

Brennan's®

Mentored to Master

A valued member from within, Ryan Hacker, is the New Executive Chef at Brennan's Restaurant in New Orleans

How do you respect the past and have one foot in the future? It would be a challenge for most chefs facing the new position as executive chef of the kitchen at Brennan's, the seventy-five-year-old, much-lauded luxury New Orleans restaurant owned by Ralph Brennan. Not in this case though, as a valued member of the original team at the renovated Brennan's and interim lead chef of six months, Ryan Hacker, gets the distinguished honor to take on the role. As of this week, Hacker officially takes over from his former mentor, Slade Rushing, who was by his side from the very beginning of Brennan's reopening to much amazement and delight 5 years ago this month. In stepping into this role at age 35, Hacker becomes the youngest chef to helm the kitchen and the first to be promoted from within at Brennan's, which holds high marks from *The New Orleans Advocate*, *The New York Times*, and *Wine Spectator* (among its many other accolades such as a James Beard Foundation Award Finalist for five years). Hacker is aware of the pressure and has already been making moves to elevate the restaurant's distinctive and ambitious cuisine while respecting Brennan's distinguished legacy. "As we look to the future of Brennan's, our goal is to apply our continued research into classic Creole cuisine to our knowledge of contemporary technique and the rich bounty of the Gulf South to invoke a sense of time and place," says Ryan Hacker. "We need to respect where we have been while we continue to move forward."

Hacker first became interested in cooking as a kid growing up in Tyler, Texas seeing Paul Prudhomme's cookbook on the kitchen counter at his grandmother's house for Sunday suppers. Beyond the meal itself, his family instilled in him a respect for the act of dining and the importance of dining amongst family around the table.

Hacker spent a few years studying business at Texas Tech University, but he had a burning desire to leave Texas. Hacker went on to attend the New England Culinary Institute and landed his six-month internship at Hamersley's Bistro in Boston, MA, where he began to realize his culinary path in fine dining. From a youth spent watching his family grow vegetables on one acre of their five in rural Texas, it all clicked: the fundamentals of cultivating fresh produce are akin to the philosophies of an award-winning restaurant. Immersing himself in Chef Gordon Hamersley's approachable food, smart sourcing, and a kitchen built around teaching - Hacker was effectively attending a graduate program. Hacker next set out to work with Kent Rathbun in Dallas, Texas. Rathbun was a true advocate of maintaining a given culture in one dish. Hacker learned the valuable lesson that every dish tells a story and presents a sense of time and place. The crusade to work with chefs who have diverse backgrounds and are top in their field brought him back to Texas with Andrew Weissman at Osteria Il Sogno. He credits Weissman for being the most respected and influential chef in his growing career. His direction was forever embedded in Hacker's cooking style - a clean, aesthetically pleasing approach to the plate, while coaxing ingredients to present the most collaborative flavors.

New Orleans was the last place he thought he would be but when chef Slade Rushing offered him a position that was a challenge he could not refuse. It would forever change Hacker's future. There were a few parallels with both chefs- growing up in extremely rural towns, Hacker in Tyler, TX and Rushing in Tylertown, MS, with hunting as a favored past time that poised them to be good partners in the kitchen. Rushing was instrumental in running a successful kitchen that begins when menu development is initiated with a conversation amongst the team.

Changes had begun to arrive on the menu by Hacker during his tenure with Rushing starting with an inventive rendition to one of New Orleans' most famous dishes, *Blackened Redfish* [a flashback to his childhood,] that is now poached in butter with spices cooked separately. After delicately preparing the spice mixture, the entire fish is coated with it and the taste maintains its pronounced flavor. As the trusted voice in

the kitchen these past few months, Hacker's modern interpretation of Quenelles, a classic French favorite in the city since the 1800s, features *Shrimp Quenelles* with *New Orleans Style BBQ Sauce*, *Candied Lemon*, and *Rosemary Dusted Crostini*. "We aren't so much looking to reinvent the wheel when it comes to traditional dishes and Creole cuisine, but rather change its tires, refresh it, and offer a refined version that pleases our local diners beholden to a rich New Orleans heritage, as well as its next generation," says Hacker.

Hacker is a perfect choice to lend to the esteemed group of experienced chefs at Brennan's, holding a strong reverence for the tradition and determined to maintain the authenticity of all aspects of the restaurant, while integrating a creative and innovative approach to the menu. "Ryan Hacker showed leadership in the kitchen and his cuisine is imaginative, ingredient based, and builds on the tastes and flavors of the local culture," says Ralph Brennan.

Come this holiday, Ryan has one gift on his "shopping list" that's personal, and it is seeing his family gathered around the table he now presides over at Brennan's in New Orleans.

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