

Brennan's Is Back

A New Orleans establishment
returns to form by JULIA REED

WHEN I WAS A KID IN THE 1960s AND early '70s, there were—in my family at least—four essential New Orleans restaurants. (Five if you count Felix's, the oyster bar to which my father still has a stubborn allegiance.) Antoine's, Arnaud's, and Galatoire's were the venerable French Quarter bastions of haute Creole cuisine. Brennan's, the younger, cheekier upstart, didn't turn up until 1956 (by then Antoine's had been dishing up pompano *en papillote* for more than a century). Its creator, Owen Brennan, had opened a previous version, Owen Brennan's Vieux Carre, on a dare—"Count" Arnaud told him an Irishman couldn't do French food.

Brennan's defied Arnaud by offering up a fine version of classic Creole, but it also had a sexy pink facade and a multicolored coq as its logo, and it served rum-drenched flaming desserts—in the morning. There



LOCAL FLAVOR Clockwise from above: The vibrant dining room at Brennan's in full swing; chef Slade Rushing; plating steak Diane.

was dinner, too, but Breakfast at Brennan's was the thing, an event during which you'd see half the people you knew curing the ills of the previous evening with a restorative milk punch alongside eggs Hussarde—a Brennan's invention that adds *marchand de vin* sauce to eggs Benedict.

Then, in the mid-'70s (about the time I

was thrilling to the restaurant's pan-fried quail in a straw potato basket), Owen's heirs had a nasty split. One side kept Brennan's (where the magic vanished fairly quickly), while the other went off to start an empire that includes Commander's Palace (where much of the festive brunch crowd decamped).

The good news is that the fun upstart is back. Last year, after the down-at-the-heels "old" Brennan's was forced to declare bankruptcy, Ralph Brennan, Owen's nephew, bought the place with his partner, New Orleans businessman Terry White, and the pair have refurbished it well beyond its former glory. The pink facade and the coq are still there, but there are windows facing the street now, a bigger courtyard and bar, and a stunning wine cellar that houses close to ten thousand bottles and a table, made from a giant felled Mississippi cypress, that seats eighteen.

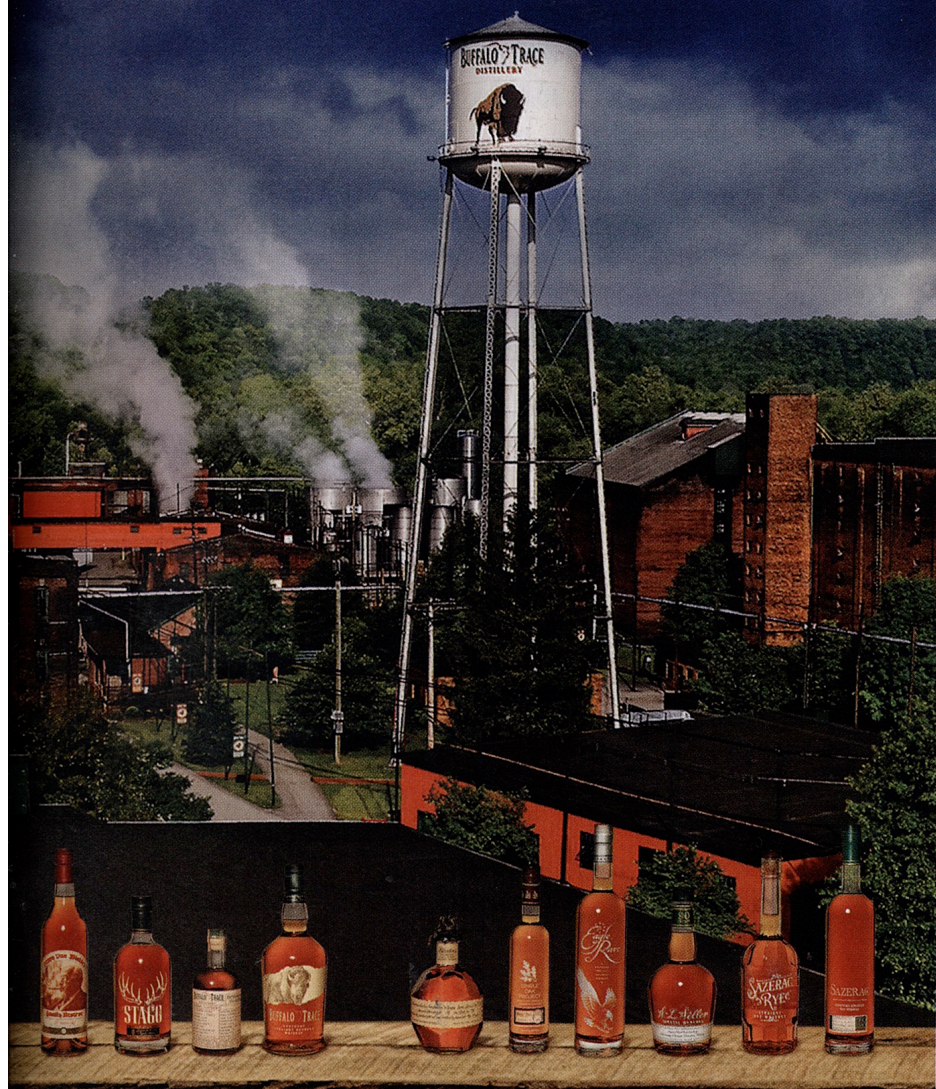
The interiors by designer Richard Keith Langham are light-filled and seriously lovely, and include such narrative touches as the Morphy room, a cozy spot off a balcony named for Paul Morphy, the great nineteenth-century chess champion who once called the 1795 building home. For Ralph,



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who now owns seven other restaurants, the building was also home—his aunt, the much-loved and enormously influential Ella Brennan, brought him with her to work when he was little (she ran the place after Owen died); through high school and college, he worked every job from boning chickens to manning the door.

Given his boss's personal history—as well as the old regulars' expectations—chef Slade Rushing is mindful of Brennan's traditions, but he's having some fun too. The Mississippi-born Rushing cooked with his wife, Allison Vines-Rushing, at Manhattan's tiny but celebrated Jack's Luxury Oyster Bar (fans will be thrilled to know he's brought the barbecued lobster with him) before the couple returned South to cook, most recently at New Orleans' MiLa. Rushing's Deep South roots are reflected in perfect biscuits and fried Mississippi rabbit over creamed collards, but he's fermenting those same collards' stems to serve with grilled steak. Eggs Hussarde is on the menu, of course, but this time with house-made English muffins and house-cured Canadian bacon. "We're not opening any packages," Rushing says, adding that he loves the all but lost art of tableside cooking. The restaurant has long flambéed its signature bananas Foster (invented by Ella in 1951) on a cart in the dining room. These days, steak Diane is also on offer, but the beef is "cooked" first via sous vide so the waiters can sauté it faster. "I'm leaning on some of the modern tools to bring the old into the new," he says. Next up tableside, he's thinking whole flounder or a "badass roast chicken studded with truffles."

"It's easy to find inspiration in all this old stuff," Rushing says, and the bartenders clearly agree. An addictive Caribbean milk punch combines aged rum and bourbon for a new take on a beloved standby, and another New Orleans favorite, the Pimm's Cup, is enlivened with hibiscus syrup.

Best of all, Brennan's once again is a happy family affair. Terry White's wife does the flowers, while Ralph's son Patrick works in the kitchen and his daughter Katherine is dining room manager. When he had the run of the restaurant as a kid, Ralph says, it was "kind of like Disneyland." For his part, Chef Rushing knows you've got to stay on top of the menu to maintain the magic. "Restaurants die if they're not progressive." ©