can remember the day when, I think it was Fitzgerald's, switched to frozen. And where we would deliver, you know, thirty, forty, fifty bags of these potatoes, we had none to deliver because they switched to frozen French fries.

[00:07:21]

Sara Roahen: Wow. So this a minor detail, but how do you keep the potatoes from getting brown if they're fresh?

[00:07:30]

Ralph Brennan: There was a liquid that they put them in, and then they'd drain them and they'd pack them into bags. And they had a very short shelf life—a day or so—but he'd deliver them every day except Sunday.

[00:07:46]

Sara Roahen: So your dad had a business mind.

[00:07:48]

Ralph Brennan: He did. He did. He was always—he was kind of the businessperson, and he taught me a lot. I used to go with him when he had that restaurant supply company and he would show me what he did and all the—he actually wrote the checks back then. It was a small business.

[00:08:07]

Sara Roahen: What was it called, the business?

[00:08:08]

Ralph Brennan: Well, it started, first, as Brennan's Prepared Potato Company, and then it eventually became Brennan's Institutional Supplies. Not a very creative name.

[laughs]

[00:08:19]

Sara Roahen: And then it literally got put out of business when the—

[00:08:22]

Ralph Brennan: Well, no, they stopped serving the processed French fries because the frozen French fries came in. So he had to come up with other things to do, and that's when they expanded. They used to serve—excuse me—they used to sell Hunt-Wesson products. You know, like Hunt's Ketchup and everything. And so they were competitors to Heinz, and they had other product lines that they repped. He used to be up on, just off Earhart Boulevard, and he would receive train cars of product. And that was always fun, to unload a trainload of canned goods in July in New Orleans. It all had to be done by hand back then.

[00:09:04]

Sara Roahen: How old were you—well, did you ever work for that company?

[00:09:07]

Ralph Brennan: I did. I did. When I was young, Dad made me work half a day, and I would ride on the trucks with one of his drivers that I knew. And so I'd get there in the

morning with him, and we'd finish loading the trucks, and then I'd go out and help make deliveries. And then I actually spent one summer doing the deliveries myself after I was old enough to drive. I used to make my deliveries; get finished as fast as I could so I could go do other things. [laughs]

[00:09:35]

Sara Roahen: So at what age did you start working half a day?

[00:09:38]

Ralph Brennan: I think I was about eight or nine years old. My dad believed in that: believed in hard work. His father had him do that when he was young, and he believed in that for me. And I forget what he paid me back then, but it was very little. But it was enough when you're eight or nine years old and you have a few dollars in your pocket. He was very smart about that. In fact, when I came to work here at Brennan's, he paid me half the minimum wage. He said, "That's enough. That's all you need." Of course, then I was older and I was working a full day, but it was enough money at that age. He never wanted us to have too much. He wanted us to learn the hard way like he did. His dad worked at a shipyard, and my father used to go work there in the summertimes. He had some great memories of that, and he wanted us to make sure that we learned the hard way too.

[00:10:23]

Sara Roahen: So just for the record, your dad's dad was—can you tell us who your grandparents were?

[00:10:29]

Ralph Brennan: Yes. He was Owen Patrick Brennan, and Nell Valentine was my grandmother.

[00:10:37]

Sara Roahen: So we actually heard a lot about him in an interview with your Aunt Ella. She talked a lot about Owen Senior.

So when you say that he made you start working half days, you mean in the summer?

[00:10:51]

Ralph Brennan: In the summertime.

[00:10:52]

Sara Roahen: On the weekends?

[00:10:53]

Ralph Brennan: Yeah, just in the summertime. Because he didn't want me fooling around and doing nothing in the summertime. He wanted me to do at least something, and so he would keep me busy until right after lunch. The trucks always made a morning

delivery and an afternoon delivery, and so I'd work the morning delivery. And then when I came back, he'd go to lunch with me or he'd take me home, and he'd go off and do whatever he did in the afternoons. Probably went back to work. But Dad was like that, you know. His father wanted him when he grew up to grow up the right way back then, and that was to work hard, and he used to send my father to work in the shipyard, So he said, "You can do this too."

[00:11:33]

Sara Roahen: What about—you have some siblings. Was it the same with them?

[00:11:36]

Ralph Brennan: Well, not really. Because I'm the oldest and then I had two girls, and two girls weren't going to ride on delivery trucks. [laughs] And then my brother's a lot younger, and by then Dad's business was changing. So my brother worked there a little bit, I know. I don't remember exactly what he did because he's nine years younger, so we kind of grew up apart, in a way—because of the nine-year difference.

[00:12:01]

Sara Roahen: Can you tell us for the record your siblings' names?

[00:12:04]

Ralph Brennan: Yes. My sister, the second one in the family, is Claire Lally Brennan; and then Cynthia Louise Brennan, who is married to Eddie Davis, is my number-two sister; and then my brother is Thomas John Brennan.

[00:12:25]

Sara Roahen: Can you tell us about what—you know, you just mentioned Brennan's Restaurant on Bourbon Street. Was it called Brennan's when it was on Bourbon Street?

[00:12:39]

Ralph Brennan: It was actually called the Vieux Carré Restaurant, and they added the Brennan's tag to it, so it became Brennan's Vieux Carré Restaurant. And that's where they started their career, although the Absinthe House across the street, which my uncle bought right around World War II time, or right at the end of World War II, had a small food service operation in there. It was really a bar and a club. And then they bought the restaurant across the street and began serving food there, and that's where Breakfast at Brennan's was created. Bananas Foster and all that. That's where everything started. But they moved here to this location in 1956.

[00:13:14]

Sara Roahen: So can you tell us some of your earliest memories of the restaurant? You were born in '51. Yeah, you would have some early memories of that.

[00:13:28]

Ralph Brennan: I have very vague memories of the Vieux Carré Restaurant, but I do remember the Absinthe House because it was a wonderful old place, just as it is today, and I recall people putting business cards on the walls, and also dollar bills that they signed back then. And the neatest thing was they had sort of a mini wax museum upstairs, and we used to go up there and play, and they had all these figures. It was based on the history of New Orleans and the Battle of New Orleans, and so Jean Lafitte was there, and I'm sure Andrew Jackson was there, and many of the other people from that age, around that time. And it was just a great place to play, just like the Brennan's location was a great place to play later on for me.

[00:14:15]

Sara Roahen: Do you think those figurines are the same figurines that wound up in the Wax Museum on Conti Street?

[00:14:19]

Ralph Brennan: I don't know. I don't know. But as I mentioned earlier, I know some of those pieces we kept when they sold the Absinthe House, and they wound up in a restaurant that we had in Biloxi, Mississippi called the Friendship House. I believe that my cousin Dickie has some in his steakhouse right now, some old rifles and swords and other things like that.

[00:14:40]

Sara Roahen: We'll ask him about that. I've heard—I'm not sure if I read this, but I either read or heard stories about you spending time at this restaurant when you were young—

[00:14:55]

Ralph Brennan: Yes.

[00:14:57]

Sara Roahen: —spending time with your aunts.

[00:14:59]

Ralph Brennan: Yes.

[00:15:00]

Sara Roahen: Can you tell us about what that was like?

[00:15:01]

Ralph Brennan: Well, you know, it was kind of the right time in life for me and for Aunt Ella and Aunt Adelaide. Back then, young ladies not married lived at home, so they lived with my grandparents. So I'd go spend a weekend with my grandparents, and then Adelaide and Ella would take me downtown here. And we kind of had a tradition where we'd go to one of the theaters down here and see a movie, and then they'd take me to Woolworth's when there was Woolworth's on Canal Street and buy me something—a

toy, a trinket, whatever—to keep me occupied. Because on that Saturday afternoon after the movie, we'd come here to the restaurant and they'd go to work. And so they had to entertain me, but I was entertained by the building. You know, I had free areas to roam around to do anything that I wanted to do, so I'd hang out in the kitchen sometimes. The wine cellar was what particularly fascinated me.

So when we came back here a couple years ago and I saw this old window; they wanted to take it out and put a new one in, and I said, "No, save this." Because this goes back to, you know, whenever, early in my family's time here, and I wanted to preserve that. It's just an arched pane window, but I knew it was old and original because I remembered it.

[00:16:13]

Sara Roahen: So how old were you in that phase?

[00:16:16]

Ralph Brennan: Well, I probably started probably six, seven, eight years old. In that time period. So, as I said, I'd come down here and spend a day with them, and then they'd go to work and I'd entertain myself, and then we'd have dinner. We'd sit down and have dinner, and we enjoyed it. Then they'd go home. And they would sleep in on Sunday morning and I'd play with my grandparents and have breakfast.

[00:16:43]

Sara Roahen: Those were some fun babysitters.

[00:16:45]

Ralph Brennan: They were. They were. They were a lot of fun, especially Aunt Adelaide who—you know, Aunt Adelaide and I were very close. Again, I guess, because of the age. As I was growing up, we used to do a lot of things together. I'd come down here and have dinner with her when I was older.

[00:17:02]

Sara Roahen: When you say “because of the age,” she was a little younger?

[00:17:05]

Ralph Brennan: Well, no, she was older than Ella. But the way I kind of fell in the group of cousins. My three cousins, “Pip,” Jimmy, and Ted, were a lot older, and a lot of the other cousins are younger, and so I kind of hit this gap where I'm in the middle. And with my sister Lally and then my sister Cindy, they're closer in age. But, I don't know, it just worked out that they were looking for something to do and they weren't married, so I hung out with them a lot.

[00:17:34]

Sara Roahen: It's so funny. Like they were really busy, but they were looking for something to do.

[00:17:38]

Ralph Brennan: Yeah.

[00:17:38]

Sara Roahen: I guess it's just fun to hang out with a kid.

[00:17:40]

Ralph Brennan: [laughs] Yeah, I guess it was, you know. I guess maybe they gave some relief to my parents. I don't know, but they were always wonderful to us.

[00:17:49]

Sara Roahen: So I'll just say, for the record—we've covered this in other interviews in this project so far, but your dad had five siblings.

[00:17:59]

Ralph Brennan: Yes.

[00:18:00]

Sara Roahen: So the aunts that you're talking about are his sisters.

[00:18:02]

Ralph Brennan: Yes.

[00:18:04]

Sara Roahen: Just for the record. Now, can you describe Ella and Adelaide to us?
Their personalities, at that time?

[00:18:11]

Ralph Brennan: They were very close as sisters, but total opposite. Although Aunt Adelaide was originally the bookkeeper at Brennan's and the Absinthe House, when she came over here what I remember is she was just the opposite. She was Miss PR. She was a beautiful lady, always decked out nicely in the finest of everything. And Aunt Ella was the businesswoman. She's the one that really drove everything back in those early days. And yet, as I said, they were very close, but Ella started to have some children and she would spend a lot of time here during the day, and Aunt Adelaide would be here at night to entertain. So they were wonderful complements to each other.

[00:18:56]

Sara Roahen: What do you remember eating when you would have dinner with them when you were young?

[00:19:00]

Ralph Brennan: [laughs] I'll tell you two stories. One, what I don't eat. You might appreciate that story. I always used to eat steak Diane because it was cooked tableside, and I loved crêpes Fitzgerald because I always loved strawberries. In fact, back then, I knew where they kept them in the refrigerator and I'd go eat them cold. I'd pull the

crêpes out that had been prepped, you know, and then I’d get some of the strawberries and ladle it over and have some cold dessert. But those are my two favorites items.

And I also loved—they made a creamy onion soup here. And actually, my mother would tell you that I loved vichyssoise. In fact, we were going to St. Louis to visit her brother once, and we were on a train, taking the train up to St. Louis, and I ordered vichyssoise, and the waiter on the train looked at me like, “Who is this kid?”

[laughs]

[00:19:52]

Sara Roahen: “He must grow up in a restaurant.”

[00:19:54]

Ralph Brennan: Yeah.

[00:19:55]

Sara Roahen: Can you explain to us what steak Diane is?

[00:19:58]

Ralph Brennan: Sure. It’s a filet, beef filet, split in half, and sautéed tableside with a little butter and a little kind of like Marchand de Vin sauce, and flamed. And I loved that. And, of course, the crepes Fitzgerald were flamed, too, so I enjoyed that.

[00:20:16]

Sara Roahen: I can see a little boy being into the fire component.

[00:20:19]

Ralph Brennan: [laughs] Exactly, exactly.

[00:20:22]

Sara Roahen: That sounds like a really fun childhood. When do you—I mean, you know, kids aren't—what would you say you wanted to be when you grew up, when you were young?

[00:20:35]

Ralph Brennan: Well, you know, I guess I always thought I wanted to be in this business because I grew up around it and I enjoyed it. I worked, you know, some bits through college in my father's restaurant supply business as a salesman, but I didn't like that. I'm not that kind of a person. So I gravitated away from that to this, and I always felt like this was what I want to do.

[00:21:00]

Sara Roahen: Is your father's business still operational. Or how long did that last?

[00:21:06]

Ralph Brennan: Oh, it lasted a long time, probably twenty-five years, but he closed it a while back, well before Katrina. Well, I mean, he died in 1998, so it had to be way, way back. I don't remember, but he closed it down; sold it to someone else.

[00:21:25]

Sara Roahen: Did you work at this restaurant?

[00:21:26]

Ralph Brennan: I did. I did. It was the summer probably between my freshman and sophomore years in high school, and I came here and my aunt made me a prep cook, and I boned chickens and peeled shrimp. Just right behind where you're sitting right now, there was a little room, a prep room, and I worked for a guy—I believe his name was James. He taught me how to do that, and I did that most of the summer.

And then I remember coming home one day. Aunt Ella was having dinner over at my parents' house, and I remember coming home and I made some comment, you know, that I'd just peeled hundreds of pounds of shrimp and boned so many chickens; we had a big party. And my mom said, "We're going to have chicken for dinner."

And I said, "I'm not." And I jumped on my bike and I went to actually a Burger King not far away and grabbed a hamburger, because I said, "I can't do this."

And the next thing, when I went back to work—I recall that was on a Friday. I come into work on Monday, and Aunt Ella said, "You're going to go down to the main line." and that's when I learned how to poach eggs and make Hollandaise sauce for eggs Benedict.

[00:22:37]

Sara Roahen: Did you like that, the kitchen work?

[00:22:42]

Ralph Brennan: I did, and I've always loved the kitchen. Unlike my son, who's been to culinary school. I didn't do that, and you really didn't do that back then. But I didn't see that as my career path. It was more front of the house. But my favorite thing growing up, especially when I started at Mr. B's, was to expedite. I just really enjoyed that, calling the orders, building the trays, sending the food out. It was always a peaceful experience for me, especially after a rough day. You know, take your coat off and loosen your tie and expedite for a couple hours. It's great fun.

[00:23:17]

Sara Roahen: It's kind of like exercise.

[00:23:18]

Ralph Brennan: It is in a way, and you lose yourself in that and you forget about the rest of the world.

[00:23:24]

Sara Roahen: Can you tell us what Mr. B's is?

[00:23:26]

Ralph Brennan: Mr. B's is one of the family restaurants. It's on Royal and Iberville [Streets]. It started in 1979, and I went there in 1982. My sister joined me a year later. We ultimately bought it from the family and we've operated it ever since.

[00:23:43]

Sara Roahen: Okay. When you say it was one of the family restaurants, you mean Ella and Adelaide and that generation owned it, or opened it?

[00:23:51]

Ralph Brennan: Yes, Ella and all of them. Ella, Adelaide, Dottie, Dick, and my father owned Mr. B's, and they opened it in 1979 because they'd been out of the Quarter for about five years. You know, the split with my cousins here at Brennan's took place in 1974, and so they all moved up to Commander's Palace and made that their home base, and they wanted to get back into the Quarter. And they came up with this idea to create this more casual bistro-style restaurant, and it's been very successful over the years. It was a great move.

[00:24:28]

Sara Roahen: I'm happy to know how that came about. I didn't really realize that. I'm going to back up again a little bit to more when you were younger, around this restaurant. You mentioned before we started filming that you have some memories of the day—and

maybe you can remind me what year it was—that Brennan's moved from Bourbon Street to the current location on Royal Street.

[00:24:52]

Ralph Brennan: Right. You know, my memories of that move from the Vieux Carré Restaurant over here to Brennan's on Royal Street are very vague. I remember walking back and forth during the construction period with my grandfather. But the family did have a parade, and the story goes that they closed for lunch and opened for dinner over here, and when they did, they invited their regular customers to come, and they actually moved pots and pans and plates and chairs over here to this location and celebrated the opening here.

[00:25:21]

Sara Roahen: Wow. And it was called the Brennan's Vieux Carré Restaurant on Bourbon when it was on Bourbon, and then when they moved here, it was called Brennan's? Or was it called Brennan's French Restaurant?

[00:25:31]

Ralph Brennan: I recall Brennan's French Restaurant. And, in fact, you know, we have the brass letters out front, and under that it said, "French Restaurant." Because, back then, that was the very popular cuisine here, and if you go back and you look at many of the old dishes, they have deep roots. And, of course, Paul Blangé, the chef here, you know, came from Europe, so he was classically trained.

[00:25:55]

Sara Roahen: I wanted to ask if you have memories of any of the chefs. I know there was Paul Blangé, and Ella mentioned Jack Ames.

[00:26:04]

Ralph Brennan: That’s a name I don’t remember.

[00:26:06]

Sara Roahen: He might have been on Bourbon Street. I’m not exactly sure what his tenure was.

[00:26:10]

Ralph Brennan: I really don’t remember Paul Blangé. I do remember Mike Roussel, who grew up here in the kitchen under Paul Blangé, and so I guess at some point he had to be the sous-chef. Mike and I stayed friendly over the years. He was a long-term chef here. He died a number of years ago. And then he had one man who really kind of took me under his wing. His name is Jimmy Smith, and he was a long-term veteran of the kitchen here. And at some point, probably in about 19—let’s see. I went to Mr. B’s in ’82. Maybe ’82 or ’83, my cousins here let him go, and he went to see Aunt Ella for a job, and she didn’t have anything at Commander’s, so she called me at Mr. B’s and said, “Would you talk to him?”

And I said, “Absolutely.” And we actually set up a unique situation at Mr. B’s back then. Gerard Maras was the executive chef, and we put Jimmy Smith in as we call the “Creole chef,” and he put the Creole influence on. Like I can remember he used to do all the rouxs that we used in the kitchen. And other things he did to help work with Gerard, who was not from New Orleans, adapt his food to get the New Orleans taste into the food. And Jimmy stayed with us a long time.

[00:27:28]

Sara Roahen: I think, you know, a few years back I interviewed the chef there now, Michelle.

[00:27:32]

Ralph Brennan: Yes.

[00:27:33]

Sara Roahen: And she spoke about him.

[00:27:35]

Ralph Brennan: Yeah, when she started there, yeah. And Haley Bitterman, who’s our executive chef, probably when she was an extern from culinary school. She probably worked with Jimmy then and maybe afterwards too.

[00:27:49]

Sara Roahen: Can you speak at all to this—I know that there are French influences in the cooking here still, but can you speak to, like, how or when maybe the shift sort of happened from being Brennan's French Restaurant? Not just in name but also in sort of philosophy?

[00:28:10]

Ralph Brennan: You know, I really can't, because that probably happened in the forty-year period when my cousins operated the restaurant, and they probably made a change to go away from that. But I wasn't part of that, so I don't really know.

[00:28:25]

Sara Roahen: Because in general, you know, Brennan's restaurants—your family's restaurants—there's always a lot of French influence. But the food is also really particular to this place, New Orleans.

[00:28:39]

Ralph Brennan: Yeah, it is. I mean, we all try to use local and regional ingredients, which have always flowed through Creole and Cajun food. You know, the city of New Orleans has gone through a lot of different ownerships or control. You know, French, Spanish. But I think, really, if you look around, the French had the most influence that lasted, and I think that's one of the reasons why you see a lot more French influence in the food. You do see some Spanish, but French. And then, of course, all the other spices

in the gumbo, like, you know, African, Caribbean, German, Irish—all the mix of people who came here. And even now you're seeing some Asian influences in the food.

[00:29:25]

Sara Roahen: Paul Blangé, he was from Europe. Michael Roussel, he was African American, right?

[00:29:32]

Ralph Brennan: He was African American, yes. Grew up here in New Orleans. Lifelong resident, as far as I know.

[00:29:37]

Sara Roahen: And he was the chef here for—he stayed on with your cousins, right?

[00:29:43]

Ralph Brennan: He did stay on with my cousins, yes, and he had quite a career here and he built quite a reputation for himself and for the restaurant.

[00:29:52]

Sara Roahen: Okay. And then Jimmy Smith was also from New Orleans, an African American also?

[00:29:55]

Ralph Brennan: Jimmy was not from New Orleans. He was—I'm going to say Opelousas, but I think it's a small town outside of Opelousas. I just don't remember. He was *real* Cajun and kind of a rough, gruff guy, but very personable. And he and I worked great together, because I remember him as a young man growing up. And then working with him at Mr. B's was a whole lot of fun. [Interviewer's note: Jimmy Smith was not African American.]

I remember one New Year's Eve after I was recently engaged, and my wife came here to visit me because she'd been living in New York, and she wound up working the front door at Mr. B's. She'd never done it before, but it was New Year's Eve and someone didn't show up for work, so she was taking names at the front door. At some point, she was hungry, and I said, "Oh, great. We're in the middle of business and you want to eat." But, anyway, I picked up a chair and I put it back in the kitchen, and I said, "Jimmy, take care of her." And I went back out on the floor. And he fixed her a little food, and then she came back out and helped me out.

[00:30:55]

Sara Roahen: I wanted to ask you if your wife had ever worked in the restaurants. Was that a one-time deal or did she do it—

[00:31:01]

Ralph Brennan: It was essentially a one-time deal. After we were married, she worked on Royal Street at Royal Antiques. She grew up with that family and had worked there before moving to New York. So when she'd get off at five o'clock, I'd be working late,

so she'd come down and hang out with me for a while. But then once the children started, that ended that. [laughs]

[00:31:19]

Sara Roahen: What is her name?

[00:31:21]

Ralph Brennan: Her name is Susan.

[00:31:22]

Sara Roahen: And what's her maiden name?

[00:31:24]

Ralph Brennan: Gore. Susan Gore.

[00:31:26]

Sara Roahen: Where did you all meet?

[00:31:29]

Ralph Brennan: We actually met in New York.

[00:31:30]

Sara Roahen: A New Orleans girl you met in New York.

[00:31:32]

Ralph Brennan: A New Orleans girl. I met her in New York when I was changing careers, because when I came out of Tulane in 1975, it was right after the family split had taken place, and there really wasn't any opportunity. And Aunt Ella told me, "You know, you need to go do something else, because I don't have anything for you now. And if I ever do, I'll call you."

So she did contact me, actually talked to me, and I didn't believe her, but it was Christmas night of 1980 and we were having a family dinner like we always did. Because our family has always—our family, the Brennan family, always got together for holidays at night. So she was over at my parents' house and we were having a couple glasses of wine, and she said, "I think I have an opportunity for you." And I didn't believe her, and I forgot about it and I went back to work.

I was actually working for Price Waterhouse at the time. I was in Mobile, Alabama, and I get this phone call from her. She said, "Why haven't you called me?"

And I said, "Are you serious?"

She said, "Yes." So then I met with her, made the decision to leave, and she sent me to France for four months to go to a culinary program there. And then she wanted me to go to New York to the 21 Club. Our family and the Berns-Kreindler family, who owned 21 at the time, were great friends. And often children—in fact, back then, all the fine-dining restaurants around the country were mostly family-owned and -operated, and so kids used to get exchanged all the time for training purposes. And I spent two months

in New York at the 21 Club, and that’s when I met Susan. A friend of my sister’s took me to a party, and she was there.

[00:33:14]

Sara Roahen: Wow. There are a lot of questions I have that just came out of that little—. First of all, it strikes me that—I mean, Ella talked a lot when we interviewed her yesterday about how she would educate her employees. You know, give them books, make sure that reading was a big part of chef’s training. And she’s sounding more and more like a dean of some sort—of, you know, school or something. Like she really directed things in that way a lot, I think. A certain kind of education was really important. So let me just be clear. You went to Tulane.

[00:33:56]

Ralph Brennan: Went to Tulane.

[00:33:57]

Sara Roahen: And what did you major in?

[00:34:00]

Ralph Brennan: I studied economics as an undergraduate, and then I have an MBA from Tulane.

[00:34:05]

Sara Roahen: Okay. And when you learned that you weren't going to be able to go right into the family business, I mean, did you care? Were you disappointed or—

[00:34:14]

Ralph Brennan: Well, I was disappointed, you know. In hindsight, it turned out to be probably the best thing that could happen to me, but I was disappointed. I wanted to go in the business. But then I had to go find a job. So I started interviewing. I was probably in my last semester at Tulane in the MBA program when I started interviewing. And I always loved finance and accounting, so I interviewed with some of the big firms, and Price Waterhouse made me a good offer, and I took it.

And that was a fascinating almost six-year period in my life because I saw so many other businesses and how they operated. So I learned that, but what's more important, and I've tried to do this with my children, is, you know, if you grow up in a family business and that's all you do, it's all you know. You have to go kind of earn your stripes and be successful outside. And so that's what I did, and I was successful there. I did well and got promoted, so it gave me a lot of confidence when I came back in the business.

[00:35:16]

Sara Roahen: Did you have it in the back of your mind that whole time that you would go into restaurants or—

[00:35:21]

Ralph Brennan: No. No, I was really thinking at the time, “What am I going to do with the rest of my life?” I didn’t see myself staying at Price Waterhouse, and so I was trying to think of what other opportunities that would be out there for me. And I really didn’t get very far because Ella talked to me and made me this offer.

When I left Price Waterhouse, the two partners there—three partners, I guess, there were at the time—said, “You know, the door’s open if you want to come back, but we understand what you want to do, and go do it.” And I’ve never looked back. I had a great opportunity with Price Waterhouse, and then to get into the family business, it’s been a whole lot of fun for a long time.

[00:36:02]

Sara Roahen: Then where did you go get some schooling in France?

[00:36:05]

Ralph Brennan: I went a place called La Varenne, which is no longer there. A lady by the name of Anne Willan had a cooking school in Paris, and I spent three months there in that program. It was just a quick refresher course because I’d spent some time in the kitchens, and I wasn’t intending to be a chef, so it just gave me some background when I came back here and started to work. I was expected to go to Mr.—to Commander’s, I’m sorry, work with Aunt Ella. And in typical Aunt Ella fashion, after about three weeks, she said, “I need you to go to Mr. B’s.” And the rest is history. I’ve been down on the Quarter ever since.

[00:36:48]

Sara Roahen: At the 21 Club, what did you do? Were you in the kitchen or—?

[00:36:51]

Ralph Brennan: I was all over. It was kind of a little structured internship program, and I started actually in the wine cellar in purchasing, down in the bottom of the restaurant; then worked my way up to the kitchen floor; did that; and then I spent probably the last month in service in the front of the house and working with the private parties. Because, you know, 21 back then was really known for customer service and had a whole lot of very regular customers.

[00:37:18]

Sara Roahen: I see. So then once she sent you to Mr. B's, what was your role?

[00:37:23]

Ralph Brennan: I was a night manager. I used to go in to work about four o'clock in the afternoon and then close the restaurant down. She knew she had some issues there and she couldn't put her finger on it, so she said, "Would you go do that?" And, you know, I confirmed some of the things she was thinking, and she made some changes, and she said, "Okay, you can be the general manager now." And I was totally unprepared but ready to go to work.

[00:37:50]

Sara Roahen: At what point did your sister enter that business?

[00:37:54]

Ralph Brennan: You know, I went there in January of 1982. She's probably a year, year and a half after that. She was working at Brennan's in Houston and then wanted to come back to New Orleans, and she joined me. In fact—that was my sister Cindy. My sister Lally was actually working there, and she worked the front door at the time. And then finally I pushed her to Commander's and said, "You have to grow," and she went up there to Commander's and started working private parties and has just worked her way up over the years.

[00:38:24]

Sara Roahen: So when you were starting, when you had a young family, you weren't home at night.

[00:38:29]

Ralph Brennan: I was not. I was not. Now, we lived in the Garden District, so at some point I could go home for dinner, but then I'd go back to work. And it was rough, a rough adjustment, and I made some mistakes. I didn't spend enough time with my oldest daughter growing up, and it kind of changed my whole philosophy when my son and my other daughter came along. I started putting things on my calendar, their things on my calendar first, and then working around that as much as I could. You know, it wasn't 100 percent, but things changed.

[00:39:05]

Sara Roahen: What are your kids’ names? Can you tell me?

[00:39:07]

Ralph Brennan: Sure. My daughter is Kathryn Claire Brennan, and she’s married to Gordon McLeod now. My son is Patrick Gore Brennan. And then Kristen Cromwell Brennan, and she’s married to Paul Leonard. So I have two daughters married and a son.

[00:39:24]

Sara Roahen: So you stayed at Mr. B’s for how long?

[00:39:34]

Ralph Brennan: I went in January of 1982. On New Year’s Eve of 1985, we bought Mr. B’s from the family, and then in December of 1991, my sister and I opened Bacco, and that was the first restaurant that we did on our own.

[00:39:53]

Sara Roahen: And that was also not a typical—well, I shouldn’t say “typical.” That was not a restaurant that served New Orleans food.

[00:39:59]

Ralph Brennan: Right. It was Italian. We were trying to come up with something different. You know, a different concept, something new to differentiate—. Because we didn't want to duplicate Mr. B's and a lot of other restaurants that had opened around that time.

You know, Mr. B's, I think, was one of the restaurants that really changed the direction of food here in a lot of ways, because it became more casual, less formal. And other restaurants came along like some of Susan Spicer's restaurants. And there were a lot of other restaurants that came along, so we were trying to find a niche, and we thought Italian would be a good niche. When you look at the Italian heritage in the city, there's quite a bit of it, so we figured it would be a good fit.

[00:40:44]

Sara Roahen: And in your family. I didn't realize until, you know, researching for this that you had Italian grandparents.

[00:40:52]

Ralph Brennan: Yes, one-quarter Italian. [laughs]

[00:40:55]

Sara Roahen: Okay. Now I guess I—how would you like to talk about acquiring this restaurant?

[00:41:07]

Ralph Brennan: I'd rather not. [laughs]

[00:41:12]

Sara Roahen: We should at least talk about when that happened. So your cousins—there was a split in the family, which we've talked about in other interviews, that happens in the late '60s, early '70s.

[00:41:26]

Ralph Brennan: Actually, it started in 1973 and culminated in the spring of 1974 when all the documents were signed and everything. And for about forty years, you know, my cousins ran this restaurant, and for about thirty years—until about Katrina, roughly—they did a pretty good job. And then something happened, and the three of them had a falling out, and that caused some issues, and some bad decisions were made. And, you know, they wound up getting in a financial situation where they were going to lose the restaurant.

I had a mutual friend of ours come to me; it was during Mardi Gras a number of years ago now—I don't even remember—and said, "Would you talk with Ted?" And I reached out to Ted. It took me a while to make the phone call, but I did, and we met. And, you know, I wanted to help him. I wanted them to keep the restaurant. I just didn't want it to go to anybody else.

And, you know, we met off and on, off and on for a while, and I really thought we were going to make a deal and I'd be able to help them and get involved with them. And that didn't happen. And, you know, the next thing, the building was being foreclosed on.

And we went to the courthouse and purchased it at an auction. And then we had to acquire the name through a bankruptcy, and we did. But my goal was to keep it in the family. There's too much history in these walls to let it go to someone else.

[00:43:05]

Sara Roahen: Did you have—I mean, you have a lot of cousins now that are involved in the various restaurants. Were you the only one who wanted—who felt like—

[00:43:16]

Ralph Brennan: I think so, because, you know, I was waiting for some other ones to step up, but they didn't. And I was thinking my cousins here at Brennan's were going to work out their financial issues. There was a point about two months before we actually went to that sheriff's sale where I think they were close to a deal, working it with someone else. I really didn't care. My goal was to keep it in the family. It's a special place, especially in this city.

[00:43:46]

Sara Roahen: What does this place mean to you? I mean, why—you've been through a lot to keep it going.

[00:43:57]

Ralph Brennan: Yeah, I have, but it's worth it, because to put the name back on the building and to keep the tradition going, it's meant a lot to my family. You've read the

history, and you know it started on Bourbon Street, went to Vieux Carré and then over here, and a lot of good things have happened. And this has helped my family be successful, because of the start here. When you look at the different groups in our family now—Dickie and Lauren and their restaurants, that’s good. I have my group, and then the Commander’s Palace group. But it all started right here, and it would be to me like, you know, cutting the tree at the bottom. So that’s why I got involved. And I’ve enjoyed it. What’s fun is, you know, so many people come back and say what great experiences they had here in the past, and now they’re bringing their children in and they’re creating traditions. That’s important.

[00:44:59]

Sara Roahen: It feels like, to me as an outsider, that this—you own several restaurants. I believe eight, if I counted correctly.

[00:45:07]

Ralph Brennan: Yes.

[00:45:09]

Sara Roahen: But as an outsider, it feels like this is now sort of the nexus of your—like the hub of your operation. Do you feel that way about it or not?

[00:45:19]

Ralph Brennan: That means I would have to answer the question which one of the eight is my favorite, and I can't do that. [laughs] No, it is sort of the nexus because it is where my family started, and we invested a lot of money in this project and I want the reputation of this restaurant to continue and go on for as long as maybe Antoine's around the corner, you know. That's part of the tradition of food in New Orleans, and I think it's so important to keep it going.

[00:45:52]

Sara Roahen: Can you tell us a little bit about—so in what year then did you acquire it?

[00:45:57]

Ralph Brennan: Gosh, I was afraid you were going to ask that question. Let me think. So we opened in '14. We acquired the building in May of 2013, and then in 2014 we acquired the name.

[00:46:14]

Sara Roahen: And then you opened in 2014.

[00:46:17]

Ralph Brennan: Yes, we opened Thanksgiving week of 2014.

[00:46:22]

Sara Roahen: So a lot happened in about a year, a year and a half.

[00:46:24]

Ralph Brennan: Yes, ma’am, a lot happened. [laughs] It was crazy. It was probably the most challenging time I’ve had in my life, is first going through all the issues that we faced in the acquisition of building, and then the name; then the renovation. When I came in the building, I hadn’t been in in a very long time. I mean, over the forty-year period that my cousins owned it, I’d probably been here once or twice. Well, probably twice.

[00:46:50]

Sara Roahen: To eat?

[00:46:52]

Ralph Brennan: No. Well, actually one time to eat, yes. The time I came to eat, my wife and I chaired an event, a fundraising event for WYES-Television, and they wanted to give us an award. My wife called me and said, “Are you free on such-and-such a date?”

And I said, “Yes.”

“Good. WYES wants you to come to a lunch, and they want to give us this recognition.”

And I said, “Sure. I’ll put it on my calendar.”

And she said, “But it’s at Brennan’s.”

And that was really bizarre to walk in here after a long, long time, and there were still then some of the old-timers still here, and I remember shaking hands with a number of people. They were very nice; asked about the family. That was that one experience.

And then the other time was when I was talking with my cousin Ted; one of his daughters, Alana, had a wedding reception here and they invited us. Susan and I came, and that was strange, and then we also had a lot of looks from a lot of people in there that knew the relationship. You know, friends of ours, saying, "What are you doing here?" And, you know, I kind of—at one point I broke away from Susan and walked around a little bit, just to see. I didn't come upstairs, but I did walk around.

So, you know, just to have the opportunity to keep it going. Unfortunately, what happened was when we came in here, I got a call from Haley Bitterman, our executive chef for the company, and she was over here and she said, "Don't come." She said, "I need about two weeks." But it was in bad shape.

So I came in and looked around and thought about it for a day or two. I have a partner in the project, Terry White, and I called Terry and said, "We need to meet and we need to redo this." And we put together a plan. We closed it, closed it for eighteen months, and then did this renovation to the building because it just had been neglected for a long time.

[00:48:54]

Sara Roahen: You did a lot. Can you sort of give us the highlights of the renovation, the things that—I mean, there's so many details. But maybe you could tell us about this room, for example. You can start here.

[00:49:07]

Ralph Brennan: Sure. Well, let me just say what drove a lot of the renovation, obviously, were new codes. We had sixty years since the last renovation, so things changed a lot, which meant you need certain accessibility questions, and it required us downstairs to move things around. For example, we needed larger restrooms. So as we started moving things around, we had the opportunity to move the kitchen and open up the front of the restaurant to Royal Street.

[00:49:39]

Sara Roahen: Because the kitchen was in the front?

[00:49:41]

Ralph Brennan: The kitchen was on Royal Street, and I never could understand, even when I was young, why would you block Royal Street, this great view of the street and the courthouse across the street. So when we realized we had to move downstairs, that's when we started figuring out how to create a dining room up there. We wanted to do that. So that generated a major change. Upstairs we left kind of alone. It was here. These rooms are the same as I remember them when I was young. They're decorated differently.

The room you're in right now is called the King's Room. My cousins had a Rex Room in here, and these are all photographs around us from the Rex organization. We just wanted to do it a little bit differently, so instead of the annual posters and

proclamations that they had on the walls, we worked with the Rex organization to go back into their archives and get some great old photographs and memorabilia over the years of that organization, and that's where the idea came from. So it was a Rex Room before; it still is, and it just has, I think, much more interesting memorabilia.

[00:50:53]

Sara Roahen: So, for the record, the king of the Rex organization is the official king of Carnival every year.

[00:51:01]

Ralph Brennan: Yes, Rex is king of Carnival.

The other interesting thing that we did in the room next to us, they asked us to do a room to honor the queens of Carnival, and that's never been done before like this, and so we worked with them also, with their historian, to find old photographs of former monarchs, former courts, and so—

[00:51:23]

Sara Roahen: So the Rex organization asked you to do that?

[00:51:25]

Ralph Brennan: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

[00:51:26]

Sara Roahen: And that didn't exist in the previous incarnation?

[00:51:28]

Ralph Brennan: No, it didn't. We took the adjacent dining room. They open into each other, so it made a whole lot of sense.

[00:51:35]

Sara Roahen: What about the Paul Morphy Room?

[00:51:37]

Ralph Brennan: [laughs] Well, Paul Morphy was a famous chess master that lived here in the 1800s. My partner wanted a sitting room, and I've never had a sitting room in any of our restaurants because I've always felt we need tables. But Terry really wanted it. He travels to Europe a lot, and you see that in Europe in some of the finer restaurants over there. So we came up with this idea to honor Paul Morphy, who lived here in the 1800s and was a chess master. And it played easily into the design of the room. There's a chess table in the middle of the room, a fireplace with pictures of him, chess pieces, you know. It looks very English, much like you might expect for a chess player.

[00:52:27]

Sara Roahen: So Paul Morphy—did he have history in this building?

[00:52:30]

Ralph Brennan: He lived here. His family lived here.

[00:52:31]

Sara Roahen: When you say “here,” it was in this building?

[00:52:32]

Ralph Brennan: In Brennan’s, yes. In this building. This building was built in 1795 as a residence, and then it’s gone residential and commercial for its whole history. In fact, right after the first resident lived here, it became the first Bank of Louisiana, and that’s why if you look at the railing outside here on the balcony, it says “BL,” for Bank of Louisiana.

[00:52:53]

Sara Roahen: Oh, it still says that.

[00:52:56]

Ralph Brennan: It still says that, yes. [laughs]

[00:52:59]

Sara Roahen: There are stories of ghosts in this restaurant, including Paul Morphy. Have you experienced any of that firsthand?

[00:53:07]

Ralph Brennan: I have not met any of the ghosts that are supposed to be here. [laughs] I guess they're very happy with what we did. At least I hope they are. There were some rumors during construction that some of the people in the building felt the influence of ghosts, but I've never felt that. You think about the age of the buildings here in the French Quarter, you know; I'm sure many of them are haunted.

[00:53:31]

Sara Roahen: Where is that window that you were talking about that you remember, the original window?

[00:53:35]

Ralph Brennan: It's in the wine cellar. It's in the wine cellar. We believe that the building that is the wine cellar here was part of a property that opens on to Conti Street, and at some point it was acquired and became part of the property here. And part of that, what is now the wine cellar, was open patio space when I was young. And that's what I remember: these two arched windows, paned windows, and then two big wooden doors, pair of doors. So you'd open one of them and go into the wine cellar.

Over time, my cousins enclosed that patio area, but they left that window, and it was just in bad shape. But our maintenance team here went to work on it for me, because I said, "We're not taking this out," and they patched it up and it looks great.

[00:54:26]

Sara Roahen: So when you had your grand reopening of Brennan's, that was the first time that Ella had been—Ella came?

[00:54:34]

Ralph Brennan: Yes.

[00:54:36]

Sara Roahen: Did you just invite her and she came? Or how did that work?

[00:54:41]

Ralph Brennan: Well, we opened Thanksgiving week of 2014, and we were only open for brunch that first week. So in the evening, my partner, Terry, had a party for his family one night. And then on Wednesday night, the night before Thanksgiving, I had a party for my family, because I knew some of them were coming in town for Thanksgiving. So I invited Ella and Uncle Dick and Aunt Lynne—they couldn't make it. Aunt Dottie made it, and then many of my cousins came. We gave them a tour of the restaurant, and we walked Aunt Ella around. She loved what we did. And then the room we're sitting in is where she ended up, and it was so much fun to watch her sit down and talk with all of our children.

[00:55:28]

Sara Roahen: What did she tell them?

[00:55:31]

Ralph Brennan: She told them stories. It was great. I get a little emotional about it because it was a moving moment for all of us to be here in the room. You know, because she hadn't been here in forty years and she had great memories. And this is where she grew up, so it was like coming home in a lot of ways to her. So, hopefully, she'll come back.

[00:55:54]

Sara Roahen: And it's special that she's even still around.

[00:55:56]

Ralph Brennan: Yes.

[00:55:58]

Sara Roahen: She just turned ninety, for the record.

[00:55:58]

Ralph Brennan: Yeah, she did turn ninety.

[00:56:00]

Sara Roahen: A couple months ago.

[00:56:01]

Ralph Brennan: Mm-hmm.

[00:56:02]

Sara Roahen: A month ago. Well, it must have been gratifying for you, I don't know, to have your decision to dig into this reinforced in that way.

[00:56:14]

Ralph Brennan: Well, it was, you know, and we were able to get Uncle Dick here before he passed away. He couldn't come that night, but he came—January, I believe it was, right after the first of the year. He came with his family and had dinner downstairs and we showed him around, and that was special because that's where he grew up too. I mean, this is where he grew up, so it's a special place for the family.

[00:56:38]

Sara Roahen: That's great. I'm remembering right now when you're talking about memories that you have memories from Mardi Gras on this balcony.

[00:56:46]

Ralph Brennan: Yeah.

[00:56:47]

Sara Roahen: Can you tell us about that?

[00:56:48]

Ralph Brennan: So many good Mardi Gras memories. My mother was a Mardi Gras nut. She loved Mardi Gras. And my dad not so much so, but Mom loved the parades, so she would come down here; we'd park at the Royal Orleans and she would come up here. We'd get in one of these two rooms up here, get a table, bring our homework, do our homework, have dinner, and then we'd go out on the balcony and we'd watch for the parades. And when they'd come, we'd scamper out there as quickly as we could. Because back then, all the guests of the restaurant would come and stand on the balcony, too, so it would get very tight, and we wanted to be on the front row. And we did that for years. Mom loved coming here for that.

[00:57:30]

Sara Roahen: You're not talking about Mardi Gras day; you're talking about, like, parades leading up to Mardi Gras.

[00:57:34]

Ralph Brennan: Parades leading up to Mardi Gras, right. The whole week. I mean, she would come every night. She loved it every time she could come for a parade. Then what she used to make us do is give all the beads away. She'd make us walk around the restaurant, saying, "These people couldn't see the parade or they couldn't catch this much because you were up front." We'd give most of our beads away.

[00:57:56]

Sara Roahen: Just the excitement that she wanted.

[00:57:58]

Ralph Brennan: Yeah, yeah. It was exciting. You know, after Susan and I were married, we moved up in the Garden District, right around the corner from Uncle Dick and Aunt Lynne, so were half a block off St. Charles Avenue. And Mom used to come and just sit there and wait for the parades and walk out with us. She loved it until the end.

[00:58:22]

Sara Roahen: What year did your mom pass away?

[00:58:24]

Ralph Brennan: She died—I think it was 2002, yeah.

[00:58:28]

Sara Roahen: And back then when you were young, we should say that the parades came through the Quarter. They don't anymore.

[00:58:34]

Ralph Brennan: That's right. They do come through the Quarter—they did come through the Quarter back then. And the parades were much smaller—you know, small floats, and they could easily make the turns. And at one point, too, as I recall, it became a

safety issue. There was a fire in the Quarter during Mardi Gras, and city leaders at the time said, “Enough. We have to protect the Quarter.” So they pulled the parades out.

But it’s still fun, you know. You get a lot of the marching groups that come through, the small parades that march through the Quarter during Mardi Gras, and it’s fun to see that. Mardi Gras weekend, you’ll see groups of people sort of having their own little parades going back and forth, and that’s a lot of fun. And, of course, now, you know, second line parades are popular with a lot of the visitors to the city; a lot of them wedding-related. So you’ll have a parade here almost—well, I won’t say every day, but several times a week you’ll hear the bands and a parade walks by.

[00:59:26]

Sara Roahen: Yeah, it doesn’t stay quiet here for very long.

[00:59:29]

Ralph Brennan: No, no.

[00:59:31]

Sara Roahen: I’d like to ask you about what your culinary vision was when you set about reopening this place, because you changed a lot. Can you talk about that? What was your vision?

[00:59:48]

Ralph Brennan: Well, we wanted to do two things. You know, one was to keep the tradition here as much as possible. So many of the dishes that made this restaurant famous—like bananas Foster or eggs Sardou or eggs Hussarde, the baked apple, things like that we wanted to keep, but we also wanted to inject some new elements, something new and different to keep it fresh. One of the lessons I learned from Aunt Ella years ago was that if you don't stay fresh and you don't stay current, you get stagnant, and she used to talk to me about a bell curve and that, you know, she was always afraid of getting to the top of the bell curve and then on the other side it's going down. So you have to keep reinventing yourself, pushing yourself, growing, developing. It's kind of like we talked about earlier when you talked about she gave books to the chefs and everything. Ella has always tried to continue to grow and develop, and that's one of the things that I preach here in this restaurant, is as good as you are today, a year from now you have to be better. So that can be in many, many different ways, and that's why we wanted a little bit of the old and traditional and a little bit of the new in the menu, and I think we've accomplished that.

It's funny, though, when you look particularly at breakfast: the old standbys, those egg dishes, are what we sell. I was talking to one of the sous-chefs just yesterday, and he says, "We sell eggs." He works a lot of breakfast and lunches for us, and he said, "We sell a lot of eggs." We put some lunch-type dishes on the menu. The eggs still sell at lunch. So that's what we're famous for, so.

[01:01:30]

Sara Roahen: And it's good.

[01:01:32]

Ralph Brennan: And it's good. It's good. It's good.

[01:01:33]

Sara Roahen: I have a really hard time not ordering the eggs Sardou.

[01:01:35]

Ralph Brennan: [laughs] I love that. I love the Eggs Hussarde also. That was a dish that my uncle created here when he worked here.

[01:01:43]

Sara Roahen: Which uncle?

[01:01:44]

Ralph Brennan: Uncle Owen. He loved the egg dishes, but he also loved the Marchand de Vin sauce, so I'm told he went in the kitchen and grabbed some and put it on the eggs, and that's where the dish came from.

[01:01:54]

Sara Roahen: Well, can you describe the eggs Hussarde?

[01:01:56]

Ralph Brennan: Sure. It's an English muffin with a little bit of Canadian bacon, two poached eggs, some Marchand de Vin sauce and a little bit of Hollandaise. [laughs]

[01:02:07]

Sara Roahen: So it's like a Benedict but with—

[01:02:09]

Ralph Brennan: With Marchand de Vin. And it's a great—it's my favorite dish because I like the flavor of the Marchand de Vin sauce the most.

[01:02:18]

Sara Roahen: And am I correct that you make the Canadian bacon?

[01:02:21]

Ralph Brennan: We do. We cure our own here. That's not something that was done in the past. We also make our own English muffins too.

[01:02:27]

Sara Roahen: And the eggs Sardou—could you describe that?

[01:02:30]

Ralph Brennan: Sure. Eggs Sardou are on a base of creamed spinach with some artichoke hearts. In this case, we fry them. Before, they were just poached. And then two poached eggs and Hollandaise sauce.

[01:02:43]

Sara Roahen: And what blows me away with that is that the artichokes are fresh.

[01:02:48]

Ralph Brennan: Yes, we use fresh.

[01:02:50]

Sara Roahen: It's a lot of flavor.

[01:02:51]

Ralph Brennan: It is a lot of flavor. Just about everything we do here is from scratch.

[01:02:54]

Sara Roahen: And that's a change from what was happening.

[01:02:58]

Ralph Brennan: Yes, yes. But, you know, I've always done it in all of my restaurants. Just about everything we do is from scratch, and I think it makes a better product on the plate. We don't use any processed foods or anything like that.

[01:03:13]

Sara Roahen: Can you talk about hiring a chef to overhaul—

[01:03:19]

Ralph Brennan: It was fun. We interviewed a lot of chefs for here. We selected Slade Rushing, who has a bit of a following here with his wife. He was looking to leave where he was at MiLa. Allison wanted to go be a mother for a while, because they have young children, and so Slade was looking and he interviewed with us.

One of the things that we really like to do is have them do a tasting, and we give them some guidelines and direction. Like, for example, he had to cook an egg dish, and he had to cook one of these dishes. That kind of thing. Dessert. And he just did a great job. What we really liked was the eggs Benedict that he prepared for us, because he came up with an idea of a homemade English muffin; curing the bacon. His Hollandaise sauce was delicious, and that was one of the dishes that turned us on to him. He's worked very well. I think he'd probably like to be a little more adventuresome on some of the menu items, but, you know, we have to go with the tradition, and his team executes it very well.

[01:04:31]

Sara Roahen: Well, there are some pretty modern dishes on the menu, but you did keep the tableside preparations.

[01:04:37]

Ralph Brennan: Yes, yes. And we probably do a little bit more than they were doing before, but, you know, that really goes back to the roots and tradition of this restaurant, because tableside was very important when I was growing up, and customers loved it. It’s a great entertainment value for the guests sitting at the table, so we wanted to continue it. We’re trying to do a little more of it, and the nice thing is we have the room here. Some of the other restaurants that I have where I’ve wanted to do it, it’s just too tight. But it works well here in this restaurant.

[01:05:09]

Sara Roahen: It must make hiring waitstaff—it narrows your options.

[01:05:15]

Ralph Brennan: [laughs] Well, you know, the funny thing that I didn’t anticipate when we opened this restaurant was how hard it would be to find staff. There’s so many restaurants opening in this city, and we’ve been here a year, a little bit over a year now, and we’re still not fully staffed. We have some great veterans who have come to work for us, veterans of other restaurants, and then we’re training a lot of young people who just maybe it’s sometimes their first job in the restaurant industry. We’re working with them to try to train them and bring them up to speed, because the market is so tight here in New Orleans.

[01:05:53]

Sara Roahen: You know, there are two stories that Ella really wasn’t interested in talking about because she talks about them all the time, but I feel like they should be covered in this project. One of them is the history of bananas Foster, and the other one is how “Breakfast at Brennan’s” came about.

[01:06:12]

Ralph Brennan: Okay. Did she talk about them?

[01:06:15]

Sara Roahen: No. [laughs]

[01:06:16]

Ralph Brennan: Well, she should be the one, because I’m not—I may not get it right. I know what *I* know.

[01:06:21]

Sara Roahen: Well, I think if you say what you know, that would be fine.

[01:06:23]

Ralph Brennan: Well, okay. Breakfast at Brennan’s—how did it come about? My understanding of the story is that my Uncle Owen was pretty good at marketing, and he was trying to find a niche. And he had a friend of his, a writer at the time—and I don’t remember the man’s name, but they were taking one day about ideas on how to make

Brennan’s different. And that man said, “Well, the book just came out, *Dinner at Antoine’s*. Why don’t you call it Breakfast at Brennan’s.” Supposedly that’s how it started. It’s as simple as that. But they really created a meal period that didn’t exist in that form, in that form, because it was totally different than anything that was happening at the time.

And the other unique thing that they created was bananas Foster, and the story goes that Mr. Richard Foster, a prominent businessman, was being honored at a dinner at Brennan’s, and Uncle Owen wanted, again, something different, something new. And at the time, New Orleans was a large importer of bananas, and so Ella, working with one of the dining room captains and the chef, came up with this idea to sauté some bananas in brown sugar and butter and pour it over vanilla ice cream. Those are the stories that I know. I’d love for you to ask her. If you’d go back and follow up, get her to tell you—

[01:07:47]

Sara Roahen: Well, Ti kind of asked and said that she was sick of talking about this.

[01:07:50]

Ralph Brennan: Oh, I’m sure she is, but, you know, those are really—when you look at what happens in food, those are two unique things that were created around Brennan’s.

[01:08:01]

Sara Roahen: When you were growing up, was Breakfast at Brennan’s a big deal?

[01:08:06]

Ralph Brennan: Yes, it was. I worked in the kitchen for a while; then I went out to the dining room, and I spent a lot of time working, even through college, on the front door. I mean, I remember coming to work here and seeing people lined up outside to get in at like eight o'clock in the morning because it was that popular. And then, you know, on big busy days—I remember the Sunday before Mardi Gras serving over a thousand people. So, yes, it was a big deal. It still is. I mean, when you look at our sales today, we sell a lot of eggs, and a lot of eggs at breakfast.

[01:08:44]

Sara Roahen: It's kind of ironic, because, I mean, I know Ella and Aunt Lynne both talked about not being early risers. And then Ella talked very specifically about how her brother Owen and her sister Adelaide didn't even come alive until like four p.m. [laughs]

[01:09:02]

Ralph Brennan: Right, right.

[01:09:02]

Sara Roahen: And, I mean, I think you come from a family of hard workers. I'm not insinuating that anyone was lazy, but there were some real night owls in this family that created the earliest meal period. Although Breakfast at Brennan's, I'll say, like, it *is* a meal period. It's not just breakfast.

[01:09:22]

Ralph Brennan: Right.

[01:09:23]

Sara Roahen: It's treated like dinner, with the same respect as dinner.

[01:09:25]

Ralph Brennan: Yes, it is. It is, yes. But I think, you know, you're absolutely right about Uncle Own and, really, I've heard that about him. Aunt Adelaide was definitely a night owl and she used to always enjoy partying well into the night. But Ella—you know, the kids came along, and she became the businessperson and really ran the restaurant, and that meant you had to be here in the daytime. So she changed her life. She's probably not an early riser now, but she can afford to do that at ninety. [laughs]

[01:09:58]

Sara Roahen: I won't be either.

[interruption]

[01:10:37]

Sara Roahen: I wanted to ask you about your kids. You have three kids, and I know that at least two of them are working in the restaurant business or working towards working in the restaurant business. Can you talk about where your kids are?

[01:10:52]

Ralph Brennan: Sure. My oldest daughter, Kathryn, and my son Patrick both work here at the restaurant. You know, they grew up around me, and I used to take them to the restaurants when I was young and they were young, so they got a good taste of it. Patrick has been interested in the kitchen since he was a child. He started working at nine years old at Red Fish Grill. One summer he worked two weeks with the pastry chef at the time. He befriended her in the winter before when we were opening the restaurant, and he'd go back there and she'd always give him treats. So he wanted to get back in the kitchen, and I said, "You know, nine years old, you're too young to be in the kitchen."

And he said, "No, Pam says it's okay."

And then, as I recall, I was smarter than Patrick, and I said, "Well, let me talk to Mitch," the chef, "and see if Mitch wants you in the kitchen."

And he said, "I've already talked to Mitch. He said it's okay." [laughs]

So I bought him a little Chefwear outfit, a white coat and a pair of slacks—black pants—and he used to come home every day—I'd take him home when I left, and he'd be covered in chocolate. So I'd wash it every night. He did that for two weeks. And he's been in the kitchen ever since. I made him work one summer at Ralph's on the Park in the dining room, and he hated it. He used to call me all the time with ways to get back into the kitchen.

And after college—you know, my deal with all my children was, "You have to go to college, and after that, I'll support you in anything." And after a year as a ski bum, he said, "I want to go to culinary school," and he did. Then this was getting ready to open,

so he said, “Dad, can I come back and be a part of this?” And he’s been in the kitchen since we opened. He is our party sous-chef. He takes care of all our private parties upstairs here. So he’s doing really well.

[01:12:43]

Sara Roahen: May I ask: What did he major in in college?

[01:12:47]

Ralph Brennan: He was a business major. My first two children went to Washington and Lee, and both in business, so he has some of the business background.

[01:12:56]

Sara Roahen: Then where did he go to culinary school?

[01:12:58]

Ralph Brennan: The Culinary Institute of American in Hyde—not in Hyde Park; in Napa. Made Mom and Dad very happy. [laughs] So that was nice.

He really enjoys the kitchen. He’ll be there probably for another six months to a year, and then he moves to the dining room. He knows that. He needs to grow. He needs to learn the front of the house, you know. If one day he’s involved in the leadership of this, he has to know that. So we’ve talked about it, and he’ll put a suit on soon.

Kathryn, my oldest daughter, really didn't have a whole lot of interest in the business growing up. She worked one summer as a hostess at Red Fish Grill, but that was about it. She graduated from Washington and Lee and moved to New York and was looking for a job, and she called me one day and she said, "Dad, I interviewed for this administrative position here and here, but this company's looking for a catering assistant, a banquet party assistant. What do you think?"

I went, "Why are you looking at that?"

And she wound up interviewing, getting the job. She took the job and worked for two years there. And then she spent a year with Daniel Boulud at Bar Boulud, and did that, and then came home. She's worked in several of the different restaurants. She's worked at Ralph's on the Park, café b, Red Fish Grill, and now Brennan's. In fact, she works only half-time here. The other time, I have her in the office, and she's learning purchasing there, because I'm going to teach them all the different aspects of the business. So she'll probably do that until the summer, and then I have a couple of other things I want her to do. But, you know, they have to learn the business, and so. One day they may take over. [laughs]

[01:14:38]

Sara Roahen: So that surprised you, though? When she wound up back here?

[01:14:41]

Ralph Brennan: She surprised me.

[01:14:41]

Sara Roahen: And how did you feel about that? Did you care if she never entered the business?

[01:14:47]

Ralph Brennan: You know, it’s up to them. I have a second daughter who works with my wife in real estate, and one of their projects is ending right now and I’d love to get her here, if only for a couple years, so she learns a little bit about the business. And we’ll see. I’m trying. [laughs]

But, you know, it’s up to them. My dad was like that. He didn’t get a chance to finish college because of the war, and he always regretted that. I actually think he always wanted to be an architect, because every time we were thinking about new restaurants, he’d always want to get involved and give me ideas and advice. So since he didn’t get to finish college, his children—that was important to him, and especially his oldest son.

And, you know, that’s what I told them. I said, “It’s one of the few things that we can give you that’ll stick with you forever, so we want you to go to college. And after that, you can do anything.”

So when she said she wanted to take those jobs, I said, “That’s fine. You have to find your way.” And then certainly when she wanted to come back, she had some good training.

[01:15:51]

Sara Roahen: One thing I wanted to ask was: Which restaurant was your children's Brennan's? Their sort of playroom. But it sounds like, for Patrick, it was Red Fish Grill.

[01:16:01]

Ralph Brennan: It was Red Fish Grill for Patrick . I don't know; you know, Kathryn, maybe Bacco. They were very picky eaters, very picky. Both Patrick and Kathryn. And it's funny: Kristin, the youngest, who's not in the business, ate everything. But they used to love to go there for the pizzas and the pasta. And, it's funny: their favorite pasta dish, for being picky eaters—because when they were young we had to have plain pasta with just butter and nothing green on it at all—but their favorite pasta was the black truffle fettuccine that we cooked in olive oil.

[01:16:41]

Sara Roahen: Picky but good taste.

[01:16:43]

Ralph Brennan: Good taste. And then the pizzas. I remember when we first opened Bacco, they told me the pizzas weren't as good as Domino's because they were burned. Because we had a wood-burning oven, you know, and they'd get charred on the sides. And they would tell me, "Not good. Domino's is much better." [laughs]

[01:17:00]

Sara Roahen: Are they still picky?

[01:17:01]

Ralph Brennan: No. Patrick certainly not; Kathryn a little bit. But they eat just about everything.

[01:17:09]

Sara Roahen: So another thing, you know, I knew this about you and your family, but it's come up with your Aunt Lynne and with Ella and Dottie: wine is a really big deal.

[01:17:23]

Ralph Brennan: Mm-hmm.

[01:17:26]

Sara Roahen: And Aunt Lynne told the story about how when she and Dick—is that what you all call him? Or Richard?

[01:17:32]

Ralph Brennan: Dick.

[01:17:33]

Sara Roahen: Okay. Were newly married. Either Owen—one of the Owens, either senior or Dick's brother—would send them like a case of wine every week to taste.

[01:17:50]

Ralph Brennan: Wow.

[01:17:51]

Sara Roahen: And they would be—and I'm sorry I can't remember which one. I mean, you'll find out when we get these transcribed. She didn't cook at that time, and so she said they would be eating like hot dogs or tuna casserole and drinking these fine wines because that was like their education. You all take wine really seriously, and, I mean, I don't think it's coincidence that one of your playrooms was the wine cellar.

[01:18:17]

Ralph Brennan: Yeah. [laughs]

[01:18:18]

Sara Roahen: You all start young. Well, that's another thing Aunt Lynne told us, was that—that you might appreciate. The first time they took their kids to Europe, unbeknownst to them, their kids were served wine and got sloshed, and they had to carry them back to the hotel. Their kids were like seven and nine.

[01:18:34]

Ralph Brennan: I didn't know that. [laughs]

[01:18:35]

Sara Roahen: Yeah. But anyway, wine is a big deal. Can you talk a little about that, your wine philosophy—or how it's treated just like food? How did Owen and Ella know that?

[01:18:51]

Ralph Brennan: Oh, gosh. You know, I'm hearing stories I didn't know. I didn't know about getting the case of wine and saying to try them. I know, you know, growing up here, we were always asked to try new foods especially. And I have a great story. I don't know if you know, but I don't eat escargot, because I was about—one of those times I had dinner here with Aunt Adelaide, just the two of us, she made me eat an escargot and it was a horrible experience. All I could think of was something under a rock at home. So I don't do that, and I've never had one since, just because. [laughs]

But, you know, they were always, when we were young, asking us to try different food. My dad was allergic to shellfish, so we didn't have seafood at home. We had a lot of meat and potatoes, so it was always fun for me to come here.

Of course, wine, especially back then, being a French restaurant, and certainly the history of wine; this is well before California and wines here in the United States took off, so, clearly, that's part of the whole dining experience. The one thing I notice these days is people just don't drink as much as I remember when I was younger working here, but they still enjoy it. And we have about a 10,000-bottle wine cellar here, and we sell expensive wines all the time.

[01:20:14]

Sara Roahen: Do they not drink as much because they're drinking more cocktails?

[01:20:18]

Ralph Brennan: No, I think people are just not drinking as much overall. You know, a lot of things.

[Begin File 2]

[background conversations]

[00:01:23]

Sara Roahen: So we were talking about wine. When you acquired this restaurant, did it come with a stocked wine cellar?

[00:01:29]

Ralph Brennan: Well, we had to buy the wine cellar separately here, and then we've added to it over this year.

[00:01:36]

Sara Roahen: I'm sure—I'm assuming that, like a lot of other restaurants in town, this one also had to sort of start over after Katrina—

[00:01:44]

Ralph Brennan: They did.

[00:01:45]

Sara Roahen: —with the wines.

[00:01:45]

Ralph Brennan: Yes, my cousins lost their wine cellar here. We, actually, when we renovated, we put a generator on the wine cellar, so hopefully we won't lose the wine.

[00:01:56]

Sara Roahen: That was a big problem for a lot of restaurants after Katrina.

[00:01:59]

Ralph Brennan: It was. It was.

[00:02:00]

Sara Roahen: Did you have that in your other restaurants?

[00:02:02]

Ralph Brennan: We did, but, you know, we were lucky because we don't have big wine cellars, so it wasn't a big deal for us. In a place like Red Fish Grill, the wine that we have there—we were not out of power long enough to cause any real problems. But many places—Commander's, for example; Antoine's, Brennan's here—they lost a lot of wine.

[00:02:26]

Sara Roahen: Can you talk about the culture of drinking in general here, particularly at breakfast?

[00:02:34]

Ralph Brennan: [laughs] You know, a lot of people don't understand, and they're surprised by the fact that, you know, you can have an eye-opener at breakfast and a glass of wine, milk punch. We sell an awful lot of milk punches here; Bloody Marys. And it's just part of that culture of that breakfast, especially on the weekends. People don't drink as much during the week these days, because I think they're going off to do other things, maybe work-related. But certainly on the weekends, it's very playful here. And every day, but really on Fridays, we do a sparkling-wine afternoon special here. And, in fact, all day on Fridays we have very value-priced sparkling wines, just to get everybody in the festive spirit. [laughs]

[00:03:19]

Sara Roahen: I'm not someone who drinks during the day, really, ever, but the couple times I've had breakfast here, it doesn't really feel optional.

[00:03:26]

Ralph Brennan: [laughs] I like that.

[00:03:31]

Sara Roahen: Not that anyone is peer-pressuring you, but the guest is approached as if, “Of course you would like a cocktail.”

[00:03:39]

Ralph Brennan: Sure.

[00:03:40]

Sara Roahen: “And of course you would probably want to follow that with wine.”

[00:03:43]

Ralph Brennan: Right. Exactly. It’s tough for me, especially when we entertain people at breakfast, to start my day off with a milk punch and a couple glasses of wine and then try to go to work. [laughs]

[00:03:55]

Sara Roahen: Well, do you do that just because you’re a good host?

[00:03:58]

Ralph Brennan: Well, sometimes. Especially when you’re entertaining someone from the media, yes, I do it, and it makes for an interesting day. [laughs]

[00:04:08]

Sara Roahen: Well, you know, that brings me to something I've really been thinking about a lot. In your generation of Brennans, you and your cousins—and I don't know the younger generation well enough to speak to that, but—in general, you all are healthy people. Healthy-looking people. You do a lot.

[00:04:27]

Ralph Brennan: Yes.

[00:04:28]

Sara Roahen: But you don't look like people who indulge a lot in the excesses that you could. How do you balance that? I mean, is that just good genes and I'm not seeing it? Or did someone teach you how to balance your life?

[00:04:45]

Ralph Brennan: No, I don't think anyone taught me how to balance my life. I kind of figured it out because I would go from imbalance to imbalance. But, you know, when you're around food a lot like we are, you know, you don't want to eat all the time. And depending upon what's going on, I'll eat lunch and a very light dinner or salad, or vice versa: have something light for lunch and then dinner. And I also exercise a lot too. I go to the gym four, five times a week. You're up and you're walking and you're moving around. You have to stay active, and we do that, but you have to also be smart. Because, you know, you can, if you do it all the time, get yourself in trouble. But overall, I think we're all pretty healthy. Heart issues are something I think we've had the worst problem

with in the family. I know both my parents had heart issues and some of the other family members have had it, and some of that probably has to do with our lifestyles and the influences around us.

[00:05:50]

Sara Roahen: Do you sleep?

[00:05:51]

Ralph Brennan: Do I sleep? Yes.

[00:05:52]

Sara Roahen: I mean, I don't find time to exercise a lot of the time. [laughs]

[00:05:56]

Ralph Brennan: I go in the morning. If I don't do it in the morning, I don't do it. But, yeah, I sleep. I rest. You know, as I've grown older, I've slowed down. Although this little project [laughs], that year and a half of renovation, was tough and a lot of stress. But things have settled in now, so life's calmer and more organized, more regimented in a lot of ways, where during the construction it was crisis after crisis after crisis.

[00:06:27]

Sara Roahen: Do you have a typical day?

[00:06:29]

Ralph Brennan: No, I don't have anything near a typical day. It really depends on what's happening. But, you know, I generally get up; like I said, I like to exercise in the morning, and then I start going to the restaurants. And, you know, with eight restaurants, it takes a lot of time to work with the managers in each of the restaurants. I've neglected some of them in this year and year and a half of the renovation, just because this project has taken so much of my time, and I'm refocusing this year on that.

But, you know, it really depends. It depends on who your customers are at lunch and at dinner and where you need to be. If somebody's at Ralph's on the Park and I need to visit with them, I go out there. If it's someone here, you know, this is where I'll be. Because, basically, you know, I like to interact a lot with the customers, so I get the reservations sent to me every day for each the restaurants for lunch and for dinner. And I look at those and I try to see who's coming in, and I alert the managers about who this person is or that person is, and then, you know, I try to visit with them.

[00:07:37]

Sara Roahen: How do you communicate with all your managers, phone or text? Do you text or email?

[00:07:41]

Ralph Brennan: I like to phone, and usually—I mean, I know the managers well, and it's just so much easier for me to pick up the phone and call and say, "I need to talk to Richard Shakespeare," and tell him what I need to tell him about a guest coming in here

for breakfast. Or, you know, call one of the night managers and say so-and-so is coming in. I feel better if I can talk to them.

[00:08:09]

Sara Roahen: You know, we should talk about, at least by name, what your restaurants are. Could you tell me what your restaurants are, and maybe just like a one-liner of what it is or where it is? I can remind you of what they are if you lose track.

[00:08:26]

Ralph Brennan: No, no, no, no. Let's start down in the French Quarter. So we have Red Fish Grill, which is a casual seafood restaurant in the 100 block of Bourbon Street. We have Brennan's, classic New Orleans cuisine, I think, with a twist; famous for breakfast. Napoleon House is a new addition to the group, and we purchased that in May of last year from the Impastato family. They'd operated it for a hundred years, and it's a wonderful, wonderful place. Lots and lots of tradition there; a lot like Brennan's, and similar in a lot of ways, but vastly different.

And then we can move out to Mid-City, where we have Ralph's on the Park, which is kind of our upscale neighborhood [restaurant] in Mid-City. And across the street is Café NOMA, which is in the Museum of Art, New Orleans Museum of Art, and we operate the café there. Then we have café b at the other end of City Park Avenue on Metairie Road, which is our attempt to do a neighborhood restaurant. We're out in Metairie and draw a lot from the clientele in the neighborhood.

And then we have Heritage Grill, which is in the Heritage Plaza Building, and that's really—it's a lunch restaurant that services primarily the building, and it's the base of our catering. We have an offsite catering company, and that's the base of that operation. And we also have a bakery there. We bake a lot of our breads and desserts there.

And then the last one is a very interesting project that we just finished fifteen years on: is Disneyland in Anaheim, California, called the Jazz Kitchen. We were asked by the Walt Disney Company to put a restaurant out there. They asked us about eighteen years ago. We took three years to get it built, and it's been a fantastic experience out there.

[00:10:17]

Sara Roahen: Yeah. That's really interesting to me. Do you go there?

[00:10:22]

Ralph Brennan: I do. I go about every five or six weeks and spend several days there with the staff, and we have a great team. Our key people have been with us almost the whole fifteen years. They're a very talented group of people and very loyal.

[00:10:38]

Sara Roahen: And is it New Orleans food?

[00:10:40]

Ralph Brennan: It is New Orleans food, but we sell a lot more chicken there than we sell here. [laughs] But it's New Orleans-influenced food, yes. And it's a great building. It looks like a French Quarter building. Half of our seats are outdoors on balconies or patios, and then we have a small jazz club there that we play a lot of traditional New Orleans music.

[00:11:02]

Sara Roahen: I'd like to talk a little bit more about Napoleon House.

[00:11:05]

Ralph Brennan: Sure.

[00:11:06]

Sara Roahen: Because that is—you can almost see it from here. It's in the French Quarter. It is—I don't know how old the building is, but, like you said, the Impastato family has been running it for 100 years.

[00:11:17]

Ralph Brennan: Yeah. There are two buildings, actually, and they're right around 1800. One a couple years before, in 1797, I believe, and the other one's about 1804.

[00:11:30]

Sara Roahen: And that was, I think, from an outsider's perspective, really shocking that it sold, that you bought it. It all seemed to happen quickly. How *did* that come about?

[00:11:46]

Ralph Brennan: Well, it actually goes back to my old Price Waterhouse days. A man that I worked with back then had his own CPA practice, and the Impastatos were a client of his. Bill called me and said—after some niceties, he said, “Napoleon House, the Impastato family would like to sell it and they'd like to talk to you. Are you interested?”

And I went, “Holy mackerel.” You talk about something coming out of the blue. I had no thoughts of that ever being available. So I said, “Sure.”

And we met. We met secretly several times, because if I'd have walked in there, bells and whistles would have gone off. It took them about a year to make up their minds if they really did want to sell, because they're a lot like my family. They grew up in the business, and, you know, it was part of their life.

And, finally, I'll never forget, Sal calls me right after we open this place, opened Brennans here, and I go, “Oh, my god,” because he wanted to close right away. And I said, “No, no, no.” We'd already worked out the business deal. It was just them making up their minds if they were comfortable, you know, to really sell. And so he wanted to close fast, and I said, “No, no, no. I need a couple of months.”

And so we worked out a deal to close on April 30, and we took over May 1. And we've just left it alone. We fixed some things in the kitchen that needed to be fixed, and pretty much left the food alone. They have a wonderful tradition there. It's just fun to be a part of it.

[00:13:24]

Sara Roahen: Did most of their staff stay or did you have to re-staff?

[00:13:26]

Ralph Brennan: No, most of their staff stayed with us. We promoted one of their servers to a manager recently. They had a good operation.

[00:13:37]

Sara Roahen: I mean, I think of it mostly as a bar, but is it—you do a good deal of food service also?

[00:13:42]

Ralph Brennan: We actually do food service. You know, it's technically a restaurant because fifty percent or more of the sales are food. The one area where we've seen a great increase in business is in private parties. They were just not aggressive in booking private parties, but the demand is there. So, generally, every weekend—Thursday, Friday, Saturday—we're booked. There's one—well, it's a pair of rooms upstairs that can seat about eighty for dinner and about 150 or so for a reception.

[00:14:12]

Sara Roahen: What made you not be able to say "No" to that? It was not good timing, really.

[00:14:16]

Ralph Brennan: It wasn’t good timing, but, you know, it’s a lot like this building that Brennan’s is in. You know, there’s so much history here, and I love old buildings. I love preservation. You don’t get those opportunities every day. So I talked to my wife, I talked to my kids, and I said, “You know, you’re going to think I’m nuts, but I’m going to take another risk,” and so we bought it.

[00:14:42]

Sara Roahen: Did they think you were nuts?

[00:14:43]

Ralph Brennan: No, actually not. I think after they saw it—actually, I had my kids go in. I said, “Go eat.” Just the two—“Kathryn and Patrick, you go.” I remember Kathryn wasn’t married, but her boyfriend at the time, now her husband, the two of them went over and ate. And Patrick took a friend or something and they ate and came back with some ideas. I actually took Patrick over there one Saturday for lunch. He didn’t even know that I’d received a phone call. We just went over and had lunch. So he got a little mad, said, “Dad, why didn’t you tell me?” But I had to keep it secret because they wanted to keep it secret too.

[00:15:22]

Sara Roahen: Where did you have your secret meetings?

[00:15:24]

Ralph Brennan: [laughs] This gentleman has a condo in the Quarter and we met over there.

And then at some point, I said, “You know, I have to walk through the building.” And I would go on Sunday when they’re closed, and I’d meet Sal there and he’d walk me around and show me everything. It’s a very special place.

[00:15:43]

Sara Roahen: Yeah. Do they come by ever? It must be very strange for them to not be involved.

[00:15:50]

Ralph Brennan: Yeah. You know, the way it worked out, we sent a team of managers, three managers, in about a month before we took over, and we wanted them to work with the family to learn how they do things. And then Sal and his sister stayed with us for maybe six weeks after we took over. They come back periodically. In fact, just last month, Janie, the youngest daughter, her daughter had a wedding reception there. It was all planned long before we bought it, so we said, “Sure.” And I hear they had a very nice time. I wasn’t there that night.

But I love going. It’s just, I mean, it’s such a—what’s the right word? I mean, it’s just a classical French Quarter building, and I love to just go sit there and probably have a Sazerac and just look at the walls. Just like this Brennan’s here. I mean, the

history that’s in these walls. My mother used to have a phrase, “If the walls could talk.” I mean, the stories that they could tell about Brennan’s here or Napoleon House would be incredible.

[00:17:00]

Sara Roahen: I have to ask you. Simone will kill me if I don’t ask you to tell the story of your—I don’t know if it was your first date, but it might have been your first date. In a carriage.

[00:17:09]

Ralph Brennan: [laughs] Yeah, yeah. I don’t know how—

[00:17:19]

Sara Roahen: It involved your aunts sort of meddling.

[00:17:21]

Ralph Brennan: My aunts, yes. It was Aunt Adelaide again, just like the escargot story. She was trying to introduce me. I was a little bit shy back then. And there was a young lady who was the niece of one of Aunt Adelaide’s good friends, and they happen to also be a restaurant family here in town, and they wanted the two of us to get together. So they concoct this meal for the four of us, the two aunts, and the niece and the nephew, and they’re going to put us together.

So we come to Brennan’s here and we have a delightful dinner, and the next thing I know dinner’s over and they get us up and they take us to the front door, and there’s a carriage waiting with a bottle of Champagne. And we were underage. [laughs] And they told the carriage driver, “Don’t come back until the bottle’s empty.” And we had a wonderful time riding around the French Quarter. [laughs] And that was our only date. I haven’t seen her in a long time, but she still lives here. It’s just a lot of fun. You had to know Aunt Adelaide, that she was like that. She would do those funny things.

And another story that I remember about Aunt Adelaide, too—again pushing me. There was a lady named Jill Jackson who used to do a radio show here on Friday and Saturday nights, I think, and it was live from the main dining room. And another time she pushed me to go sit in front of a microphone and talk. You know, I’m a little boy. I don’t know—I was horrified. [laughs]

[00:19:06]

Sara Roahen: So this radio program happened regularly, like every week?

[00:19:10]

Ralph Brennan: Oh, it was every week. It was like a remote from Brennan’s. Maybe it was only one night. I don’t remember. But I just remember being horrified.

[00:19:19]

Sara Roahen: What did you talk about?

[00:19:20]

Ralph Brennan: I have no idea. [laughs] I'm not even sure I said anything.

[00:19:25]

Sara Roahen: I really wish I could have met Aunt Adelaide.

[00:19:26]

Ralph Brennan: You would meet a special person. She was an awful lot of fun, and, especially for being—she always embraced her nieces and nephews. But I keep going back. For me personally, I was kind of at the right age where I hung out with her a lot. She had this beautiful home up on Second and Prytania that had a ballroom in it, and we used to love that home, and I used to stay there. In fact, that night after the carriage ride I stayed there. I didn't feel too well the next morning, and I'm glad my parents didn't see that.

But she would always have parties, of course, obviously. Mardi Gras parties, too. And she was a gracious hostess. I remember going to a lot of parties there when I was the kid, the young man, and she was always entertaining people from all over and—

[00:20:22]

Sara Roahen: You probably don't have many memories of your Uncle Owen, because you would have only been like five or six when he passed away?

[00:20:29]

Ralph Brennan: Yeah, I really don't have any memories. I remember going to their home before and after he passed away. But really more afterwards, because that's where, again, they used to host family gatherings on holidays. So we'd go over there Thanksgiving evening, for example, and have dinner. But I really don't remember him at all. I wish—I'd love to meet him. I'd love to ask him a few questions and just try to understand, you know, why he did what he did when he did it. It'd be very interesting.

[00:21:04]

Sara Roahen: One thing I didn't get an opportunity to ask Ella or Dottie was about the high concentration of birthdays in your family in November and December.

[00:21:13]

Ralph Brennan: [laughs] Yes.

[00:21:15]

Sara Roahen: Can you talk about that?

[00:21:17]

Ralph Brennan: We have an awful lot of birthdays in November and December. Particularly mid-to-late November into mid-December, that thirty-day period, and we just joke about Mardi Gras babies. But I remember Aunt Dottie hosting us for Thanksgiving dinner, and she'd have a big cake with lots of candles and lots of names on it, because there were probably—at least ten of us, at least, have birthdays in that period, from my

dad’s generation and into our generation. And then even my daughter Kathryn—when Susan came home and told me she was pregnant, I said, “What’s the due date?”

She said, “December 5.”

I went, “Oh, no.” Because my sister Lally is December 1, Cindy’s December 3, I’m December 13, and now Kathryn—she missed the due date, so she’s December 11. So, you know, right there. But Ella and Dick and my dad were all—and Adelaide too—were all in late November. I have a brother who’s November 1. I have some cousins in December, and it even spills into early January. But we just laugh about, “I guess we had a good time at Mardi Gras.” [laughs]

[00:22:25]

Sara Roahen: Because Mardi Gras tends to be about nine months prior to mid-December or early December.

[00:22:29]

Ralph Brennan: Exactly, exactly. Roughly, yeah. [laughs]

[00:22:33]

Sara Roahen: That’s a great New Orleans family tradition. [Brennan laughs.]

We should wrap this up soon. I guess, well, I’d like to know a couple more things. Like, what drives you to get up in the morning? What is it? Is it this work ethic that, you know, you got from your father? Is it—what is it?

[00:22:55]

Ralph Brennan: It's fun. It's people. This business, it's all the people that work with us and it's all the people that are guests, and it's just so much fun to make people happy, and that's what we do. We do it every day. And, you know, you get instant gratification because you know if we've done it today for lunch or brunch or breakfast or dinner tonight, and when you see people leave and they're smiling, it's very rewarding.

And then it's fun to build that team, because we have an outstanding group of people that work with us, and from all different backgrounds. You know, mixing the front of the house with the back of the house and the challenges of all that; trying to get everybody on the same page every day. It's just a whole lot of fun. I really enjoy it. And Brennan's, for me personally, has really reenergized me because it's just such a wonderful opportunity to keep the tradition going. And, you know, you don't want to fail.

[00:23:53]

Sara Roahen: How many employees do you have in your group?

[00:23:57]

Ralph Brennan: In the whole group, about 700, a lot of people. [laughs] And they're wonderful people, they work very hard, and they do a great job.

[00:24:10]

Sara Roahen: It's a lot of names to remember.

[00:24:13]

Ralph Brennan: It is. That's hard. [laughs] I struggle with that a little bit. But, you know, many of our people have been with us a long time, and, you know, they've made a career out of this industry, and they've raised families by working here, so that makes me feel good.

[00:24:33]

Sara Roahen: You do have some culinary background. Do you get involved? Like do you go back into the kitchen and taste something? I heard stories about your Uncle Dick being very hands-on. I know Ella was hands-on. Are you? Do you do that?

[00:24:45]

Ralph Brennan: Yes. We talk food all the time and we work on menus. The way we have the company set up, our chefs have a lot of autonomy. So what we try to do is work with them to give them some guidance and direction. We might want an egg dish like this, and so Slade will work on that dish. You know, it would be something different at café b with Michael Uddo out there, or Chip [Flanagan] at Ralph's on the Park. They each have their own different styles, so you try to work with them and get them in a direction that you want them to go in, in the direction the customer wants. I mean, that's a lot of fun, and so we talk food regularly.

[00:25:26]

Sara Roahen: You're really—you're too young for this question, but since I have you here—

[00:25:31]

Ralph Brennan: Thank you. [laughter]

[00:25:34]

Sara Roahen: You're too young for the legacy question, but I'm wondering, if you do think about that, what you want your legacy to be. Or are you too busy just working every day to even think about it?

[00:25:48]

Ralph Brennan: Boy, that's a tough question, because as I've gotten older, you know, you start to think that you're not going to be here. I'm not thirty years old again starting in the business. Gosh, I don't know. I can't answer that question. I mean, the only thing I can think of, especially as it relates to Brennan's here, that we kept our tradition going. I don't know. That's a tough question. [laughs]

[00:26:25]

Sara Roahen: Sorry.

[00:26:27]

Ralph Brennan: I haven't thought about it. I mean, what I do think about is that it's going to be finite. You know, I'm sixty-four now. My dad died at seventy-eight, my mom at seventy-five, so, you know, I think about it. But, I mean, I've never thought about what I wanted my legacy to be. I mean, I'd love to see the tradition continue because I think that's important to our family and I think it's important to New Orleans, and I'd love for my kids to be a part of that. I don't know if we can make—what is it, five generations at Antoine's? We'll see, but—

[00:27:07]

Sara Roahen: You're getting there.

[00:27:08]

Ralph Brennan: We might be. We might be.

[00:27:10]

Sara Roahen: You know, there's such a devotion to the community here in your family. Everyone talks about—your cousins, your aunts talk about doing for the community. Like, having these restaurants for the community. Do you have any sense of who that came from? Is that Ella?

[00:27:36]

Ralph Brennan: I don't know. I don't know. I mean, I've always looked at it this way. My uncle and father and aunts and uncles, when they started out, they really didn't start

with much, and they've been very successful and they built something special. And part of that was because they're in New Orleans. I mean, this is a food town. And part of that is because the people in the city supported them. So you have to give back. I mean, New Orleans and Brennan's, to me, and the Brennan family, are one and the same. And so you can't lose sight of that. You have to give back to your community.

I'm not sure if that's where you were headed, but that's the way I look at it is, you know, we were very lucky we had this opportunity in this town at the time that we are here, and we need to support the community. And there was never a more significant time than after Katrina, and that's why we came back and we got the restaurants open as fast as we could. We wound up losing money, but it was important, you know, because the city was hurt, and we needed to help bring it back. I mean, food and New Orleans are special, and the combination of the two I just think make us unique.

[00:29:03]

Sara Roahen: What restaurants did you have then, when Katrina happened [in 2005]?

[00:29:06]

Ralph Brennan: We had Red Fish Grill and Bacco down here, and Ralph's on the Park, I guess. Yeah, I think so. That was it.

[00:29:16]

Sara Roahen: Did Ralph's flood?

[00:29:17]

Ralph Brennan: No. It’s on the ridge.

[00:29:19]

Sara Roahen: That’s nice.

[00:29:20]

Ralph Brennan: I don’t know if you remember “The Times-Picayune” did a story.

They took a satellite picture of the city flooded, and they—what would you call—placed over it a map of the city of 1875. And where people lived in 1875, it was dry. And that strip along City Park Avenue, which originally was called Metairie Road, was a ridge. It said Metairie Esplanade Gentilly Ridge—whatever. I can never get that name straight. But it was dry, and everything on either side of us flooded.

[00:29:54]

Sara Roahen: Everything all around you.

[00:29:55]

Ralph Brennan: Yeah. I remember seeing pictures of City Park Stadium, the football stadium, and I said, “Oh, my god, we lost Ralph’s on the Park.” And I remember getting a call from somebody who worked at the museum and they were being evacuated, and they called one of the board members who knew me to get me a message, and they said, “It looks like Ralph’s is okay.” And we were.

[00:30:17]

Sara Roahen: Because you’d never thought about the fact that you were on the ridge.

[00:30:21]

Ralph Brennan: Yeah, never did. I thought it was gone. Or at least not gone, but flooded. You know, wood floors, the bar, everything we’d renovated—I thought we’d lost it. But I went in, and it’s amazing. It was still set. When we left on Saturday night, they set the tables up. I don’t know why, but they did. And the pilots were still on on the stove. I turned the gas off. It was incredible.

You know, Bacco didn’t flood. And Red Fish—that side of Bourbon flooded. Because Dickie’s at Bourbon House didn’t flood, and we had just a little bit of water and we got in and cleaned it out real quick.

[00:31:02]

Sara Roahen: I was thinking that the Quarter did not flood.

[00:31:04]

Ralph Brennan: No, it got into parts of the Quarter, yeah.

[00:31:08]

Sara Roahen: But you opened—reopened all three restaurants pretty quickly?

[00:31:11]

Ralph Brennan: We opened Red Fish and Bacco about a month after the storm.

[00:31:14]

Sara Roahen: That's great.

[00:31:15]

Ralph Brennan: And then Ralph's on the Park, we were fine, but there was nobody out there. And other than City Park Avenue, there were no lights. I used to drive out there, you know, and go look around and see, and so it was probably late October when we opened.

[00:31:34]

Sara Roahen: Because people weren't getting back in their houses there yet or anything.

[00:31:37]

Ralph Brennan: No, no, no. So we waited maybe three more weeks to get that open. And we didn't have telephones. We opened Bacco and Red Fish Grill without water, and we opened Bacco without gas.

[00:31:55]

Sara Roahen: How did you do that?

[00:31:56]

Ralph Brennan: Remember that wood-burning pizza oven I talked about? We had that and a wood-burning grill, and we served basically the same menu, the same four items. We were able to get chicken, some fish; we had a burger—I can't remember the fourth item. We had a very short menu. But we were able to get some food out of Baton Rouge and we put together a menu, started cooking, and we did sell a lot of wine. And in the beginning, we served it in plastic cups, but people were happy to be back.

[00:32:33]

Sara Roahen: Yeah, you took what you could get in that era.

[00:32:37]

Ralph Brennan: [laughs] You did, you did.

[00:32:39]

Sara Roahen: It was the best [because there was so little].

[00:32:40]

Ralph Brennan: Mm-hmm.

[00:32:45]

Sara Roahen: But you never considered not coming back or not reopening?

[00:32:48]

Ralph Brennan: Oh, no. No. We had some issues, our family, getting settled, and we had to get the kids in school. But once we did, I came right back, and there was never a doubt.

[00:33:04]

Sara Roahen: Did your home flood?

[00:33:05]

Ralph Brennan: No. We live up by Audubon Park, and it didn't flood. We had some roof damage, but minor roof damage. Susan started coming in with me, and I remember she cleaned out the refrigerator, so I didn't have to do that. I was down here. [laughs]

[00:33:21]

Sara Roahen: You married the right woman.

[00:33:22]

Ralph Brennan: I did. I did. I did. But, no, she said, "Let's go. We're going back." So as soon as we could get back—that, again, was about a month after the storm, after Rita came through. The mayor started opening parts of the city, and so we came back.

[00:33:42]

Sara Roahen: I think we weren't filming yet when you told me, but you were in Baton Rouge. That's where you evacuated to?

[00:33:48]

Ralph Brennan: Well, we went to Jackson first; then Oxford; then Baton Rouge; then Covington. Susan's cousin found us a pool house in Baton Rouge to live in, and it was a friend's home and had been on the market for like a year or two, and all of a sudden someone snapped it up. And so we had about ten days in the pool house, and that's when we went to Covington to go live with my brother. So it was crazy. Were you here?

[00:34:21]

Sara Roahen: Yeah. I also came back about a month after, five weeks after the storm.

[00:34:26]

Ralph Brennan: Yeah, yeah, it was a crazy time.

[00:34:28]

Sara Roahen: It was. Yeah. It was really—it's hard to believe now that we talk about anything else. [Brennan laughs.] It's just so significant. But with every—I mean, I, of course, remember every restaurant reopening was an event and very emotional and very—like the most important thing going on. Other than—you know, that wasn't directly survival-related.

[00:35:00]

Ralph Brennan: Yeah, mm-hmm.

[00:35:05]

Sara Roahen: Well, Ralph, we’re at the end of our time—

[00:35:09]

Ralph Brennan: We’re done.

[00:35:09]

Sara Roahen: —and you’ve given us a lot. Is there anything that you can think of that you would like to talk about that we haven’t talked about?

[00:35:14]

Ralph Brennan: I don’t think so. I think you’ve asked a lot of great questions, and I want to thank you because it’s brought back some memories for me, just sitting here. On my way to Baton Rouge yesterday and back, I was trying to think, “Now, what can I talk about? What can I talk about?” This has been a lot of fun. I’ve enjoyed it a lot.

[00:35:31]

Sara Roahen: I’m glad.

[00:35:32]

Ralph Brennan: I've been looking forward to this for a while, and I'm glad we're doing it.

[00:35:35]

Sara Roahen: Well, you started this whole thing. I'm appreciative.

[00:35:37]

Ralph Brennan: Well, I guess I got caught up in the tradition of here, because the people that you talked to yesterday aren't going to be here forever.

[00:35:48]

Sara Roahen: It's true. I feel really, really lucky to have gotten to sit down with your aunts. It was very special.

[00:35:54]

Ralph Brennan: And they were great mentors to us. So hopefully, it'll be good, because what I'd really like is to be able to have my kids and others look at these videos, however they come out, just so they can understand the history.

[00:36:14]

Sara Roahen: There's a lot, and I think, you know, you all work hard, and so sometimes it's just you're just trying to get through the day or get through the week. And it's good to reflect.

[00:36:25]

Ralph Brennan: Yeah, it is.

[interruption]

[00:36:30]

Sara Roahen: All right. Well, thank you.

[00:36:30]

Ralph Brennan: Great. Thank you. I enjoyed it.

[00:36:31]

Sara Roahen: Me too.

[00:36:32]

Ralph Brennan: I really appreciate it.

[End of interview]