

Interview of Ella Brennan by Jack Davis and Justin Nystrom
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Abstract: In this interview, Ella Brennan (1925-2018) discusses many aspects of her long career in the restaurant business, but with particular focus on the years spent at Commander's Palace, which became the anchor establishment for her side of the Brennan clan in 1974. Topics include the renovation of the Commander's building, professionalization of its kitchen, the careers of notable chefs Paul Prudhomme and Emeril Lagasse, and the importance of developing and modernizing both the New Orleans restaurant and the flavors on its menu. The latter part of the interview deals more with Ella Brennan's youth at Brennan's and some of the key figures who were influential in shaping her understanding of fine dining and cultivating a successful restaurant.

Biography: Ella Brennan was born in the Irish Channel neighborhood of New Orleans to Owen and Nellie Brennan in 1925. The large family included siblings Owen, Adelaide, Dickie, John, and Dottie, all of whom would be involved in the restaurant business to different degrees after older brother Owen bought the Absinthe House bar in 1943 and soon after the Vieux Carré in the French Quarter. After high school, Ella Brennan began her career managing the kitchens and service of first the Vieux Carré, and later, after the unexpected death of brother Owen in 1955, took on a larger role at the Brennan's flagship restaurant on Royal Street. After an acrimonious split with Owen Brennan's widow and adult sons in 1974, Ella and siblings Adelaide, Dottie, Dick, and John moved their base of operations to Commander's Palace in the Garden District, which they had bought in 1969. For the next forty years, they transformed Commander's into a global culinary destination and opened other restaurants including Mr. B's Bistro in the French Quarter. Ella Brennan has been widely recognized across the restaurant industry, including receiving one James Beard Foundation award for service and another for lifetime achievement. Two years before her death in 2018, Ella made a triumphant return to Brennan's on Royal Street after her nephew Ralph Brennan and business partner Terry White purchased the establishment.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gANIPSpOTuY>

[00:00:17.09] Jack Davis: ...What? For...

[00:00:18.07] Ella Brennan: I don't think, out of our county office. Can I put this down? And will you see this down here?

[00:00:22.19] JN: Nope. No. no, no.

[00:00:24.28] Ella Brennan: We'll hide it as much as we can...

[00:00:27.13] Jack Davis: Is it on, Washington Street?

[00:00:29.10] Ella Brennan: Yeah. It's on Washington Avenue. And they're close to the entrance of the cemetery. There's a long... there's a patio behind the restaurant, and a garden behind this house. This is not a commercial property, the patio is.

[00:00:42.17] Jack Davis: Okay. Okay.

[00:00:44.11] Ella Brennan: And we're all happy with that. It's... just home to us, I mean, we've been... here forever. When our kids were growing... we lived at 2507 Prytania, so on the corner of Second, the house they're replacing right now. My children grew up there...we don't have to go any further than that-

[00:01:07.27] Jack Davis: No, that's interesting! The house that's... now a vacant lot?

[00:01:11.19] Ella Brennan: No. They are now restoring again.

[00:01:12.17] Jack Davis: Okay. Okay.

[00:01:16.18] Ella Brennan: ...And they... the last person that own it had put in a swimming pool, in where the garden on the...left side of the house, the Uptown side of the house, and these people nicely took it down, and are restoring the garden.

[00:01:35.05] Jack Davis: Oh good.

[00:01:36.00] Ella Brennan: And it'll be...we just hope- happy to see them do it as much as they did. Because we- my sister bought that house-

[00:01:43.18] Jack Davis: That was your sister, Adelaide.

[00:01:46.24] Ella Brennan: And I had been living at 2308 Prytania, and she's at 2507, so when we were both divorced, we decided to live together. So I lived there a long time, and it- it was fabulous house to live in. And- and so we got used to that. [laughs] Oh- Oh- it was great. And... just so much space, and, just beautiful- I mean- just the house its self, you know- as they say- the bones- were just so magnificent. Oh, we loved living there. So when we came up here to Commander's, we decided we needed a smaller house. We weren't going to continue all that carrying-on over there, entertaining every ten minutes, you know, so we moved in here, and it fits us like a glove.

[00:02:30.01] Jack Davis: This is- this is you and Dottie.

[00:02:32.20] Ella Brennan: Dottie and I yeah. We moved. Our children were there time away, in college, and that sort of thing, but we do call it the Brennan Hotel, because they're in and out. There's always somebody coming here to stay.

[00:02:43.06] Jack Davis: Well...How do we sound, Justin? Are we ready to-

[00:02:47.12] JN: You sound great.

[00:02:48.20] Jack Davis: Okay.

[00:02:49.06] JN: And we look marvelous.

[00:02:50.04] Jack Davis: Okay. Well that's good.

[00:02:51.18] Ella Brennan: Well... that's okay. At this age, I don't really care. [laughs] My sister cares a hell of a lot.

[00:02:59.08] Jack Davis: Well we're here in the...the parlor of...Ella Brennan's house on...Coliseum Street in New Orleans in the Garden District, right next door to Commander's Palace, and it's also the home of her sister, Dottie Brennan, who is in the room... or on the... floor, anyway... and might join... us later... I'm Jack Davis, I'm...helping with this Loyola Oral History project, "Inquiry into what happened in the 1970's in New Orleans," and... trying to assess its importance in and... it's... impact. And

also with me is... Professor Justin Nystrom of the Loyola History Department, who is... the main driver of the Oral History Project, and Aubrey Baudean a student at... Loyola who is assisting with...the cameras and the sound and the light. And... today is...June 25th, 2014.

[00:04:01.20] Ella Brennan: ...You're still doing it.

[00:04:02.18] Jack Davis: Yes, I am... and ...our subject...Miss Ella, is to...

[00:04:10.17] Ella Brennan: Can you please drop the "miss."

[00:04:12.17] Jack Davis: Ok.

[00:04:12.23] Ella Brennan: ...I'll feel much better.

[00:04:14.19] Jack Davis: All right.

[00:04:15.21] Ella Brennan: Younger.

[00:04:16.13] Jack Davis: Ok. Well, we have...as our focus...in the- among the many things that you've been involved in... ... we're going to narrow it down to the 1970's and perhaps, some time before and time after.

[00:04:33.05] Ella Brennan: Well.

[00:04:34.00] Jack Davis: But...so we can see where things came from and where they went later on.

[00:04:37.24] Ella Brennan: Ok.

[00:04:38.01] Jack Davis: ...But...

[Saw buzzing]

[00:04:41.27] JN: What's that? Do we know where that's coming from?

[00:04:46.00] Ella Brennan: Somebody's cutting grass, maybe.

[00:04:48.02] JN: Yeah.

[00:04:48.20] Ella Brennan: Could that noise...

[00:04:51.17] JN: Cutting down a tree.

[00:04:52.00] Aubrey Baudean: With putting in something.

[00:04:52.20] Ella Brennan: Huh?

[00:04:53.15] Aubrey Baudean: With putting in something.

[00:04:57.21] Ella Brennan: Ok.

[00:04:58.27] JN: It sounded like something that may persist.

[00:05:02.07] Jack Davis: If it's... a short-term phenomenon, we could...

[Saw buzzing]

[00:05:06.20] Jack Davis: Whoa.

[00:05:08.01] Ella Brennan: That's people cutting something. They might be cutting out here, or across the street. We have a building across the street- the apartment house on the corner, which we resurrected. And it takes a lot of attention.

[00:05:24.14] Jack Davis: Yeah... Well you've managed to keep all of the Freret Buildings together.

[00:05:29.27] Ella Brennan: Well we're trying very hard. Freret, yeah. We're trying very hard. And...we love the buildings as much as anybody in the neighborhood or the city. I mean, they're part of us. And... we certainly respect them.

[00:05:45.10] Jack Davis: Well we're... glad that all those five buildings are there.

[00:05:49.21] Ella Brennan: I guess so. I mean... the other two are very small. Those two, three, let's see... four. five.

[00:05:59.23] Jack Davis: Well- now we... recovered from the sound, and we just continue where we left off... In the 1970's... operating from the world of restaurants... you made many of the changes... that we're interested in... New Orleans culture and... way of life. And you reflected others of those changes. And you... watched the whole thing unfold.

[00:06:31.03] Ella Brennan: And it happened to me personally.

[00:06:32.00] Jack Davis: Not... well it doesn't have to. You can still talk about it, even if it didn't happen directly.

[00:06:36.18] Ella Brennan: Well it did happen to me.

[00:06:37.26] Jack Davis: Yes.

[00:06:38.14] Ella Brennan: Ok. So...

[00:06:39.25] Jack Davis: Well... we want to see how you saw the 1970s, both as an actor... and a doer, and as an observer.

[00:06:49.18] Ella Brennan: Well, we... moved up here to Commander's in 1974, which was a very big move in my personal life. We had been at Brennan's for 30 years. And the family was getting so big... and they all wanted to be in the restaurant business, and they love it. And they are in the restaurant business... And so, we came up here, and... the restaurant had been operated by some friends of ours, the Moran fam.

[00:07:19.14] Jack Davis: Uh hum.

[00:07:19.26] Ella Brennan: ...Frank and Eleanor Moran and they lived in the south, and we'd gotten to know them over the years. And we had said to them: "if you ever retire, think of us. We have all the children. You all don't have children." So. That's the way it... seemed to us, and we... Frequently on the way home, I'd stop in and meet my sister and Ralph, and they'd be having... late supper or something, and I'd join them, and Frank Moran was very kind to me. I was very... when I first started coming up here, I was very new in the restaurant business. Totally green. And it was a very exciting experience for me. And it never stopped. Like... would you believe, yesterday... now I'm not in the restaurant anymore, but yesterday, they certified eight of our wait staff as certified sommeliers. I mean... it never changes. It keeps going on, it keeps being exciting. But going back to the '70s...

[00:08:21.22] Jack Davis: Yeah. Now you said... how could you say you were "green," when you'd been in the restaurant business since the 1940s? When you were a teenager?

[00:08:27.09] Ella Brennan: Well I went... .. That's when I was talking about when I first met the people that owned Commander's.

[00:08:33.14] Jack Davis: Ok.

[00:08:35.06] Ella Brennan: And... as I said he was very kind to me. I was still trying to figure out what was beef and what was veal and what was pork, I mean, I really... was a very totally a beginner. And as I said, Frank was very kind to me. And... I'll never forget, one day he took me to... they used to have meat-packing houses, Armour and Swift's, and those kinds of companies out on Poydras street, and I remember he took me one day, he was going for some reason and he took me, and I'll never forget that. He was very kind. So anyway... we came up here to Commanders, and they- they had- he had died, and she retired, and they sold us Commander's. And this house came with it. And...

[00:09:17.28] Jack Davis: And your family bought Commander's...

[00:09:20.25] Ella Brennan: In sixty-seven... sixty-nine.

[00:09:21.21] Jack Davis: A few years. Sixty-nine? And... you?

[00:09:25.04] Ella Brennan: We didn't come up here to operate. We had people from Brennan's came up here and were operating. We knew we were going to eventually have some family up here... so as it turned out, it was us, and we had a...

[00:09:39.10] Jack Davis: And when you say "us," you're referring...

[00:09:40.29] Ella Brennan: Well my five brothers and sisters.

[00:09:42.02] Jack Davis: Ok.

[00:09:42.03] Ella Brennan: ...in our arrangement with Brennan's on Royal Street, we... had three out-of-town restaurants, I think- Houston, Dallas, and Atlanta. And the Friendship House on the Gulf Coast. And... so we took Commander's. And they took

Brennan's. And... we said: "well, what are we going to do?" ...You know..." are we going to... you know... stay here? What's... going to happen?" And so, everybody lived in the neighborhood, so it was a walk from our houses, so. We... No! You had to move up here. Dottie, my sister, was living in Metairie and... ... we thought she lived very far away. Well she said: "It's one cigarette away."

[00:10:24.20] Jack Davis: [laughs]

[00:10:25.13] Ella Brennan: So, we said: "well, what are we going to do?" So we all looked at each other and we- pondering this for a while, and we said: "Ok. Let's try to run the best restaurant we know how. Let's start." And we did. And we never stopped. I just told you the young sommeliers yesterday.

[00:10:44.16] Jack Davis: Yeah.

[00:10:44.19] Ella Brennan: That, to me, is extraordinary.

[00:10:45.29] Jack Davis: And... ... so it was four or five years... after acquiring Commander's that you actually took control?

[00:10:54.27] Ella Brennan: Yes, that's true.

[00:10:56.00] Jack Davis: And did you... just start trying and... day by day? or did you...

[00:10:59.21] Ella Brennan: No, we had been trying, but we... really felt...

[00:11:01.07] Jack Davis: Did you have a plan that was...

[00:11:03.05] Ella Brennan: Well, we... wanted it to be the best restaurant in New Orleans, and to us that meant competing with the top restaurants in the city of New Orleans, which were Antoine's, Galatoire's, Arnaud's ok. That was always the three in my head, you know. And... so we went to work, and we decided: "Well, ok, what we going to do?" So... my two sisters took over the front of the house, and... my brother Dick was very... we didn't have a kitchen. And he was very involved with trying to get the kitchen organized and straightened out. So I fell into my natural place, which is the food, and the service. And Dick and I worked that together. And... my brother John, one day, he was... John would spend a lot of time there, whether it was- out in the dining room with the customers when we were doing other things, and couldn't be there... he was always here. And... he ...went upstairs, and... where... there is the Garden Room now, which is our prime room as far as a lot of people are concerned... well it didn't exist. It was like... refrigerators, and waiters' hangout... changing clothes, and things like that. So my brother, John... straddled the john, and looked out one of these small windows and he said: "Oh my god, come look at this." Well, the windows were down, I mean, the walls were down, and glass went up- instantly.

[00:12:36.07] Jack Davis: To see the garden.

[00:12:37.04] Ella Brennan: To see the garden. And the Garden Room became one of the highlights.

[00:12:41.07] Jack Davis: And when was that?

[00:12:42.05] Ella Brennan: I don't know.

[00:12:43.00] Jack Davis: Was it shortly after you... took over?

[00:12:44.14] Ella Brennan: Yeah. Shortly after we were there. I can't... ... and exact timing, I have a problem with that. But it was in, let's say, we went there in '74, so let's say it was '76, '77. Something like... '78. I think it was very early on. And... that's what we were doing in the front of the house. And a short time later, my sisters decided to take the wall out in the main dining room, between the two dining rooms, and when they dug down for supports, and I looked down there, and I said- "they're out of their minds. They're totally out of their minds." And then I looked up there, and I saw the beams, unbelievably magnificent beams, the structure was... breathtaking to me.

[00:13:32.25] Jack Davis: Why did you think they were out of their minds at first?

[00:13:35.11] Ella Brennan: Well, number one, the hole was deep. But- the biggest thing was, "whoa!!! That's going to cost money!" Because I, of course, was never in the money

end of the business. I... .. knew generally, the money end, but I mean... at that point, I was more... well I had been in the money end down at Brennan's... what am I saying? Well anyway, it impressed me- that hole. And...

[00:13:59.26] Jack Davis: But when you saw the beams, you realized it would... stand.

[00:14:03.25] Ella Brennan: What?

[00:14:04.27] Jack Davis: You realized it had enough strength to...

[00:14:06.15] Ella Brennan: Oh yeah. Yeah. But they had to put up something just- in the middle... No! They didn't put anything in the middle. I guess they put them on the sides. And we wound up with this magnificent lovely dining room. So... when I first went there to work, I have to say to you... that I said, "We simply don't have any tables." I'd left Brennan's, and we had a big restaurant. And when I first went in the restaurant business, what... the people that I was looking at; Arnaud's and Antoine's... were big restaurants. I didn't know anything about little restaurants. I knew we- didn't do it big we were in trouble. So that's how we started going after the tables, trying to configure the restaurant that it would work as a restaurant. And it was very exciting, because all I had to do was look. My sisters, my brother Dick- were- he was very involved, helping in with the construction. And were just lucky to find great contractors- and so that thing went along amazingly fast and wonderful.

[00:15:04.16] Jack Davis: And configuring the tables? You mean getting-

[00:15:06.07] Ella Brennan: Configuring the walls, because we had... very small areas. It was... all these small areas and we weren't comfortable with that. And we didn't think the customer would be comfortable with that. So we tried to make it in... what we actually did was made it our restaurant. We did all the things that we were comfortable with. And Dick was moved fooling around with the kitchen, fooling around with the kitchen, and... doing amazingly well, amazingly well, and... it wasn't, I don't think, until the '80s when we really moved the kitchen, early '80s. Very early '80s that we... maybe it was earlier than that, I can't remember.

[00:15:44.13] Jack Davis: How much did you change the seating capacity of... Commanders before you'd bought it?

[00:15:47.27] Ella Brennan: Well... I don't know the numbers. We wound up with... with two rooms on the first floor, we made it one. And we went upstairs, and we made the Garden Room in one. Now, between the two, when you first get to the head of the steps, there's the Parlor, which is a lovely room, the windows... overlook this house, by the way, and then we had... the Coliseum room, which ran along Coliseum Street, and the Little Room. The Coliseum... and the Little room could make private parties, ten, twelve, fifteen, twenty. Different sizes of rooms. We needed that. But the Parlor... had to take walls off there, and make... It wasn't a restaurant, it was... lots of little rooms. So, we finally got it to be our restaurant, because... when we didn't have any tables, I remember going into the check room and crying, and said, "This is a terrible place."

[00:16:44.21] Jack Davis: You mean, because you didn't have enough tables?

[00:16:46.10] Ella Brennan: No, it wasn't really that. I wasn't comfortable with the restaurant. I mean, it was... boxed-up... .. when we were at Brennan's, we had a very... spacious, open, wonderful, daylight, sunshine shining in. I always liked daytime in a restaurant, you know, when you... have the glass walls, and the windows, the light comes in. And in the daytime, it's very nice. At nighttime, you put out candles, which gives it a totally different atmosphere. So we had to get comfortable, and we did.

[00:17:22.19] Jack Davis: How many years did it take to get comfortable? Just...

[00:17:24.17] Ella Brennan: Oh, it didn't take long.

[00:17:25.10] Jack Davis: Ok. When... you came uptown, in 1974... would you say New Orleans was in the middle of... a major change in the world of restaurants?

[00:17:37.29] Ella Brennan: Yes. I think...

[00:17:38.28] Jack Davis: In all... of these traditional restaurants-

[00:17:40.26] Ella Brennan: The owners were getting older.

[00:17:42.29] Jack Davis: Getting older. And new people were coming in?

[00:17:44.03] Ella Brennan: And they were... New people were coming in.

[00:17:46.12] Jack Davis: And... new restaurants?

[00:17:47.04] Ella Brennan: And new restaurants. I particularly remember...Jonathan's... down on Rampart Street with... Tom Cowman¹ was the chef.

[00:17:58.01] Jack Davis: Right.

[00:17:58.17] Ella Brennan: And I remember that restaurant being particularly un-New Orleans in the fact that it was in a beautiful building, but it was decorated beautifully. I mean it was an attractive, handsome, good-looking building. It wasn't historically pure, but the house was pure, you know what I mean, it was good.

[00:18:17.13] Jack Davis: Was that something of a breakthrough for New Orleans?

[00:18:18.28] Ella Brennan: I think, that for New Orleans, I think it was. And I think that Tom was a hell of a...

[00:18:23.05] Jack Davis: Because of the... menu? And because of the decor?

[00:18:25.22] Ella Brennan: Well I think, the decor, and I think the approach to the menu... In New Orleans... we're a big seafood restaurateur ... And... Tom came up with some different versions of...fish, crabmeat, shrimp. We didn't have- Crawfish wasn't around a lot then. Crawfish came into the restaurants later... And he... did lovely things, and they looked lovely, and right about that time, I'm sitting in Commander's one day, and the phone rings, and it's Howard Jacobs from Times Picayune and he said...

[00:19:09.01] Jack Davis: The columnist.

[00:19:09.16] Ella Brennan: Huh?

[00:19:09.26] Jack Davis: The columnist.

[00:19:11.09] Ella Brennan: Yes. Lovely man. And he called me up and he said: "Ella, tell me about Nouvelle Cuisine." Now I'm a girl that's traveled a lot. I go to New York to keep in touch. I've been to Europe, I mean... mainly for educational purposes, to really understand what I was trying to learn how to do. And... he told me that... where was I?...

[00:19:36.16] Jack Davis: You said that Howard Jacobs asked about Nouvelle Cuisine.

[00:19:39.18] Ella Brennan: Howard Jacobs. Asked about Nouvelle Cuisine. And...I said: "Howard, I don't know what you're talking about." And I mean I was... I got every restaurant magazine... Of course there weren't that many. There was *Gourmet* and... I mean, there weren't that many restaurant magazines, but there were the traditional classics that you know- *Town and Country*, *Holiday*, and that sort of thing. They hadn't mentioned Nouvelle Cuisine. So we to immediately go into researching "What is Nouvelle Cuisine?" And when we find out, we said, "Oh, we don't think that's going to work in New Orleans."

[00:20:13.01] Jack Davis: Why? Define it...

[00:20:15.07] Ella Brennan: Well...

[00:20:15.05] Jack Davis: And... say why it wouldn't work.

[00:20:16.27] Ella Brennan: Well... number one: it was cutesy-poo. Do you know what I'm talking about?

[00:20:21.01] Jack Davis: I think so.

[00:20:23.22] Ella Brennan: And... I don't think New Orleanians were into that. I mean, getting this on their plate, something with a... very tiny... it wasn't dinner to New

¹ Restaurant Jonathan was at 714 N. Rampart Street and owned by Jim Maxcy, who also had the Coffee Pot restaurant in the FQ. It opened in 1976 and closed in 1986. Tom Cowman, originally from New York, became the second chef at Jo Ann Clevenger's Upperline restaurant, where he worked until his death in 1994. See <https://nomenu.com/posts/jonathan>

Orleanians. So we were experimenting with that, and... I don't know the exact year I'm talking about, I don't know, but we... had Paul [Prudhomme] in the kitchen by that time.

[00:20:45.02] Jack Davis: So that was after '76.

[00:20:46.23] Ella Brennan: Yes. I don't remember exactly when Paul came in.

[00:20:50.11] Jack Davis: I read that he came in '76, but...

[00:20:52.19] Ella Brennan: All right. That's it.

[00:20:52.23] Jack Davis: I would defer to you, of course.

[00:20:54.00] Ella Brennan: Well, no. I mean... I'm telling you, the years sometimes merged. Paul was there, and we were very much into... combining, I don't think rightly, but we were combining a lot of Creole dishes with New Orleans dishes. And I came to learn, that experimenting with all of them, would produce a fantastic menu, which I happen to love, and we're always trying to do it better, but I think it's pretty good right now, and... Paul was there, and we... you should know he had big problems standing up, but we sat frequently in the kitchen at what is the chef's Table. We eventually got that there. And we...

[00:21:43.15] Jack Davis: ...That was you and Paul, and who else would be around that chef's Table?

[00:21:46.17] Ella Brennan: Well, my brother Dick, Dottie would be- would come in and sit there... maybe somebody from the front of the house... working in the restaurant. It was a combined... anybody was welcome. It wasn't a secret meeting or any kind. On Wednesdays, Wednesday afternoons, we head upstairs, in that little building I'm telling you about... we would... call it our food meeting. We would have a... food meeting on Wednesday. No excuses! Wednesday afternoon, 3:00, And then we came downstairs when Paul couldn't go up those steps anymore. And we would sit there, and that's where he did the... one day, I'll never forget. Betty Hoffman, was a lady who worked with us, and... Betty said... "we got to get something. We need something. We need something... new on the menu, something great on the menu." And I said: "Well, the best dish I had ever eaten in my life-" no I said "that I dreamed of eating"- was if somebody caught the fish, cooked it on a fire, right there at the... water's edge, and just that fish... my mother used to cook, my mother was a fantastic cook... and... I don't know where she learned, but she had magic in her hands. And... I wanted that fish. Because she frequently would cook the fish and you'd get this marvelous white meat of the fish, the fabulous taste, she knew how to season, you know, and I said: "I want that in the restaurant. I want to get that in the restaurant." And... we worked on it for a long time. And... Paul called it... we called it "Grilled Gulf Fish," which wasn't what my mother cooked... what did we call it? "Grilled Red Fish." And Paul changed it into, "Blackened Redfish." Well, you know what happened to that. And... there went our fish.

[00:23:47.02] Jack Davis: And that was in response to your specifications for a new dish.

[00:23:50.13] Ella Brennan: Yes, and Paul came up with... a version that we could do in the restaurant that moment, and it, as they say, spread everywhere, because it... was basically a simple piece of fish, with extraordinarily good seasonings. And I'll... always remember my brother Dick coming in the kitchen and saying to every young cook- "you must season both sides" of the fish, or the chicken, or whatever he was talking about. You don't just sprinkle seasoning on the top, you turn the fish over and you season the whole fish. We want it to have New Orleans taste. In fact, they did a video called "Taste." Jimmy Smith was one of our fabulous young... well he became old eventually, but he came very young, and Jimmy just cooked... I call it magic in your hands. You either can cook or you can't cook. And Jimmy did this wonderful cooking. And... so Dick... made this video, to make sure that anybody who came to work there had to sit down and understand, from Jimmy's demonstration, from our mouths, how we felt about the taste of the food.

[00:25:01.20] Jack Davis: This was the... Commander's way of working in the kitchen.

[00:25:06.05] Ella Brennan: Yes, I guess you could call that. We'd grown up...

[00:25:07.22] Jack Davis: And... ... was the Blackened Redfish something you put on the menu right away?

[00:25:11.28] Ella Brennan: Yes. We didn't call it "Blackened." We called it "Grilled Redfish."

[00:25:15.18] Ella Brennan: And we put in a grill. And we had... it became very popular, and still is. But... Paul took it another step and blackened it with more seasoning.

[00:25:27.20] Jack Davis: Did he do that at Commander's, or did he wait...

[00:25:29.13] Ella Brennan: He did it at Commanders, but we didn't call it that. When he left, he started calling it that.

[00:25:34.04] Jack Davis: When he went and started his own...

[00:25:35.27] Ella Brennan: Yeah.

[00:25:36.02] Jack Davis: Restaurant.

[00:25:36.20] Ella Brennan: Now, I don't mean to say Paul didn't have anything to do with that dish... it was... his, he cooked it. We talked, But it was what we call...when's the afternoon foody... Betty Hoffman, I am convinced, came up with the word "foodies," first in the United States. She got to calling it our "foodies meeting," because we would go sit up there, and we would just talk, whatever you had on your mind. I mean, you would say... "Well last night I went to so-and-so's dinner, and they had this extraordinary whatever whatever whatever."

[chime and barking dog]

[00:26:09.16] Ella Brennan: Because at that time there... was a big change going on. Sorry about that.

[00:26:13.10] Jack Davis: That's ok. We like to hear... That's Talula. We didn't introduce Talula.

[00:26:18.20] Ella Brennan: No. We can't introduce Talula, she'll jump all over you. So... all of this excitement in food was going on with us, and trying to get Paul to reduce the... heaviness of a lot of the Creole dishes by making gumbo without a roux. Did you ever hear of that?

[00:26:44.10] Jack Davis: ...No. Not before that.

[00:26:44.28] Ella Brennan: Well, it's sad. You can have it. It's... ... it's a magnificent broth, of seafood. I mean- you can say it was our version of... bouillabaisse, but it wasn't. I mean... we did not use... what's that marvelous seasoning... Oh, I'll come up with it. It's a marvelous seasoning you use with bouillabaisse. It won't come to my mind... Saffron. And it... gave a certain taste to... bouillabaisse, but gumbo was just- making a seafood broth, a brown seafood broth, and using... all the fresh seafood that we had... you know, everything in it, like... pieces of redfish, shrimp... we weren't into crawfish at that time... crab meat, shrimp, piece of whatever fish they were doing...No, I guess that was it, and... there was nice variety, and... so it became an excellent dish. We, we were crazy about it, and at that time, Paul had made the... bread pudding soufflé, and... we said, "Paul, you got to make it lighter. You've got to make something lighter." We... had this magnificent bread pudding, I think the best bread pudding the Lord ever put on earth, improving even on my mother, and it was made by a guy named Floyd Bealer², who ... took care of our lunch, and Paul made that. It was... like a bread pudding with custard. I don't know what to tell you, it... was fantastic, and we said, "We've got to lighten it. We've just can't keep that, We'll serve it at lunch, but at dinner... with the dinner we've got to." So he made the Bread Pudding Soufflé. Which became... Instantly, a success.

² Floyd Bealer had been a chef for the Brennan family in the 1960s and 1970s, eventually becoming the chef for a now-closed restaurant in Slidell named "Doug's."

[00:28:52.26] Jack Davis: So now you're inventing, these new combinations.

[00:28:55.19] Ella Brennan: We're not.... inventing anything.

[00:28:57.00] Jack Davis: But you're.... changing the combinations, and you're using the...

[00:28:58.18] Ella Brennan: We're taking... The food... That New Orleans loves, and trying to make it less heavy. And Creole food was never that heavy, Creole food. Now, I don't really know what Creole food is, except, I think, we cook it every day. But... it wasn't as heavy as Paul was coming on with... what we call "pot cooking" in Creole culture. He was coming on with these heavy dishes. People adored them, but eventually, you got to the point where couldn't eat them. You see what happens [gestures at stomach] if you eat them, and I ate them all the time.

[00:29:32.01] Jack Davis: But if you're not inventing, you're changing. You're sort of...

[00:29:34.24] Ella Brennan: Yes.

[00:29:35.04] Jack Davis: ...you're re-invigorating.

[00:29:36.06] Ella Brennan: Right.

[00:29:36.18] Jack Davis: And so, did... .. this get attention, for Commander's?

[00:29:40.08] Ella Brennan: Ooh. Let me tell you. That's when it all really happened. And... now I don't like to say this, but, every major magazine in America wrote a story about it. And... it was unbelievably good for business in the restaurant- everybody was coming there, entertaining there... everybody. And it was

[00:30:06.12] Jack Davis: Did it have an impact, beyond... Commander's and the Brennan restaurants...

[00:30:12.03] Ella Brennan: Oh!

[00:30:12.09] Jack Davis: ... and...

[00:30:13.06] Ella Brennan: I don't know about...

[00:30:14.01] Jack Davis: ... into... New Orleans?

[00:30:14.25] Ella Brennan: Well, I have to say...

[00:30:15.28] Jack Davis: Did you find that people, other restaurants in New Orleans, were...

[00:30:18.11] Ella Brennan: Well I remember particularly, it was one man, it was a psychiatrist, and he opened Marti's Restaurant. He eventually... .. moved from there and he opened another one on Decatur Street...

[00:30:31.22] Jack Davis: Right. Sbisa.

[00:30:33.00] Ella Brennan: Sbisa's. And... ..Larry... What's his name?... He... was a psychiatrist and a doctor and he opened both of these restaurants. And he began getting involved, like I had. He didn't cook, or maybe he did, but I mean, he wasn't the chef, but he was changing that menu at Sbisa's tremendously, and... so what we were all trying to do, is we knew that everybody in New Orleans liked the New Orleans food. They loved it. But every restaurant had the same menu.

[00:31:08.22] Jack Davis: What was in the air?

[00:31:11.04] Ella Brennan: What was it that said... I can't get the quote... but it was something like, 'there were five dishes, and we had five hundred recipes or something for it in New Orleans.

[00:31:20.11] Jack Davis: I think- I think our friend [Gene Burg] told me it was...

[00:31:23.14] Ella Brennan: Excuse me.

[00:31:23.02] Jack Davis: "They have five hundred restaurants and five recipes."

[00:31:26.13] Ella Brennan: That's what it was. That's what I'm trying to say. Couldn't think of it, but that's true.

[00:31:30.18] Jack Davis: ... So you... and these others started adding more recipes.

[00:31:34.17] Ella Brennan: Yes. Yes.

[00:31:36.14] Jack Davis: And what was it that... allowed that to happen? What... was it about the 1970's?- if I can try to get to that.

[00:31:43.18] Ella Brennan: Well... what happened is that we... were determined to run the best restaurant we knew how, so we were devoting a tremendous amount of time to it. And the foodie meetings were resulting in a lot of things. In the city, I think, I think the city was becoming... Wasn't Moon Landrieu mayor about that time?

[00:32:08.11] Jack Davis: Yes. He started in 1970...

[00:32:10.08] Ella Brennan: And Moon had given...

[00:32:10.27] Jack Davis: ...Seventy.

[00:32:11.04] Ella Brennan: Yes. He had given a really good... spin on the city, as far as people who lived here. Mentally, we were proud of... what Moon was trying to do politically, And... I guess we were hoping in hell, trying to think that the schools were going to get better, and there were reasons why the schools were going to get better; the whole community was in an up-mood. And then there came a little recession in the middle of the '70's, but we didn't notice it. I did not know there was a recession at that time. I didn't have time to read like I do constantly... and New Orleans just seemed to be on a sparkling "Let's do it! We can do it! Let's go!" And we had learned, from my older brother Owen when I was very young, that you should be friends with all the people in the restaurant business. They are in the same business as you are, and nobody should be competitors. We should be friends. So, we started that. We did our best to go eat in their restaurants, and they started eating in our restaurants, and we all became this big happy family. I'm not saying they weren't any of them close before, but we worked at keeping it going that everybody would be friendly. So we all got to be very friendly, and we were...

[00:33:31.22] Jack Davis: Do you think you...

[00:33:33.19] Ella Brennan: ...The restaurant business was changing from being "I'm ashamed of my child who's a cook," a little bit more that "I'm proud of them," to the point where "it's okay if he wants to be a chef." That sort of was going on at that time. And, we were very happy to be part of that, And one of the things that I have to say to you, in addition to the foodie meetings, we told our staff, "we want you to be part of making this happen, and we want you to learn and grow." I bought more cookbooks than anybody in America. They all have studies the first 30- 137 pages of Escoffier, which was basic French cooking, gave them every new cookbook that came out, and really... we were teaching, teaching, teaching. They used to laugh about "oh, Miss Ella's got somebody at the table." Well, I would have somebody that... seemed to be free at the moment, and I'd sit down, and I'd say, "what's going in your head? Tell me what you thinking about. I'll tell you what I'm thinking about..."

[00:34:36.23] Jack Davis: This is one of your employees?

[00:34:38.09] Ella Brennan: Yes. And I felt it was a- wonderful way to operate with having all the people involved. Now... that didn't come to me just out of the blue. I had a pretty sensational brother, named Owen, I had a sister named Adelaide... ... and they sort of taught me this, and so, it was a... spirit that they built up in the family. We're very close family. We've had our moments, but we're very close. And so we wanted to include these people we work next to, right next to all day long, into learning. "Read this book; study this book; tell me what you think about this book." And that was all going on, and it was very exciting, and about that time, Emeril appears on the scene. Because Paul's wife had opened a restaurant in the French Quarter, and he...

[00:35:38.07] Jack Davis: K-Paul's?

[00:35:39.15] Ella Brennan: K-Paul's. And he wanted to-

[00:35:41.02] Jack Davis: ...That was about 1979, I think.

[00:35:43.02] Ella Brennan: Well, all right. That's about the time Paul left. And he didn't leave like that, I mean... he's, "look, I got to go help Kay. Y'all figure something out; I'll be here until you do." Which is what we did. And at that time, we were opening Mr. B's. That was an interesting part of our...

[00:35:56.20] Jack Davis: Also 1979.

[00:35:57.24] Ella Brennan: Yes. Mr. B's... We wanted to be back in the French Quarter, a little bit. We had grown up in the restaurant business there, and... we had a lot on our minds about... being less of a fine-dining restaurant, but an absolutely fine restaurant. "Fine" maybe not the word, but great food, extraordinarily great food in a more relaxed atmosphere. Of course, people came in coats and ties anyway, but, That's what we were trying to... .. make it a little bit less expensive- although our goal at Commander's was never to be an expensive restaurant- we never wanted to be the top restaurant in prices in New Orleans- uh uh. You got to stay down there. Which we still do today... So we worked on Mr. B's, and we put in a... a wood grill, and started all kinds of...

[00:36:52.24] Jack Davis: Was that wood grill inspired by the... "Grilled Gulf Fish" facility of...

[00:36:57.28] Ella Brennan: Part of that, yes, yes, and... the "Gumbo Ya Ya" that they have at the Sbisa's, all of that was coming from... all of us, and Paul went down and helped us open it. I mean, he was helping write the menu. He was very involved, and... we were very lucky in the people that we were able to bring in down there. We sent Jimmy Smith down there, who was the taste guy at our outfit. If anybody was working they had to understand what Jimmy was doing. And so we had this opportunity to get this restaurant on... it was a... pornography store, and a take-out-type Chinese restaurant. And I'll never forget... well, also the ceilings were so low... ceilings low, and Dick went down, because there was a parking lot above it, it had been the old Solari's. Remember that wonderful, wonder... you know about that old...

[00:37:49.03] Jack Davis: Yep.

[00:37:49.11] Ella Brennan: ...store?

[00:37:50.02] Jack Davis: I never saw it.

[00:37:50.17] Ella Brennan: Well, a grocery store had been there, which we knew quite well, because my mother shopped there a lot. Upstairs... so Dick got in the restaurant and stood on a chair, or something, pushed the acoustical ceiling out, he was 6'3", you know, and pushed his hand up, says: "we can do this here. We can do this here." And he came back from...

[00:38:07.03] Jack Davis: You can raise the ceiling.

[00:38:09.15] Ella Brennan: And he said, "We got this. We got to get... .. this in." oh yeah. We had to take out... we gutted the building. Again we gutted the building, but the parking lot was upstairs, and they had a great foundation. So I don't think we... .. well we had to gut the building, and what they did for engineering was... I do not know. But, it was an exciting, exciting, experience... being back in the Quarter... and, let's see...

[00:38:41.11] Jack Davis: But, so did you, by coming back, by taking this form... you basically had tested out this formula over several years at Commander's.

[00:38:51.04] Ella Brennan: Yes.

[00:38:51.16] Jack Davis: And you took... the best of that, and... do I have this right? You took the best of that to Mr. B's.

[00:38:56.23] Ella Brennan: Yes. But we took, at Mr. B's, and put on more dishes that I now want to get back on at dinner at Commander's, but we didn't used to serve at... .. Commander's. We had a great lunch menu at Brennan's, and we did things like great stew, beef bourguignon. They have everyone read the first 137 pages; they knew what beef bourguignon was. But we had a run a great beef stew, we had to... short ribs, we had to run... rabbit... all these native New Orleans things, and... worldly things, that we

were not serving at Commander's at dinner. So we... said the way that the greatest lunch's menu in the world. Let's put it down there for dinner. So that's kind of how that evolved. And we got, well... I just think it's... a great menu down there.

[00:39:49.19] Jack Davis: do I have this straight, that when you... .. took control of Commander's in 1974, you... .. more or less... intuited your way into the formula that you ended up with at Commander's several years later, and then you took a lot of the lessons that you learned and had a...

[00:40:09.01] Ella Brennan: We took the lunch menu.

[00:40:10.18] Jack Davis: Yeah. But you took to Mr. B's, a... plan.

[00:40:12.29] Ella Brennan: Yeah. Yes. We knew what we were doing.

[00:40:15.01] Jack Davis: But you... .. didn't take over Commander's with...

[00:40:18.03] Ella Brennan: No.

[00:40:18.03] Jack Davis: ... as good a plan.

[00:40:18.22] Ella Brennan: Well, we...

[00:40:19.07] Jack Davis: ... With as solid a plan as that.

[00:40:20.23] Ella Brennan: Well we were be as going to be as good as we were at Brennan's. What better? I mean, to this day we try to be better. I mean, I promise you...we... read every magazine published, we travel... we keep up with... what are the interesting foods that people are talking about?... or we hope we can make them talk about. So we're working all day. The menu... we don't have a static menu, at Commander's. It changes, and right now, I'm thrilled with the way it's turned out. We have a table d'hôte dinner. You can get a three-course dinner, below 40 dollars, then you have the a la carte, the appetizers, the entrees. And then we have up in the corner over here what they... 're calling the "Chef's Playground." And that changes constantly. So, the dinner menu changes constantly. Whatever's in their mind, they're going to put on today. What's ever at the... whatever they buying today... they're going to get on that menu. They change it at least once a week. Sometimes they change it in the middle of the week, they can't get the fish they want, that can't get whatever... they now print them up in the office. I mean, I used to remember the mimeograph machine, you know, And... the dirty fingers from the ink, and all that kind of stuff. They have this magnificent machine, and it even prints in color, and they print the menu, and they can crimp the menu, and, they can go up there and in half an hour they've got it printed.

[00:41:58.19] Jack Davis: When the Mr. B's menu hit the French Quarter, what impact did it have...

[00:42:04.00] Ella Brennan: Quite an impact.

[00:42:04.13] Jack Davis: ...on the rest of the restaurant business. Tell me.

[00:42:06.15] Ella Brennan: Quite an impact. On the city.

[00:42:07.20] Jack Davis: ...How did you see it?

[00:42:09.14] Ella Brennan: ...No more they thought it... it's hard to put into words what they thought of... anything. You know? But you knew all of a sudden the people were packing in, and all the other restaurants were packing in, and we were going to their restaurant, I mean, we'd work all day, and whoever had the B-O-D duty, you know what that is?

[00:42:31.13] Jack Davis: No.

[00:42:31.21] Ella Brennan: That's the "Brennan-On-Duty," so we had to have one or two people there at night, to greet, and talk, and see, and, the others were free. And I promise you, every other night we'd go out to dinner. We were some of the best restaurant customers in the city. We loved to go out to dinner.

[00:42:47.08] Jack Davis: And... .. what places...in... the...

[00:42:50.22] Ella Brennan: We began having places to go.

[00:42:52.11] Jack Davis: What places right after Mr. B's launch did you think...

[00:42:54.08] Ella Brennan: Oh, that's very hard to say. Right after Mr. B's.

[00:42:57.05] Ella Brennan: Well, we said... Sbisa's... Jonathan's didn't last long. It was very sad. It didn't last long. And there was... right after... we were down the streets, try and look... Uptown always had Manale's at one point there was a Pittari's was a re-restaurant. And he was getting into... ...a lot of... I think it was game...

[00:43:31.12] Jack Davis: Seafood. Lobsters. And...

[00:43:32.26] Ella Brennan: ...and... yeah... that sort of thing. He was... really working on that menu and building it. That was going on up there, and I'm just trying to think about the other restaurants that...there weren't always that many. You know...

[00:43:47.02] Jack Davis: ...Did Mr. B's ...spark a lot of...

[00:43:49.23] Ella Brennan: I think so.

[00:43:51.12] Jack Davis: Of- of new kinds of thinking about the restaurant business?

[00:43:54.16] Ella Brennan: Well, a lot of them weren't necessarily kinds of thinking, but a lot of people went into business. Then after they got into the business, they actually did their thing... As I said, Larry used to sit at table eight... and learn the restaurant business there. He was a psychiatrist on the side. So... I'm trying to think of the other restaurants that opened. I'm going up and down Royal Street, I'm going up and down Bourbon Street... it always had its great old seafood houses. They didn't change. They had oyster bars, fried seafood restaurants and- I'm trying to go down Bourbon Street...

[00:44:35.07] Jack Davis: Well there was a lot of... if you looked at the journalism about food in New Orleans, we went from having no restaurant writers or restaurant critics in 1970 to having a whole fleet of them...

[00:44:49.19] Ella Brennan: I remember.

[00:44:49.22] Jack Davis: ...by 1980. You had Richard Collin...

[00:44:52.02] Ella Brennan: Oh! Do I remember him! You know what he did?

[00:44:55.28] Jack Davis: Well...

[00:44:56.17] Ella Brennan: You want me to tell you?

[00:44:57.11] Jack Davis: Yes! I do. Because he... worked at the State's Item also.

[00:44:59.15] Ella Brennan: ...Yes. We had just opened. He had been very kind at Brennan's and we just came up to Commander's. We were just there at Commander's. She was in the hospital, at the Baptist hospital, it was the Saturday night before Mardi Gras, she had just had a mastectomy. A serious m astectomy. Major. And I'm at Commander's. We were just pulling ourselves together, and trying to think what we're going to do with this restaurant. A friend hands me the Times, the... I don't know what it was...

[00:45:29.08] Jack Davis: States Item?

[00:45:29.14] Ella Brennan: State Item, and it was a review of our restaurant, and it was a black ball. Now for years, I called it a... I didn't think of it as a black ball. Wasn't that quick to get that mass-produced. It was a terrible, terrible review. And there I am sitting with her in the hospital...

[00:45:48.05] Jack Davis: That was in his second restaurant book, right? About, 1976?

[00:45:53.17] Ella Brennan: Our second restaurant?

[00:45:54.16] Jack Davis: No, it was... I think he published that New Orleans Restaurant Guide...

[00:45:58.00] Ella Brennan: Well, this was in the newspaper.

[00:45:58.28] Jack Davis: Yeah.

[00:45:59.13] Ella Brennan: I don't remember...

[00:46:00.13] Jack Davis: So it was before you really got your hands on Commander's?

[00:46:04.19] Ella Brennan: Yeah. We... were just beginning to go there... I mean, we were there, but we weren't functioning. In fact, I remember when the day we went to work at Commanders, we said: "Ok. Monday is the day we're going to work at

Commander's." That was the week after Mardi Gras. We said: "Enjoy Mardi Gras. Monday we go to work." And we had just gotten up there, and as I said, that happened to her, and... it just floored me. It just floored me.

[00:46:33.25] Jack Davis: So he didn't like it.

[00:46:35.23] Ella Brennan: Oh! Of course he didn't like it. I didn't like it either.

[00:46:37.25] Jack Davis: But he liked it...

[00:46:38.10] Ella Brennan: Twice.

[00:46:38.20] Jack Davis: ...he liked Commander's in his Underground Gourmet book, that had preceded his Times Picayune.

[00:46:45.08] Ella Brennan: Oh, maybe that's true.

[00:46:45.08] Jack Davis: I'm sorry, preceded his States Item article.

[00:46:47.10] Ella Brennan: Well, I think maybe that's right. I don't remember... I'm positive you may be right, but you've got to check it.

[00:46:53.21] Jack Davis: So he downgraded the restaurant. Certainly.

[00:46:55.13] Ella Brennan: Ohhh.

[00:46:57.07] Jack Davis: And did that help you or hurt you?

[00:46:58.09] Ella Brennan: Well...

[00:46:59.11] Jack Davis: I mean...

[00:46:59.12] Ella Brennan: It certainly got our attention, to put it mildly. And... that was with the next part of... we were going to try to run this best restaurant. And we were working every day. And... It really did get our attention. And... we read all his publicity too... I remember... well wait... I've got to go to the bathroom... So...

[00:47:23.10] Jack Davis: No... go ahead.

[00:47:24.27] Ella Brennan: No, no no no.

[00:47:25.28] Jack Davis: Ok. Well... But he continued to write in the State's Item.

[00:47:29.16] Ella Brennan: Mhm.

[00:47:30.27] Jack Davis: ...Did he come around to a different review of... Commander's?

[00:47:34.29] Ella Brennan: I really don't remember that. I couldn't tell you that.

[00:47:37.15] Jack Davis: Did... he have an influence on the way restaurants behaved in New Orleans?

[00:47:44.04] Ella Brennan: Well, he just... everybody disliked him intensely. Let me give you an example; when Gene Bourg got on the paper, everybody loves Gene.

[00:47:51.19] Jack Davis: Gene became the restaurant critic in the mid-80's.

[00:47:55.27] Ella Brennan: Well, I promise you, everybody loved it.

[00:47:57.29] Jack Davis: ... But Richard Collin was the first.

[00:48:01.06] Ella Brennan: He and his wife.

[00:48:02.13] Jack Davis: Yeah, and she joined him.

[00:48:03.23] Ella Brennan: And they were really... I think we thought... no, I don't think at Commander's... Now, I didn't think Commander's was a good restaurant. I'll tell you that. I was working awfully hard to try to change that. But it was so low and underhanded, I thought, at that moment. He knew we had left Brennan's after having invented "Breakfast at Brennan's" and done all the Brennan's stuff for many years, and we were going up to Commander's, and our word was to everybody, "We're going to do the best we know how. We going to change this restaurant." And it was right at that time when it... [Slicing Noise]. So... well... everything was affecting us at that time. It was a real turmoil in... all of our lives. But yet, we were going in there every day, and working at it, and when we finally got our feet on the ground, and we started being able to do interesting things. We got Paul to come up.

[00:48:57.26] Jack Davis: Yeah. Why did you get Paul? What... was it that made you look for... Paul.

[00:49:02.01] Ella Brennan: Well, we know... we knew we needed a chef. We had never had a chef. We had cooks who we called chefs. Never had a chef. And I don't think Paul was really what you call a chef. I think Paul was a great magnificent cook. I was looking for a chef. At one point at Brennan's, I had hired a ... Swiss... can't say 'Swiss'... chef and he brought with him a... no, the chef I hired was... Austrian, and the sous chef was from Switzerland. When he came down, at Brennan's, he started changing the menu to be more European. More Inter-continental. And I'll never forget Dick saying, "If you don't get him out of here, we're going to close." Being that he couldn't stand the food, we couldn't stand the food. But...

[00:49:54.19] Jack Davis: He was getting too far away from Creole?

[00:49:56.18] Ella Brennan: Oh yeah... And I was very mistaken, I mean, at that point I had been spending my life in European cookbooks and going to France, and in my head I was trying... All right... So... that happened... The thing he did for us that was so monumental; he taught us how to run an organized kitchen. He put in the traditional, European kitchen. Which is very organized, and very different from what we were doing. I mean to tell you we were pitiful. We did not know, and nobody was working for us who knew. At that time, you didn't have any...

[00:50:35.29] Jack Davis: Did anybody in New Orleans know?

[00:50:37.02] Ella Brennan: Maybe the hotels. I don't know, I'm not sure. Maybe a hotel or two had a European chef that organized their kitchen. I don't know. There was nobody that you could go call up and say, "Would you come organize my kitchen?" You know... So, he did that for us, and he left, and the sous chef stayed... Rudy Steinhauer³. I remember him very well. And he stayed with us, and he went over to operate the... Dallas restaurant, and he did very well there. So... when we got our kitchen organized, whee! What a relief that was. And Paul came into that kitchen.

[00:51:15.04] Jack Davis: So you... had a job description for a chef.

[00:51:18.12] Ella Brennan: Uh huh.

[00:51:19.10] Jack Davis: And... did you search?

[00:51:21.11] Ella Brennan: Well, the job description was not what you'd call 'classic.' I mean, what they did in the continental restaurants. We wanted a chef to be in this organized kitchen, just physically organized equipment... But we wanted to have... a New Orleans restaurant. We never have changed that. We grew up with a mother who knew how to cook. She seasoned magnificently. And she had brothers that would go hunting... and fishing. And they would come and say, "Nelly, we're here, come see what we have." And we would all run out the side porch and see what they brought; Fish, they brought ducks, they brought rabbits, whatever they brought. And my mother cooked all that. For us, we grew up pretty magnificently in the food department. Of course, I didn't learn how to cook. My mother had a wonderful black lady, Leona Nicholls, and between my mother and Leona, they cooked. And we tell the story, Doddy and I tell the story all the time, about when my mother cooked fried oysters on a Friday night. We had this big table in the kitchen, and she would cook the oysters and French fries, she'd cook it for you, and she'd serve you. The stove was right there, and this was the table. Then she'd cook your potatoes and oysters, she cooked the oysters very little, and did not over season, I mean, did not over batter them. She was a magnificent cook. So we knew that. I mean, we know how food should taste. You know. And somebody little cooks you at high, you couldn't let them go in the kitchen. They were dangerous.

[00:53:13.02] Jack Davis: So when you were hiring a chef, after-

³ Although this name is inaudible in this interview, in a 2016 interview done by the Southern Foodways Alliance, Ella Brennan identifies him as Rudy Steinhauer.

[00:53:16.14] Ella Brennan: Terry Flettrich was a lady on television in New Orleans, and she was leaving New Orleans, and she came to have... like a final luncheon together. We had become friends over the years. And I said, "Terry, I've got to find the right chef for this restaurant. We can't... keep operating the way we're operating, we've got to have somebody that's in charge in that kitchen." And... it was me and Dick, and I promise you, I didn't know any more than he did, and he didn't know any more than I did, so we were doing our best, and she said, "Oh, oh, I have a friend, his name is Paul Prudhomme," she says, "let me go to the phone right now." She got up from the table, went to the telephone, and called Paul. And said, "as soon as you can, today, tomorrow, come up and see Ella." That's how we got Paul.

[00:53:59.16] Jack Davis: So he was your only candidate.

[00:54:01.03] Ella Brennan: Only candidate.

[00:54:02.16] Jack Davis: That's... interesting.

[00:54:03.19] Ella Brennan: And he...

[00:54:04.10] Jack Davis: And he'd only been in New Orleans for a year or so.

[00:54:07.07] Ella Brennan: Well, he worked for me at Brennan's, he swears, as a busboy. When he was very small, short, and thin. I did not recognize him. And... we sat in the kitchen. And we started talking. Dick, me... I don't know who else was talking at the time, but...anybody in my family that walked by, I promise you, was sitting there. And we started talking to Paul. And he said, "Well, you know I have problems, I can't work the kitchen... like a chef really does."

[00:54:39.24] Jack Davis: Because of his mobility?

[00:54:42.20] Ella Brennan: Yes. And... at that time he was walking. But he couldn't stand long periods of time. So, we said, "don't worry about that. We just need help to make these people understand taste." And we went to work, and he says, "I'll take lunch. I'll come in and do lunch for you." We said, "fine." Well knowing Paul, next thing you know, he was in charge of everything, which was to our delight. And we worked together for a long time. I think it was for five or six years. And we got to know each other well. And I think he did extremely great things, but we were leaning more and more to the heavy Creole, and when he said to me he was going, I... knew I wanted to find somebody that could do it lighter. More like my mother did. I mean, it wasn't this heavy, heavy Cajun food.

[00:55:35.13] Jack Davis: So you started your second search...

[00:55:36.25] Ella Brennan: Uh huh.

[00:55:38.00] Jack Davis: ...because Paul Prudhomme was leaving.

[00:55:39.23] Ella Brennan: Uh huh.

[00:55:40.14] Jack Davis: And... how long did it take before you got Emeril Lagasse?

[00:55:43.27] Ella Brennan: ...Well we had another man there, that was a German... who was a continental chef who could hold the fort down. And Emeril could go. So he was there in for... what was his name?... He was just there for a short time. And he knew what we were doing. He knew that Paul was leaving, and that we were looking for somebody. Can't think of his name right now⁴. He eventually wound up in Mobile. I'll think of it... ..

[00:56:14.26] Jack Davis: We can come back to that... fill that in later.

⁴ This was Gerhard Brill (1939-2016) who was at Commander's for six years mostly working under Paul Prudhomme. He was executive chef from 1980 to 1982, when Emeril Lagasse arrived. According to a 1986 *Los Angeles Times* article, he claimed to have invented "blackened redfish," or at the very least had equal claim to its invention with Prudhomme. Brill opened his own short-lived restaurant in Metairie in 1986 and worked as an executive chef in several locations on the Gulf Coast subsequent to its closing.

[00:56:19.04] Ella Brennan: Yeah. The search for... a chef after Paul began. And I had... looked out. I had reached out. I talked to everybody I knew in the business. Dick was talking...

[00:56:31.14] Jack Davis: Around the country?

[00:56:33.15] Ella Brennan: Yeah. We were... going to go out of New Orleans if we had to. Dick was... on the board of National Restaurant Association; he was talking to all those guys. I was talking. And... there was a man that I had met and... I called him up... I can't remember his name right now... I called him on the telephone, and I said, "Look, I'm looking for a chef. I want- somebody very talented in cooking, and somebody who... would be adaptable to becoming a New Orleans-type cook." I didn't want a New England... well, well, we'll talk about that. I didn't want... somebody from New England or California, cooking their food. I wanted New Orleans food. I was adamant about that. And... keep saying "I;" we were a team, ok? My brother, and I and my other sisters and... we worked on this together, so they kept pushing me to handle the food, and the kitchen... So along comes... he sends me a resume. And I say to him: "I can't hire that man. I don't even want to bring him down, because I'm rejecting him before he comes," and he said, "that's not fair." And he said to me, "he's pretty sensational, as far as a young man is concerned. He's very mature." He talked me into him coming down. I'll never forget Emeril showed up here on a... Sunday and Monday he was going be here. So we were sitting down, my brother and I, talking. We sat down in the dining room and had a meal, and we were talking to him. And... he was this very attractive... young man, and very intelligent. And we fell in love with him right away. And, we talked to him a lot about the changes he'd have to make. That we did not want the food that was coming out of... basically, New England, no, let's say, New York. We loved New York, we loved to go there, we go there constantly. But we wanted New Orleans food. And the whole difference is seasoning. I mean, you can make the same piece of fish and cook it in New Orleans and cook it in New York, and it's very different.

[00:58:46.24] Jack Davis: And Emeril wanted the job.

[00:58:49.07] Ella Brennan: He wanted the job.

[00:58:50.16] Jack Davis: Did he have to convince you that he could do it?

[00:58:52.12] Ella Brennan: Yes. We had sent him in the kitchen... Sunday, the next day, he went... or Monday was the next day... we said: "Just go do something for us." So he did something, and we kind of watched what he was doing, and said, "okay, he knows what he's doing in the kitchen." He'd graduated from Johnson and Wales Culinary institute, and had been working around in some hotels in New York. He hadn't had a- he didn't have a good background. And so, he hadn't worked anywhere that I was impressed with. And... he was too young, inexperienced, as far as I was concerned. But after we spoke to him... my brother Dick and I together, and Dick went off, called me to the telephone, and said, "That's him, huh?" I said, "Yeah. Let's go with him." So, Monday night, we told him, "Look, we'd like you to come down." So we had to wait several months, because he'd married, he'd had a baby and his wife was pregnant. We had to find a house here, he had to sell a house there, you know, the usual routine of a move. So... this is all in my mind like it's happening on your camera... So we, Dick and I, started worrying, and we decided, "Okay, you worry one day I'll worry the next." Let's work the other day. We were that worried. We were joking with it...

[01:00:16.10] Jack Davis: You were... taking a big chance.

[01:00:17.22] Ella Brennan: Yeah. We're taking a big big chance.

[01:00:19.19] Jack Davis: You were making a big investment in all of the...

[01:00:21.28] Ella Brennan: Uh huh.

[01:00:23.04] Jack Davis: ...expense and responsibility.

[01:00:23.20] Ella Brennan: And... So... Emeril got here, and he went to work. And every afternoon between three and five, we talked to him. We tasted everything he cooked. We were on his back like you wouldn't believe, and... I will say today I'm sorry about that. But I wasn't going to have him coming in and feel that he could cook... whatever he wanted.

[01:00:52.14] Jack Davis: ...In the beginning, how much did you have to reject?

[01:00:56.17] Ella Brennan: Well I remember seasoning, the taste of New Orleans food... the taste. You know, there's meat, fish, chicken, and eggs. Well there's New Orleans meat, fish, chicken, and eggs. Which I think are very different. They're native to this community, the way we cook. So, he was so young, and so, affable, and I can't say enough wonderful things about him. And he started. And... we had him eat in every restaurant.

[01:01:27.01] Jack Davis: Yeah. Where did you take him first. What was the thing that made the biggest impact on him?

[01:01:32.19] Ella Brennan: I don't know what... Do you remember, Dottie, where we took him first?

[01:01:35.16] Jack Davis: Or, early on...

[01:01:38.15] Ella Brennan: Well I'm sure I took him to Antoine's and Arnaud's and Galatoire's, and then... I'm sure I took him up to Manale's, it was barbequed shrimp, and you know that wonderful Italian food, which was... cooked in their mother's kitchen at that time and brought to the restaurant. I ate there enough to know that. And they would tell me... I would say "What was mom cooking tonight?" and they would say, "This is what we have," and that's what we would eat. And I'm trying to think... of course Jonathan's, and Sbisa's and... There weren't too many restaurants in the Quarter and around in those days. There really weren't. There was... they come on later.

[01:02:15.16] Jack Davis: Did you take him to La Provence, or La Rouse or...

[01:02:19.02] Ella Brennan: Eventually, but I don't even know if La Provence was there... I think that restaurant in Metairie that... French or Italian... I think it's French, though I don't know it's name, in Metairie.

[01:02:34.15] Jack Davis: It's name slips my mind.

[01:02:35.24] Ella Brennan: Yeah. You don't... Dottie...

[01:02:37.16] Jack Davis: We can slip that in later...

[01:02:38.20] Dottie Brennan: I don't know which restaurant you're talking about.

[01:02:40.18] Ella Brennan: The restaurant up in Metairie. The French shell.

[01:02:43.01] Dottie Brennan: Chris?

[01:02:43.27] Ella Brennan: Chris. Yeah... She's calling him by his first name... We'll come up with it. We sent him there. At that time, we liked Provence when it came out, and in the years I don't remember how to place it, but if it was open, we sent him there, because we liked to go there. Sunday afternoon, Jesus, let's get out of here and go round over to Chris's at La Provence. And... I'm sure that we sent him to that one little... fried seafood place in Hammond, right up there off the highway. We sent him everywhere. And we said, "Now you go to the steakhouses, the seafood... steakhouses in the Quarter, fried seafood. They batter too much, they overcook. New Orleans loves that, but we're not doing that here. You can't batter that heavy. You can't overcook. You've got to understand what we're talking about. So we worked on all that.

[01:03:43.11] Jack Davis: Did you send him into Cajun country?

[01:03:46.11] Ella Brennan: Not at the time. Not at the time. Because we were trying to ugh-ugh-ugh. And... well we did send him to New York. That point in New York they were opening... Joe Baum was a Restaurant Associates, and they were opening a lot of new restaurants. Now the restaurants I had him going to going to New York were like Chambord, which was a classic, magnificent French restaurant, was like a- Bistro- I

guess, or dinner. Whole right-hand side was glass, and it was all French cooking in there, and, oh, I loved to go to Chambord. And there was... another great one... We went to all the restaurants in New York that were open... but most of them... not Chambord, had opened from when the World's Fair was in New York. Started a bunch of chefs, like... well Le Pavillon can't remember the other, oh, oh... Côte Basque. Those kind of restaurants where chefs who came out of restaurants of... I mean... the World's Fair, that brought a series of great cooks to America, and so... we would go up there and go to those restaurants. And-

[01:05:03.09] Jack Davis: And... with Emeril, still...

[01:05:06.03] Ella Brennan: Yeah. Emeril would go too. Before we got Emeril, we had been doing this, but as soon as Emeril got with us, we said, "Okay, plan a trip to New York for the summer with [where you want to go]." So we would plan a trip and he would go, and we said: "Meet the people. Meet the people. Get to know the people." We'd write notes or call up ahead of time... so we could go. Joe Baum had opened at that time, the Four Seasons, which is still today, I think, one of the best restaurants in the United States, but he had opened some crazy restaurants up; Tower Suite, and... what was that other big one...

[01:05:41.23] Dottie Brennan: Seasons.

[01:05:43.14] Ella Brennan: Huh?

[01:05:44.03] Dottie Brennan: ...Four Seasons.

[01:05:46.11] Ella Brennan: No, but I know Four Seasons, and the... one that... there was one at...oh I had it; Forum of the Twelve Ceasar's.

[01:05:53.27] Dottie Brennan: That's what I was thinking of.

[01:05:54.15] Jack Davis: Right right.

[01:05:55.00] Ella Brennan: And then he opened Tower Suite, and I'm trying to remember them, there were at least five in New York at that time. And Joe Baum knew what he was doing. He was a great...

[01:06:04.06] Jack Davis: So you shaped Emeril to... what you'd already been educated to about-

[01:06:11.07] Ella Brennan: And I wanted him...

[01:06:11.19] Jack Davis: the great restaurants of the world and New Orleans.

[01:06:14.22] Ella Brennan: Yes. I wanted him to know them inside-out, so he'd know where I was trying to go. I didn't want him to think anything less was okay with me.

[01:06:25.16] Jack Davis: How long did it take you to get him to where you thought he could work on his own?

[01:06:29.03] Ella Brennan: Well he was absolutely smart as a whip, and he learned as fast as we could teach him something, he got it. You know, he was like that; let's do this, let's do that. Do this, do that, and then of course he started feeding back "let's do this, let's do that." He was fast. He grew, I mean, like a weed, I mean, he just grew. I have nothing but extremely strong compliments to pay Emeril. Still do. I think he's a great guy. And what he's done has been magnificent. And I told him, when he first came to work for us, "I want you known in the food world. I want you to know those people, and I want them to know you." And I said, "Go in the office in the morning, and call three or four people that you know on the phone and just chat. Get to know them well. Invite them in. We want to know the food world." And he did that very well. He got well known.

[01:07:20.04] Jack Davis: I assumed that you wanted him to be well-known in media also.

[01:07:22.28] Ella Brennan: Well the media came... when Commander's started clicking.

[01:07:26.21] Jack Davis: How did that happen? Did you do it consciously, or did the world beat a path?

[01:07:30.14] Ella Brennan: Well, I have to say Brennan's had a pretty unbelievable PR history. Especially in the discovery, I mean, 'discovery,' especially in the beginning of Breakfast at Brennan's. The bachelor magazines were just beginning to do that sort of thing, and we were a family, and they wrote them. I mean- it was Collier's, Saturday Evening Post ...Look Magazine...

[01:07:58.19] JN: Life...

[01:08:00.00] Ella Brennan: Life! We got a... little bit in Life, I mean, there was a...a story about wines, and I was considered one of the wine kids, they brought me up there. And... one of the things I'd have to say that happened in my early life... my brother introduced me at 21 in New York. And that family adopted my family.

[01:08:24.19] Jack Davis: The Kreindlers?

[01:08:25.08] Ella Brennan: My family adopted them. And then-

[01:08:27.12] Jack Davis: That was the Kreindler family?

[01:08:29.01] Ella Brennan: Kreindlers and Bernns- B-E-R-N-N, and those guys were so welcoming to my family... I hung out there an awful lot. I mean, I'd go to New York, be in their kitchen... back in their wine cellar, that fabulous wine cellar, at the front door... understanding what they were doing, who they were doing. They were telling me who was in the dining room, and it was the top people in America, and they would take me out to places. It was an extraordinary experience because I was very young. And... I'll never forget going to the opening of the opera with them, and then leaving there and going someplace for a snack after dinner. I'll never forget going....

[01:09:19.11] Jack Davis: This is when you were running Brennan's.

[01:09:20.13] Ella Brennan: Mmhm.

[01:09:21.10] Jack Davis: In the '50's and '60's.

[01:09:22.24] Ella Brennan: Mmhm. I'll never forget going into the big... German restaurant- Lüchow's and Mac Kreindler, who I love, standing there and singing "Wunderbar!". Wonderful. You just... everyone in New York knew him, and he knew them.

[01:09:38.23] Jack Davis: So, did they have chefs?

[01:09:42.08] Ella Brennan: Yes.

[01:09:41.13] Jack Davis: When did the... chef become a phenomenon in New Orleans?

[01:09:44.14] Ella Brennan: Well, they had a lead cook who they called the chef. They didn't have a chef.

[01:09:49.23] Jack Davis: But in... New Orleans, there weren't chefs.

[01:09:52.08] Ella Brennan: No.

[01:09:52.24] Jack Davis: There were, as you said, there were cooks.

[01:09:54.07] Ella Brennan: None.

[01:09:54.27] Jack Davis: And... who was the first chef?... And when was it?

[01:09:58.14] Ella Brennan: I don't know what happened in the hotels, but right here.

[01:10:04.07] Jack Davis: So you had... would you say...

[01:10:06.12] Ella Brennan: Most of them, any kitchen you went into, there was never a chef. It was, I mean, you would know the guy, I mean, he was a cook. But everybody knew him, somehow or another, we knew each other. And... the old cooks at Antoine's used to sit out on the sidewalk outside the restaurant, and you'd pass by and you'd tell them hello, and they'd saying hello to you, and that's where Jimmy Smith came from, he had been at Antoine's and he quit.

[01:10:32.26] Jack Davis: And... .. what's the difference between a cook and a chef?

[01:10:36.26] Ella Brennan: Well, a chef...

[01:10:39.04] Jack Davis: In New Orleans's terms.

[01:10:40.27] Ella Brennan: ...Well I think of him as having to... lead an orchestra, and the restaurateur has that role too; a great symphony orchestra... You have to be able to

put the whole thing together, and... most people don't do that. I mean they open a restaurant and there's a kitchen and a front, and generally, if it's small, it works. But if you're trying to do what I was trying to do, I, me, I have to understand there's a 'me' in this... I mean a 'we'. We. We... The... chef bit. That's why I felt we needed... I knew about chefs. I had read every cookbook written, I had read every book about France, and all... and I knew I understood that how the French put their kitchens together, and we needed that, and we did that... So I felt the need to do that. And that's when I hired... I thought, "at least Emeril has culinary background" and I had worked with the Swiss chef.

[01:11:56.16] Jack Davis: Did you consider Paul Prudhomme a chef.

[01:11:59.24] Ella Brennan: No.

[01:12:00.09] Jack Davis: You said he became a chef... or did he...

[01:12:02.09] Ella Brennan: No.

[01:12:02.16] Jack Davis: become a chef under?

[01:12:03.04] Ella Brennan: I think Paul is one of the greatest cooks naturally, intuitively... he loved cooking, I mean, it was... in him, you can't help it. It just comes out. And he has unbelievable taste. He teaches you how to taste things. But... running a kitchen, I mean, he ran it, don't get me wrong, but he ran it like I ran it, out of, you know, his pocket. But Emeril at least had culinary background. And he came in and he understood how to organize a kitchen. And Dick and he... immediately organized the kitchen... ... When Emeril came was when we really did the kitchen.

[01:12:48.22] Jack Davis: Let me ask you, going back to what Howard Jacobs asked you, what did you tell him... that Nouvelle Cuisine was?

[01:12:54.07] Ella Brennan: ... I said, "Howard I don't know what you're talking about. I really don't." And I read the New York Times every day.

[01:12:59.17] Jack Davis: And... then you found out, and you decided you didn't want it. Is that right?

[01:13:05.02] Ella Brennan: Yes. Because it was a lot of these little boutique-y type, as I call them, restaurants and chefs, doing this in France. Then the big chefs got involved, and it began to spread, then it came to New York, and then the next year we're doing California food, and all of this is magnificent, but it's not here, and if you're going to be in business here, you can't do that.

[01:13:30.04] Jack Davis: Did anybody make it in New Orleans at that time as a Nouvelle Cuisine?

[01:13:33.10] Ella Brennan: Not really. Not really. Maybe Jonathan's was more that vein than any of the others.

[01:13:39.15] Jack Davis: Now... I've heard you quoted as using the term "Nouvelle Creole Cuisine."

[01:13:46.17] Ella Brennan: We tried but... we eventually forgot that and it was "Ode Creole."

[01:13:50.14] Jack Davis: And "Ode Creole" are they...

[01:13:51.22] Ella Brennan: "Ode Creole" was like... what we were trying to hang on our hat...

[01:13:56.03] Jack Davis: So define "Ode Creole."

[01:13:57.25] Ella Brennan: Well "Ode Creole" is what we've been talking about. You take classic dishes, you take New Orleans history, you blend it in with... the lightness of the Nouvelle Cuisine, the lightness of French Cuisine, Creole Cuisine, and make a food that you thought was New Orleans. And I promise you, it was exciting, and I thought it came out extraordinarily well. We worked our tails off. And we loved every minute of it.

[01:14:25.00] Jack Davis: Now... in this hard work, there was turmoil in the restaurant business, but as you've told me, there's also...

[01:14:33.23] Ella Brennan: ...Well we went in the restaurant business... when we left Brennan's, we really didn't know how to make reservations. Today, our reservation system is marvelous, and we have no problems. Dottie tells the story about down at Brennan's one night, she... said to me, "I'm going to buy green rope," like they had at the movie houses, she said, "I got to keep these people out of here." Because we didn't know how to take reservations, and we had a patio full of people waiting for tables, and people were wanting to come in. That shouldn't have happened. We shouldn't have abused people that way, but we didn't really understand how to make reservations. And... when we got up to Commander's... and we're not stupid people, basically, but we were stupid about that... we finally started working, and everybody that worked at Commander's contributed something, whoever they were. We said, "well why don't we try this, or why don't we try..." so we were using all these people who were in the restaurant... I hope we weren't using them, I hope they were part of us... and they would say, "Well, let's try this, and let's try this," and eventually, we got the reservations system perfection. Perfection. Perfection. Perfection. Now they're going to come in with all this ...online, and we take a little of that, I think, but if you call online and tell me you want a reservation... I have to be able to tell you no. You know? You've got to really work it into your system.

[01:16:15.05] Jack Davis: So... now that... in this turmoil... ... of coming up with the plan-

[01:16:20.29] Ella Brennan: Packing the bar, not being able to seats for the people, ugh...

[01:16:23.21] Jack Davis: But... ... I think you alluded to... there was turmoil in the city, in the sense that there was just a lot of change and ferment... and you mentioned...

[01:16:30.09] Ella Brennan: Oh! There was a tremendous amount of change going on in the city!

[01:16:32.28] Jack Davis: And Moon Landrieu you mentioned...

[01:16:34.18] Ella Brennan: I think Moon did a...

[01:16:35.26] Jack Davis: Brought a lot of change in...

[01:16:36.28] Ella Brennan: I think he was spectacular.

[01:16:37.11] Jack Davis: in the cultural and social...

[01:16:39.08] Ella Brennan: He did. He did. He did. He...

[01:16:39.28] Jack Davis: ...area, and particularly in integration.

[01:16:42.08] Ella Brennan: Huh?

[01:16:43.04] Jack Davis: By pushing integration.

[01:16:44.19] Ella Brennan: Oh! He was phenomenal with that! He was in...

[01:16:46.07] Jack Davis: How did... you see all that, from the perspective of the restaurant?

[01:16:49.12] Ella Brennan: Well let me tell you a story. I'll never forget as long as I live. It was at Brennan's, it was toward the... way to the sixties there. Well two things happened to me: One day I turned around, at the little office we had on the third floor, and I looked out the third floor windows, and the Court House lawn was covered with hippies. It was like a week before Mardi Gras. About a week from Mardi Gras week. I couldn't believe it! It was a shock to me, as I said, I read the New York Times every day. I was shocked. The other time...I had something that I...When, it was terrible... these people were invading the city en mass, and the integration thing was going on, and I'll never forget this young man...

[01:17:43.25] Jack Davis: And the invasion was the hippies.

[01:17:45.16] Ella Brennan: Invasion was the hippies. I'll never forget seeing the great... actress, who I now love, what was her name, Dottie?

[01:17:54.06] Dottie Brennan: Cher.

[01:17:54.17] Aubery Bodeen: Cher and Sonny.
 [01:17:55.26] Ella Brennan: ...and Sonny. Sonney and Cher walking on Royal street, and everybody saying to me, "That's Sonny and Cher!" And I looked at them, and felt like saying, "I've got to go take a bath." I mean, they looked awful. So...
 [01:18:07.05] Dottie Brennan: They were kids.
 [01:18:08.22] Ella Brennan: Huh?
 [01:18:09.15] Dottie Brennan: They were kids.
 [01:18:09.04] Jack Davis: They were kids.
 [01:18:10.23] Ella Brennan: And I'm trying... Oh! This man came in, and he's one... I knew him! He was from a very prominent family in New Orleans, Trinity. And he said... "Ella, we having the Harvard Club here's like, next Tuesday or something." And he said, "and we're going to have a black man with me. In the party. One of our out-of-town graduates is coming in." And I said to him, "Oh my God." And he said, "Well, what do you mean?" I said, "Well you know we have a table we keep every day in our main dining room for the federal judges that are across the street. People bring them to lunch. And I personally know that some of the men that bring them, and I'm quite sure a couple of the judges, would get up and walk out. And make a scene in the dining room."
 [01:18:58.28] Jack Davis: Okay. And when exactly was this? Can you remember?
 [01:19:01.19] Ella Brennan: Well, we were at Royal Street...
 [01:19:03.18] Dottie Brennan: In the 50's.
 [01:19:04.15] Ella Brennan: '60's.
 [01:19:05.20] Jack Davis: '50's or '60's?
 [01:19:06.28] Ella Brennan: Maybe. Maybe it was late in the '60's or something. And I said, "And I think another few people might follow them." I said, "Is there any way... " Royal Orleans was very, very new, and Jim Nassikas⁵ was managing the [Royal Orleans]. And I said, "Is there any way you could take the club over to the Royal Orleans? They've passed the law that the hotels are integrated. Would you mind going to the Royal Orleans?" He was furious with me. Absolutely furious with me. And I think I'm a way-out liberal nut, okay? And he his furious with me, and I think he should know... I think he knew... I know his brother knew my political feelings. It was terrible. But...that was true. And that was going on in the city. The turmoil. And the Judges were fine gentlemen, I mean, they had lovely families, the- the people who were entertaining them at lunch... I mean it was just the way it was. And Moon... they all just despised him tremendously... They wanted him out, they wanted him out, they wanted him out. Now, I'm not picking on the Judges. I'm picking on New Orleans. And Moon was fantastic.
 [01:20:23.13] Jack Davis: As Mayor.
 [01:20:24.13] Ella Brennan: As Mayor. I can look you in the eye and tell you, Moon Landrieu never took a cent from this city. Never a cent. Not even... I don't think he took a cab drive. He was fabulous, and God knows his wife Verna was right there beside him all the time. That brought New Orleans up to understanding we could have some clean politics. And things began to get better.
 [01:20:50.24] Jack Davis: Well they were... committed to...
 [01:20:53.13] Ella Brennan: They were committed.
 [01:20:54.00] Jack Davis: ...integration of the cultural and social and business aspects.
 [01:20:55.23] Ella Brennan: Yes, they were. They absolutely were.
 [01:20:59.03] Jack Davis: And he passed the law you referred to, was that the... there was a public accommodations law passed when Mayor Landrieu
 [01:21:08.00] Ella Brennan: City law.

⁵ James Achilles Nassikas (1927-2019) Opened both the Royal Orleans and Royal Sonesta in New Orleans. One of the founders of the Krewe of Bacchus.

[01:21:08.18] Jack Davis: Yes. When Mayor Landrieu was in his last year on the city counsel. That would have been '68...

[01:21:13.08] Ella Brennan: Well, that would have been last, because... it wasn't in effect when I was telling this man to go out, because we were all waiting for it. We were waiting for some kind of a law that we could hide behind. That's what we were trying to do, hide behind. And... well, by the time we got up to Commander's, we were able to welcome black people without a blink of an eye. I mean... it...

[01:21:36.08] Jack Davis: Do you remember when the first black customers were regular at Brennan's?

[01:21:41.12] Ella Brennan: I can't recall that. Do you? I can't tell you that. I don't think... they could have cared less about us. I don't they were interested. I think... as I have learned as the years go on... I think those people had a wonderful life. Now I'm not saying they shouldn't have every legal right to come in and do everything that anybody can do... but they had a lovely life. They were people who... Number 1: They ate as well, or better. They would go fishing, hunting, crabbing, crawfishing; go home, and cook it the one New Orleans style, and have the music to go with it. Now, I'm not saying that's an excuse for segregation. Because I didn't think segregation was right ever. My mother and father didn't think segregation was right. So I'm not... but I believe those people taught us a lot about the good life.

[01:22:36.09] Jack Davis: Did... so then, at Commander's...

[01:22:42.03] Ella Brennan: ...

[01:22:42.19] Jack Davis: When did you have... integrated parties, or integrated...

[01:22:46.26] Ella Brennan: When ...A lot of parties were integrated.

[01:22:49.10] Jack Davis: I... mean... when was your dining room visibly integrated?

[01:22:52.06] Ella Brennan: Well I think it started almost right when we started getting well known. We were getting a reputation, being a good restaurant. These people were beginning to come in.

[01:23:02.11] Jack Davis: So you'd taken over... for a few years.

[01:23:04.10] Ella Brennan: Uh huh.

[01:23:04.18] Jack Davis: You had...

[01:23:05.09] Ella Brennan: And they were coming in, I'm sure, but I... when I really think of it, and I remember my sister Dottie 'working the front door,' as we call it, being so excited, and coming back and saying to us, "Go look at these wonderful people at table..." so-and-so "Look how well educated they are, look how well-dressed they are."

[01:23:23.28] Jack Davis: And these were African-Americans?

[01:23:25.04] Ella Brennan: Yes!

[01:23:25.22] Jack Davis: And you felt like you had to attract them by having a good restaurant and good food?

[01:23:31.21] Ella Brennan: Good restaurant and good food. And when they came, I want to tell you, we tried to be hospital. Hospitable. Just the other night, I was sitting in the restaurant, and this young black man came in- young black man- he was well-dressed, and he had this child with him. And we wanted to make him feel comfortable. The first thing out of our minds, and we sent the child some balloons. And the next thing you know, you sent the gentleman some wine. You wanted to make him feel comfortable. And when they got up to leave, they came over to our table, I was in the wheelchair at the time, and the little boy hugged me. And I just... that's the way I was brought up. Black people come in our restaurant, and my sister Dottie makes a point of going to those people and welcoming them, and talking to them. And saying, "Do you live in New Orleans? Oh, it's so good to meet some of our neighbors. Are you from out of town? We're so thrilled that you come to New Orleans." We feel that. And we want them to feel comfortable in our dining room.

[01:24:45.13] Jack Davis: Who are the... did Moon Landrieu come to Commander's?

[01:24:51.08] Ella Brennan: Oh, all the time... We grew up with Moon. My brother Dick and Moon played on a baseball team and went for the chair... National... what do you call it... the World Series of Baseball for kids, when they were in... high school or grammar school. I don't know what. We've known him forever.

[01:25:07.00] Jack Davis: And, who did he eat with in Commander's when he was... mayor?

[01:25:10.05] Ella Brennan: I don't remember... I mean, he came with friends. I mean... he frequently would bring... somebody from... out of town that he had... to entertain. He was entertaining. Somebody from out of town, and he'd bring them to Commander's because he knew Dottie. Dottie grew up with him; she knew him very well. And... he was just perfect for New Orleans, because he knew New Orleans inside and out. He was not on either side. He knew the... elite, the aristocracy, silk stockings... whatever you want to call it, he knew those people. He knew the business people. He knew the black people. I mean... He played tennis with everybody. He was a very decent human being.

[01:25:56.07] Jack Davis: Would he bring...integrated groups to... the restaurant?

[01:26:02.00] Ella Brennan: Yes. I'm sure he did. If... there was somebody coming down from Washington... it was somebody he was doing business with in New Orleans on the city counsel, or in the Mayor's Office, he would bring them. I'm sure he did. I can't pick out certain... I mean, I just considered it the way it was.

[01:26:18.13] Jack Davis: Was Commander's ...an attraction for political and business leaders?

[01:26:24.03] Ella Brennan: Uh huh. A lot. Yeah. For a long time. Ruth's took them away for a while.

[01:26:28.16] Jack Davis: Who?

[01:26:29.10] Ella Brennan: Ruth's Chris Steakhouse.

[01:26:30.06] Jack Davis: Oh. Oh.

[01:26:31.01] Ella Brennan: I remember they all started gathering there. But Brennan's was always. All the political people were. And at Commander's, I promise you, they all were in and out of there.

[01:26:40.05] Jack Davis: And did you have...

[01:26:41.00] Ella Brennan: And they kind of hang... out together. You know. There'd be a table of eight guys that were in politics, you know, over here, a couple judges...

[01:26:48.04] Jack Davis: Do you remember who they were?

[01:26:49.00] Ella Brennan: Well, Dottie, you can help me with the names. That was your generation of the younger ones...I'm thinking of judges. What were their names? I'm... having... I'm 88 now, you know...

[01:27:05.10] Jack Davis: Well, you're remembering a lot more than me. So.

[01:27:07.26] Ella Brennan: Well this is...

[01:27:08.19] Jack Davis: Did Dutch Morial come to the restaurant?

[01:27:11.08] Ella Brennan: Yes. Not much. He came, I think, on parties. He came when he was invited, and I don't remember him coming, but his wife came a lot.

[01:27:22.05] Jack Davis: Sybil.

[01:27:23.00] Ella Brennan: Sybil came a lot.

[01:27:23.09] Jack Davis: And did they... come as guests, or were they hosts?

[01:27:26.08] Ella Brennan: Well Sybil would come with people, she'd bring people, they brought her...I'm having trouble remembering who, but Sybil was always in there. In fact, I remember going up to the table one day and saying, "Can we talk?" And she said, "What?" And I said, "Look, line yourself up to run for mayor. Please, we women have to do it. And you can do it. I know you can do it. Please." And we sat down; we talked and

she says, "Well I can't do it for this reason, you know here." I said, "Those aren't good reasons." You know, and tried to persuade her.

[01:27:53.29] Jack Davis: And was... Dutch Morial in the restaurant before he was mayor, or after he was mayor? During?

[01:27:59.29] Ella Brennan: I think it was after he was mayor. I don't remember him before mayor...

[01:28:03.05] Jack Davis: And what about... I mean, so when...

[01:28:05.02] Ella Brennan: ...Himself.

[01:28:05.08] Jack Davis: ...he was mayor he was in the restaurant.

[01:28:06.00] Ella Brennan: Yeah. Yes. Yes.

[01:28:07.15] Jack Davis: Yeah. What about... the... great...

[01:28:10.20] Ella Brennan: They mostly came, I think, like in the political groups. And, why am I having trouble remembering their names? I think I can remember Chep's (Chep Morrison) city council, I can remember Chep's council, but I can't remember... Mitch... - now let's try to think of that. I know they came in the restaurant. I knew them. I read the paper every day. I knew what they were doing. Why can't I recall their names?

[01:28:17.18] Dottie Brennan: ... I can't put names to them, I'm sorry.

[01:28:38.12] Jack Davis: City Counsel members?

[01:28:39.17] Dottie Brennan: I can see their faces, Ella, and I can't remember names too. I'm sorry.

[01:28:42.12] Ella Brennan: I'm having trouble.

[01:28:43.09] Jack Davis: Peter Beer⁶ or Eddie Sapir⁷?

[01:28:44.19] Dottie Brennan: It's such a long time ago.

[01:28:44.18] Ella Brennan: Oh! Peter Beer! There was a wonderful man! Of course he was a good... Eddie Sapir? Yeah.

[01:28:49.16] Jack Davis: Jim Singleton

[01:28:51.00] Ella Brennan: Jim Singleton, Yeah. Jim Singleton came in all the time, all the time.

[01:28:55.12] Jack Davis: ...Sherman Copelin wasn't on the Council, but he was in the legislature.

[01:28:58.20] Ella Brennan: No, he's been in, but he wasn't one of our customers. Thank god.

[01:29:02.23] Dottie Brennan: [Unintelligible]

[01:29:03.05] Ella Brennan: Well, I'm sorry Dottie; it's true...From my point of view.

[01:29:07.27] Jack Davis: What about Norman Francis?

[01:29:09.13] Ella Brennan: Oh! We adore him!

[01:29:10.11] Dottie Brennan: Oh! He's a [unintelligible].

[01:29:11.14] Ella Brennan: He's one of the great people of New Orleans...

[01:29:14.26] Jack Davis: And was he a regular... from the early days of Commander's?

[01:29:16.08] Ella Brennan: Yes. He came- He still comes to... I mean, his wife's not well, I don't know if you know that. I think she has Alzheimer's. But he has always always been a customer in the Commander's Palace.

[01:29:30.08] Jack Davis: And would... ..

[01:29:31.19] Ella Brennan: And his wife Blanche.

[01:29:32.19] Jack Davis: Would... they come for social reasons, or for business reasons, or both?

⁶ Peter Beer (1928-2018) New Orleans attorney, judge, and city council member.

⁷ Eddie Sapir (1937-2024) New Orleans attorney, judge, and city council member.

[01:29:37.06] Ella Brennan: Mostly entertaining with somebody, you know. He had a busy job. And then she was a great cook. And so when he got home, he wanted to be home. He would come when he had somebody to entertain, and he would call in advance and tell us who he was bringing, and wanted us to understand and take care of them, and we were thrilled that he was doing it.

[01:30:00.21] Jack Davis: Do you remember... any restaurants in particular that... racially mixed groups in New Orleans in the '60's felt comfortable going? A number of people said it was hard to find a place...

[01:30:15.06] Ella Brennan: Where they felt comfortable...

[01:30:15.29] Jack Davis: Felt comfortable going together and that they were welcome. And... Dooky Chase was...

[01:30:23.10] Ella Brennan: Very wonderful woman, huh?

[01:30:23.11] Jack Davis: ...one place and... there weren't too many other examples. Do you?

[01:30:28.13] Ella Brennan: Well, I don't think there were. The... ...I have to move. The customers... everybody kind of understood, like Leah Chase and I considered ourselves best friends. I mean, we'd do anything for each other. And have. Have. And I've been to her restaurant many times. She comes to our restaurant all the time... But she will tell you there was a line. I read something the other day where she said- she was talking about how she felt very comfortable in the white community, but a lot of her people did not. They weren't able to... they didn't want to risk being... snubbed, that's the word, and they didn't want to risk causing any conflict...

[01:31:22.10] Jack Davis: Was that then or now?

[01:31:24.24] Ella Brennan: I think it was more then. I think they know they're welcome now. I think they come whenever they want to, but I think there's... still a line that these people live, and not because of integration or segregation, but because of the way they live. They have their own lifestyle, they have their friends, they entertain, they go out, they have their parties. And sometimes the parties are at Commander's. Frequently we have large integrated parties; frequently, we have ladies... at lunch that are all dressed up, look wonderful... but there's just... I don't know. I don't know how to... I'm not capable of putting it into words.

[01:32:09.07] Jack Davis: Yeah... let me ask you about another group of people, the business people. Did you get...

[01:32:15.00] Ella Brennan: Oh my, they're our customers.

[01:32:15.24] Jack Davis: you know, the bank presidents

[01:32:17.29] Ella Brennan: Oh, they're our customers.

[01:32:18.01] Jack Davis: Lawrence Merrigan and Jimmy Jones⁸ and...

[01:32:19.27] Ella Brennan: Oh, they were all our customers.

[01:32:20.27] Jack Davis: And... they would come on business? For lunch and dinner? Or...

[01:32:23.26] Ella Brennan: They'd come for lunch. They'd bring their... they'd come with money in their offices or a friend or a customer... always for lunch. They came lots of times for dinners. We were a big celebration restaurant here... They'd celebrate anniversaries, birthdays, graduations... And then...

[01:32:40.00] Jack Davis: And was that happening right from the beginning of your tenure?

[01:32:42.08] Ella Brennan: No! We had to earn that.

[01:32:43.08] Jack Davis: Yeah.

⁸ James Jones (1930-2018) President of First National Bank of Commerce in New Orleans 1969-1975.

[01:32:44.09] Ella Brennan: We had to earn it. They were going to Antoine's and Arnaud's and we had to get on that list.

[01:32:51.20] Jack Davis: How long did that take?

[01:32:53.06] Ella Brennan: Well, I think we're at Commander's a good five years before we felt we were beginning to arrive.

[01:33:00.27] Jack Davis: ...These people that... work for you, we named Paul Prudhomme and...

[01:33:10.15] Ella Brennan: Emeril.

[01:33:10.26] Jack Davis: and Emeril.

[01:33:11.20] Ella Brennan: Jamie.

[01:33:12.05] Jack Davis: ...We had... but you had... just a long list of other people. Kevin Vizard

[01:33:17.05] Ella Brennan: Oh, Vizard

[01:33:18.06] Jack Davis: Vizard. And Frank Brigsten and...

[01:33:20.09] Ella Brennan: Uh huh.

[01:33:20.26] Jack Davis: So... how do you feel about... I mean, these people were-were... alumni of you kitchen... Did that... how do you assess the impact they had? What impact did they have?

[01:33:33.00] Ella Brennan: Well I would tell you, and it's going to sound phony, but we were excited when they learned and grew. We were trying to raise the standards of the restaurant business, and we would, I promise you, I spent half my life sitting at the kitchen table talking, trying to, like, I told my grand-nephew, who is coming around, talking to me a lot now... I told him, I said, "Harvard Business School always taught by the... they call it the... what do they call it? Not the..."

[01:34:13.20] Jack Davis: The 'Case Study'?

[01:34:14.07] Ella Brennan: Case Studies! I said, "That's natural to me. That's the best way I can know how to teach. I would tell them a story." I would tell them a story about celery... you know?

[01:34:26.04] Jack Davis: So that's how you ran your culinary school?

[01:34:28.01] Ella Brennan: Um hum.

[01:34:28.26] Jack Davis: For them... And... without your kitchen, what would- what would the New Orleans... restaurant world be like?

[01:34:38.18] Ella Brennan: Without our kitchen?

[01:34:40.28] Jack Davis: Yes.

[01:34:41.29] Ella Brennan: Well, I never thought about that.

[01:34:44.12] Jack Davis: I'm giving you a chance to brag.

[01:34:46.11] Ella Brennan: Well, I mean, I think we were a major part of bringing New Orleans into the 20th Century, and now we're trying very hard to do it now, we... feel that the people that work with us... are rather special... most of us. If they're not special then we're quick to tell them... We think they want to learn, and we try to expose them to everything we know. My brother would sit there, my sister, Dottie, has been, for years, working with the... the people that work in the restaurant. I could tell you some stories, but I won't tell them to you, because it's not fair. But she has taken people and take them shopping. So they'd know what to wear... She has taken them... As they're standing up, and she straightens their coats, on them and... she straightens the...

[01:35:48.05] Jack Davis: These are employees?

[01:35:49.11] Ella Brennan: Yeah. She loved them. And then pats them on the cheek and gives them a kiss. I mean, you know, we try... To, you know, pat somebody on the cheek and kiss them if you don't like them, but they're not... most of them, when you give them half a chance, they immediately become wonderful people. And you... understand each other. And it's easy to work together.

[01:36:14.29] Jack Davis: You know, a lot of the things that happened in New Orleans in the 1970's, some of the things... stopped... like... real estate development, and high rise construction on Poydras Street. If we had it in the 1970's, and we didn't have it much after that.

[01:36:29.20] Ella Brennan: I remember Poydras Street way before that ever happened. So to me that's very current.

[01:36:34.06] Jack Davis: But let me ask you about the... but the restaurant business seem to have been... permanently changed by the 1970's...

[01:36:43.16] Ella Brennan: I think so.

[01:36:44.01] Jack Davis: ...and keeps going on. I mean, every... decade since then has added to it.

[01:36:47.18] Ella Brennan: Uh huh. And all I can tell you is what's happened on Magazine Street has been phenomenal. It's been very successful, and everybody goes to Magazine street. I mean, they think of it as restaurant road. Most of them, you know, that sort of thing. I think, they have not had as many restaurants that I've seen that we would consider "Hey let's go out to dinner" open in Metairie, as have on Magazine Street. I don't know how many there are, but... I don't think there are many we missed eating in. And... like the night, I'll never forget, this Magazine and Prytania here.

Magazine and... Washington... was an automobile parts store. And the next thing, I turned around, and there was this bistro there. It's absolutely charming. And I go there whenever I get a chance. I like it. I'm crazy about it. They know us; we know them.

[01:37:50.11] Jack Davis: And... in the... 1980s we started experimenting with having kind of a more... industrial-strength tourism economy for New Orleans.

[01:38:02.26] Ella Brennan: We were very big part of that.

[01:38:04.12] Jack Davis: Yeah.

[01:38:04.25] Ella Brennan: Very big part of that.

[01:38:06.11] Jack Davis: And that's do you- do you see that as having grown steadily?

[01:38:09.27] Ella Brennan: Yes. My brother Owen, sits on the intersection of Bourbon and Bienville Streets, restaurant was here, Absinthe House was here, He had bought the Absinthe house, and then got us in the restaurant business. And he stood there, and he said, "If you can't sell New Orleans, you can't sell anything. This's got to be the biggest tourism city in the country." And Chep Morrison⁹ appointed him, now listen to this, to be Vice-Chairman of the Vice Commission. And Mr. Foster, Bananas Foster, Richard Foster, was the Chairman. And they were determined to build a convention and tourism business in New Orleans. Didn't go as well; it was slow to move, Chep pushed it like crazy... they... We, my brother's dead by this time, on the front porch of my family house, we had this big group of people, all in the tourism, hotel, restaurant business, and said, we going to move the tourism and convention bureau out of the Chamber of Commerce. Now our big job is not to make the Chamber of Commerce anti. We have to do things, that make them feel we will still be a part of the Chamber; we will pay our dues; we will attend, but the Convention Bureau has to be a concentration of effort to promote this city. Now before that, my brother was alive. As far as I was concerned, there were five hotels in New Orleans, and none of them first class. Because by this time, I was being sent all over the country to learn, and I got to learn what a first-class hotel was. I'm going to tell you this story: Seymour Weiss¹⁰ every time somebody would come to New Orleans...

[01:40:10.03] Jack Davis: Of the... Roosevelt Hotel.

[01:40:13.13] Ella Brennan: Yes. The big chains, the Hilton, the... it was Sheraton in those days- would come to New Orleans, and he would take out his plans how he was

⁹ deLesseppe Story "Chep" Morrison (1912-1964) Politician and mayor of New Orleans.

¹⁰ Seymour Weiss (1896-1969) President of the Roosevelt from 1931-1965.

going to expand Roosevelt. And he knew them, being on the board of the Hotel Association of America, and they wouldn't come. And Chep was going out of his mind and was trying to get this Tourist and Convention Bureau going, so that we could begin to get past Mr. Weiss, who was a charming man, but he was a hell of a competitor. And that was very very hard, to get the first hotel here. And, we eventually... who was? The Sheraton. They... bought the... Saint Charles Hotel.

[01:41:04.16] Dottie Brennan: The Royal Orleans, of course.

[01:41:06.01] Ella Brennan: Huh?

[01:41:06.12] Dottie Brennan: The Royal Orleans, of course.

[01:41:08.05] Ella Brennan: Of course, well that came a little bit later. There was a Sheraton.

[01:41:10.18] Jack Davis: Yeah, I think the Sheraton was in the Saint Charles (Hotel).

[01:41:12.19] Ella Brennan: Yes, I think so. That lovely old building. Do you remember that?

[01:41:15.18] Jack Davis: Uh hm.

[01:41:15.19] Ella Brennan: Oh, it was a handsome building. And they took over that. And... then they built a hotel, and by degrees, there was a man running at Tourist and Convention that had worked for Chep, he was one of his guys, and put him in there, his name was Glen Douthit we became very close friends, Glen worked his tail off for no money, clerical job, I mean, I don't want to say, put him down, but he was a dear friend and I know he didn't make a lot of money, to run this Bureau. Eventually, it was in the... on Royal Street in the... American Legion Building, which is now a police station or... I don't know what it is now... and they finally had to move, so they got an office in what is now the... courthouse building. And they were right across the street. We got to know each other, we got to know the Bureau people very well. And as I said, on my front porch, we had all the hotel... not the hotel... the restaurant people, people interested in tourism, and we were able to take it out of the Chamber, and concentrate on it. Later on, Lester Kabacoff who, Gloria, his wife, went to high school at the same time together, on the streetcar; we knew each other. We would have dinner together. A lot. We were friends. I was very close friends with Glen, very close friends with Kabi. Kabi came in and took over, Glen was out. And Kabi started this wonderful tourism birth of New Orleans. I'll give him all the credit in the world. He really was... he got money, is what he did. Glen didn't have any money in the bureau. Chep, I mean Kabi know how to get money. And I'll never forget, there was a parking lot where the Royal Orleans is now. And...Kabi came over one day to talk to us, we had lunch together, and he said, "I'm going to build this hotel. The Stern family, Kabi, and...It's going to be here on the corner, and we going to have a garage. Be great for you all. We're not taking your parking lot away." We had a great garage. And, there came Royal Orleans Hotel. We were investors, very small, but we invested in the Hotel. And... Edgar Stern...his mother, of course, Edgar and a bunch of New Orleans citizens put up money and built the hotel... It was unbelievably beautiful and well-done. He was terrific.

[01:44:12.12] Jack Davis: And that, was that the beginning of the, the hotel boom in...from the '60's?

[01:44:16.07] Ella Brennan: That was really, because... like I said, we like had a [shift]. Maybe right before they opened it... Maybe it was... I think it was... I can't tell you. The Hilton. Kabi was a big part of getting the Hilton over where it is on the river...We started getting money from the Tourist and Convention Bureau, and tourism began... to happen. And what I remember, from day one. And love the idea of how the city worked together, finally, got these hotels built, and this is the result.

[01:44:58.09] Jack Davis: And could...

[01:45:01.27] Ella Brennan: I'm trying to put it in the '70's for you.

[01:45:04.21] Jack Davis: Yep. Right. Well could... Brennan's and... Commander's, later, have... survived without the tourists that were coming, increasingly?

[01:45:13.03] Ella Brennan: Not as well as we have. I don't think so. We...we did Breakfast at Brennan's, it was almost... except for Sunday, Sunday was all local, but the rest of the week. When we first started Breakfast at Brennan's, we only had- we used to always serve the first...four from twelve to... eight. We had eight tables that we opened for Breakfast at Brennan's on weekdays. Eventually, we used the whole building. But we struggled because we knew there were tourists in the city, but there weren't that many, and they were coming here for other reasons, and they never heard of Brennan's and we pulled Breakfast at Brennan's. We came up here, by the time we came up here in '74, believe me, conventions were moving. The city was building. I think we had built the...what's his name... you know, his building... Lou... Davis... the Architect.

[01:46:12.08] Jack Davis: Arthur Davis.

[01:46:13.04] Ella Brennan: Arthur Davis. They had built the...that beautiful building that they tore down. They... first convention center.

[01:46:21.13] Jack Davis: Oh, yes!

Ella Brennan: The Rivergate. That had happened then. That was early. That was very early. And what a wonderful building. So sad that they tore that down. But... that was all happening back in the '70's, in the hotel business.

[01:46:39.00] Jack Davis: And... .. the clientele for Commander's?...Was it local at first? Was it local and tourism mixed?...

[01:46:48.00] Ella Brennan: It was mostly local in the beginning, as we developed the local people. And then we began getting good national publicity, and I thought, it was rather phenomenal that we got all this publicity out there...

[01:47:06.09] Jack Davis: And that brought in more non-New Orleanians.

[01:47:09.22] Ella Brennan: Well, yes, it brought both... we still consider ourselves the first person who can take care of coming in that door is going to be New Orleans. And we do everything to tell them, "Say you're from New Orleans when you call up." Don't let us tell you we don't have a table. Because we save tables for locals. We always do. I mean, if you call me at eight o'clock and say, [unintelligible], I'd give you a table...Because we hold back. Because you can- you know why? Because enough businesses in the city, you can fill them away. So you can hold back.

[01:47:44.26] Jack Davis: Listen, before we totally exhaust you, and...

[01:47:47.15] Ella Brennan: I am.

[01:47:48.07] Jack Davis: [laughs]

[01:47:48.26] Ella Brennan: Want some water.

[01:47:49.13] Jack Davis: Do you want... .. a break? I wanted to give Justin an opportunity to ask some questions, and... unless...

[01:47:57.15] Ella Brennan: No, I think I've tell you everything I know.

[01:47:58.04] Jack Davis: unless we're overtaxing you.

[01:47:59.29] Ella Brennan: It... was good for a while, and then it sort of changed, and there was... the great Chinese restaurant...

[01:48:07.12] Dottie Brennan: Oh, [Jin's]?

[01:48:08.26] Ella Brennan: Mr. Jin's. On Conti Street. I mean, it was a hole in the wall, but it was packed with New Orleans people, it was great...Help me Dottie, I don't remember all those restaurants.

[01:48:21.02] JN: I'm actually going to go head and keep this recording, I'm going to keep this, because these are some things that are actually very interesting to me. Do you remember the restaurant named Masera's on-

[01:48:33.14] Dottie Brennan: Maseras.

[01:48:34.19] Ella Brennan: Miss...Maspero's.
 [01:48:35.04] JN: Not Maspero's, but Masera's It was the-
 [01:48:36.25] Ella Brennan: No. There was a Maspero.
 [01:48:38.23] JN: the Nut Club Bar and it became Segreto's and then it became-
 [01:48:43.00] Ella Brennan: I remember Segreto's was on Bourbon Street.
 [01:48:44.18] JN: Right. Bourbon and Saint Louis.
 [01:48:46.23] Ella Brennan: Well, when they first was there, it was right near Galatoire's...
 [01:48:51.01] JN: Right!
 [01:48:52.09] Ella Brennan: That's where it was.
 [01:48:52.13] JN: Where Turci's... Where... Turci's was.
 [01:48:55.29] Ella Brennan: I don't remember that. I remember Segreto's.
 [01:48:57.10] JN: Yeah. And then..... because I'm writing about all these right now. And... it's unusual,
 [01:49:05.20] Ella Brennan: Well... you're bringing them back to me, I'll tell you that.
 [01:49:08.00] JN: There's a restaurant at where...Segreto's moved, and then Moran took over.
 [01:49:15.04] Ella Brennan: Oh! Jimmy Moran. Now you see?
 [01:49:16.07] Dottie Brennan: Yes. Jimmy Moran, well that was like...
 [01:49:18.14] Jack Davis: La Louisianne
 [01:49:19.19] Dottie Brennan: La Louisianne.
 [01:49:20.13] JN: But he had....
 [01:49:21.11] Ella Brennan: No, but... before that he had a... ..restaurant on one of the side streets right near Bourbon... When he was Jimmy Moran he had the diamonds in the... meatballs.
 [01:49:29.03] Dottie Brennan: Yeah. [Unintelligible].
 [01:49:33.24] JN: Shall I sit there?
 [01:49:35.09] Jack Davis: Yes. Yes.
 [01:49:36.04] JN: All right.
 [01:49:36.21] Jack Davis: Do you need this or...?
 [01:49:38.04] Ella Brennan: Now, part of our group always was a lot of the people on Bourbon Street. And when I say Bourbon Street, I'm immediately thinking of Pat O'Brians. Pat and... what was the other man's name?...See? I mean, I knew that man quite well, but...
 [01:49:55.26] JN: Masera's would have been...
 [01:49:59.24] JN: Their timeline was 1885 to 1944.
 [01:50:05.13] Ella Brennan: Well, I came in '43.
 [01:50:06.19] JN: And then Joe Segreto's dad, who was actually Joe...
 [01:50:11.15] Ella Brennan: Joe Segreto and Dottie, Joe worked at Brennan's and Commander's next to Dottie for years. They're like brother and sister.
 [01:50:17.16] JN: Yeah yeah. Yeah yeah yeah. Yeah.
 [01:50:18.26] Ella Brennan: We were down there all the time.
 [01:50:19.23] JN: And- and his father, of course, was the one who had Segreto's restaurant, and he was there, they had... Turci's was down there in the 200 block.
 [01:50:27.25] Ella Brennan: Yeah. I'm vaguely pulling Turci's out.
 [01:50:29.06] JN: But that was right when they moved over to Poydras.
 [01:50:31.01] Ella Brennan: I think Turci's was on the river on the- w- on the riverside of the street, wasn't it?
 [01:50:34.16] JN: ...You know, I think they may have been on the lakeside...But this was a very long time ago. And then... it was Tosca's for like a year. And then...Joe Segreto moved to Masera's location, which is the 809 Saint Louis, just right off of Bourbon. And

then...and then, in 1947, Jimmy Brocato Moran took over the management of that restaurant.

[01:51:03.06] Ella Brennan: I remember that. I remember Jimmy Moran. I promise you I do.

[01:51:05.26] JN: What kind of man was he?

[01:51:07.02] Ella Brennan: ...Wonderful...Theatrical...Very proud of his background with Huey Long, and all that history...He, obviously, was an Italian and grew up in a great Italian family, cooked well. And he tried to do that in his restaurant. The meatballs were a very big thing. They had diamonds in them. Know that?

[01:51:33.26] JN: Yeah. Yeah.

[01:51:34.21] Ella Brennan: ...I remember eating there. I remember meeting him any number of times. I don't think he would say we were friends, but we certainly were friendly acquaintances...I was a kid, and...but... he was a great exciting... that had gone out of my mind totally. And we brought it up. It was a big part of, I'm sure if you'd ask me about... some others, I probably will remember them.

[01:52:00.25] JN: Well how about Elmwood Plantation? Was Elmwood Plantation a significant restaurant in your mind?

[01:52:05.12] Ella Brennan: Well, Clay Shaw lived in Elmwood Plantation.

[01:52:08.05] JN: Oh, I didn't know that.

[01:52:09.07] Ella Brennan: And when he moved, or they... he was renting it I think... he had to leave, or whatever, they opened this restaurant. And...I had been... at Clay's house. Clay was a dear friend of mine... extraordinary human being. I remember going up to the house. Wherever he lived, we'd go for dinner, at this point, he was living at Elmwood, because he moved a lot. He'd buy these houses and renovate them, and boom boom boom. You know, you almost felt you had to go down Bourbon street and say, "Clay! Clay! Where are you? We're coming for dinner, where are you?" Because he was constantly moving into a different house. So he was at Elmwood. Then these people, I can't remember... I think they were part of a... large Italian group of people... It was said mafia... I have no idea whether it was or not Mosca's is a great restaurant that everybody loves. Dottie just recently's been out there a couple of times...But Elmwood was very good. We loved going there, and we thought of it as a quality restaurant...Italian people are all over this place, and Marvelous.

[01:53:20.29] JN: I wanted to ask you...some questions, as a business person. We've heard in a number of these interviews about how banking in New Orleans could have been more progressive in the 1970s, in that there were... people in New Orleans who really wanted to expand lending and extend credit to business ventures, but that the banking community was very conservative. As a Restaurateur, did you run into this?

[01:53:53.28] Ella Brennan: Well, I have to say that... my brother, I remember this exact statement, he said, "We cannot bank with the Whitney. We have to help another bank get started." And there was something called the Louisiana Bank, Gene McCarroll was President. And we banked there, and they're progressive- maybe ten times later, we're still there, but it's... I think it's... can't recall the name right now. Dottie, what's the name of our bank? Chase Manhattan... no... not Manhattan. What's the name of our bank?

[01:54:30.28] Dottie Brennan: Bank? Chase.

[01:54:32.29] Ella Brennan: Chase. Is what it is now, but it started with a small group of people, I my brother might have invested ten dollars in it, you know? He became very friendly with the board, and... they were very good customers in our restaurant. But... he said that to me. "We can't bank at the Whitney." Because they have a monopoly in his mind... and we needed to have other bankers come in.

[01:55:01.01] JN: And that was stifling to business.

[01:55:03.06] Ella Brennan: That's what he thought. And ...the people that banked at the Whitney thought it was the greatest bank in the world. Because they felt that they could go there, and if you were an honest, hard-working person, you can get a loan. So the Whitney was not bad, it was just the only bank.

[01:55:20.21] JN: Was the Whitney reluctant to extend credit to restaurants?

[01:55:25.18] Ella Brennan: I don't think we ever asked. I don't really know that. But it- it- so many people go into the restaurant business with no money, and I would think yes. I think they...I think you would have some collateral of some kind. I remember that word collateral. You know, and it generally was a house you owned or were buying, or something like that.

[01:55:45.26] JN: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm interested in... the NFL comes along, right ... in... the 1960. How did the New Orleans becoming an NFL town affect being in the restaurant business?

[01:56:03.12] Ella Brennan: It was fantastic. Now, if you think selfishly about it, they played football on Sunday, and they took some of our business to the football game. But they brought so much to the community that you didn't notice that. And it didn't last very long. The business came back. I don't even know that it was a mob... we were scared of the NFL football games being on a Sunday. We wanted them. We had the... first people to buy the tickets, but...It was wonderful for the city. And I remember all the NFL men, I'm trying to remember, I remember that wonderful Mardi Gras when we had two or three of them join our family Krewe at Mardi Gras... oh what was his name? And... remember that magnificent movie star?... he brought Ava Gardner into the restaurant one day. I can't remember his name... he was the lawyer, the chief negotiator for the NFL. Why can't I remember his name? Anyway, he was a delightful guy, and... what I was thinking of Ava Gardner I was thinking years later. But...they came en masse. What was that man? He was an ex-football player, and they called him Lucky somebody, or Footie somebody. He'd been with one of the universities and he... had a nickname like that as a football player. Can't remember. He was with the NFL. And they literally took our business over.

[01:57:34.19] JN: Did they bring a lot of...

[01:57:36.17] Ella Brennan: They came in en masse, you know?

[01:57:38.20] JN: Did they bring a lot of star power? did you start seeing more celebrities dining in New Orleans restaurants when the NFL came to town?

[01:57:45.26] Ella Brennan: I don't know that the NFL has anything to do with it. I know that United Artists had a man named...

[01:57:53.01] Dottie Brennan: Addie Addison.¹¹

[01:57:54.20] Ella Brennan: Addie Addison was their local man, and that was the time when they started... movie stars were going on the road, it was before the television, and they would go to each city and try and get radio, and newspaper advertising. And Addie was- I mean- we knew a lot of them- but Addie was the one that we knew the best [laughs]. And we'd know to cook Pea Soup- Addie's coming tonight. It was...

[01:58:24.23] Dottie Brennan: The radio show, Ella.

[01:58:26.07] Ella Brennan: What?

[01:58:26.08] Dottie Brennan: The radio show that we had.

[01:58:28.02] Ella Brennan: Oh, we had a radio show, did I tell you?

[01:58:29.20] JN: A Brennan's radio show?

[01:58:30.20] Ella Brennan: In the restaurant. On Bourbon Street we started it. Jill Jackson was on Friday nights, and she'd broadcast, but she didn't broadcast to the restaurant. She was sitting at a table, and she would talk about who was in the

¹¹ Addie Addison was a publicist for United Artists in the 1950s into the early 1970s.

restaurant, what was going on in New Orleans, and she'd interview one of the customers. And she and Dick had a radio show called "Hollywood" something or other. And she... would invite those movies stars that had been on her radio show into the restaurant for the nighttime radio show, and we'd all wind up having dinner with them. I mean, from Leopold Stokowski to... I'm seeing over my shoulder that table looking in the window, Tommy Dorsey... Everybody. And they'd come for Jill's show. And they'd do their show in the daytime, and then they'd come down to Brennan's at night. And I mean it's hard for me, Dottie will tell you, some of our oldest friends, I mean friends; I'm not talking acquaintances, were these people on tour with "Hollywood." And they would come, and you'd get to know them. And then they'd come back, and you'd get to know them. And the next thing you know, they're in town, with their wife and children. And you'd get to know them. And I'm talking about people like...Robert Mitchum. I'm talking about people like...our dear friend, one we adored... I loved Mitchum. Mitchum was a smart, smart guy. He was fun to talk to...

[02:00:04.15] Dottie Brennan: Danny Kaye.

[02:00:05.00] Ella Brennan: Huh?

[02:00:05.25] Dottie Brennan: Danny Kaye.

[02:00:06.14] Ella Brennan: Oh, Danny came in all the time. When he was learning to fly jets, he would fly into New Orleans for lunch. [laughs] And stay for dinner. You know. Crazy. Dance all over the street, you know, that kind of stuff. Wonderful.

[02:00:17.22] Dottie Brennan: Raymond Burr.

[02:00:18.15] Ella Brennan: Raymond Burr! Oh god...

[02:00:20.17] Dottie Brennan: He was always here.

[02:00:20.21] Ella Brennan: He became a member of the family. He'd come for Thanksgiving. I mean, that kind of stuff... All those movies stars were in and out of New Orleans, it was the beginning, you know... I'm trying to remember all this. I mean, it was the beginning of a lot of New Orleans becoming the city that we think it became. And people would love to come here. And it became easier and easier, I think to sell to tourists and conventions. I'm trying to think of all the movie stars, I mean... There's so many, last night we were talking about [Coulbert ?]. I mean, you know, they came. And...

[02:00:56.18] Dottie Brennan: Lillian Hellman.

[02:00:57.12] Ella Brennan: Who?

[02:00:58.09] Dottie Brennan: Lillian.

[02:00:58.28] Ella Brennan: Oh, Lillian Hellman. Well, she was from New Orleans. She wasn't a movie star, she just wrote for the movies. [Unintelligible]

[02:01:02.18] Dottie Brennan: Yeah, but she brought movie stars.

[02:01:04.24] Ella Brennan: She lived here, I mean, her family lived here... one time she came down to do a thing at the Public Library, and we had her for dinner like almost every night. And she came to our house one night, and cooked red beans and rice, because she wanted to show us really how to do it. She was... quite a character. I loved, adored her... I'm just trying to think of all these people that came through.

[02:01:29.01] JN: Phil Harris, of course.

[02:01:30.03] Ella Brennan: Of course. And his wife.

[02:01:32.11] JN: Right. Alice Fay.

[02:01:33.19] Ella Brennan: She sang for us one night in the lobby, there was a lobby bar in the Royal Orleans, and she stood up there and sang for us. Gathered people from all around. Louis Armstrong. One night, I can't [unintelligible]. Maggie Ettinger¹². Was one of the top PR people in Hollywood. I learned what the word PR was from Maggie. She was

¹² Margaret Ettinger was one of the prominent publicity agents of early Hollywood with early clients from the 1920s like D.W. Griffith.

another one that adopted me. She came to New Orleans, and the first show was a Comedy Hour. And it did not have, I mean, it was live. They didn't tape in those days. And they did it. they were going to do it in Antoine's, but she met my brother [Owen]. And they did it in the intersection of Bourbon and Bienville Streets. Where you could see the Absinthe House and the restaurant signs. And when Louis Armstrong... wait, who else was there that night... with a couple other movie stars: Peggy Lee, there was a third movie star...think he did...Oklahoma [and/in] the movies... Anyway, when Louis came in there on Sunday afternoon, we went out and stood on the balcony of the restaurant, and when he went in there to practice, and he played *Way Down In New Orleans* people came like it was Mardi Gras. From three sides... you know they come across the street, down the street, down the street, and they all surrounded him. And that man played, and there wasn't a dry eye in the crowd. He was home. And he was playing. It was phenomenal. One of my greatest memories.

[02:03:14.28] Dottie Brennan: You can tell them about the segregation story. About, you know, Louis Armstrong. Well, he was talking about that earlier.

[02:03:22.21] Ella Brennan: ...

[02:03:23.27] JN: Please. That would be great.

[02:03:24.29] Ella Brennan: Well, there was a point where he was in and out for a brief thing. Maybe he was doing a commercial, if I remember correctly, and... he couldn't stay in a hotel. Now, there were a lot of people around the Negro community that put him up, but this particular day, I think it was only one night, I don't remember. we had an apartment above the Absinthe House, and he stayed there. And everybody was going around; "Louis Armstrong came... Louis Armstrong." We adored the ground he walked on. As I say, I'm not going to the saloon in the sky, if Louis' not there.

[02:04:00.25] JN: Another occupant of that apartment was Lucius Beebe, right?

[02:04:05.29] Ella Brennan: Yes. Yes. Yes. Oh, yes. Yes. Yes. And Robert Ruark. I don't know if you know Robert Ruark.¹³ He was on the cover of Time. I'll tell you a story about that.

[02:04:16.18] JN: Sure.

[02:04:17.24] Ella Brennan: I'll tell you a lot of story about Lucius Beebe.

[02:04:20.25] JN: He's... somebody I've gotten very interested in.

[02:04:25.08] Ella Brennan: Have you read his books?

[02:04:26.14] JN: I have read Lucius Beebe Reader.

[02:04:29.09] Ella Brennan: Ok, then you know who I'm talking about. He'd come to New Orleans in his private rail-road car, and he would invite us over to dinner. The first night. And he had this big dog, a Saint Bernard, named T-Bone Towser. This big dog was in, you know, in a railcar. Which was beautifully furnished. There was a wine cellar, turkish bath, somehow, a hot bath, the kitchen was terrific, and we'd sit down at this very, very ornate formal table and have dinner. And frequently, when he didn't bring the train, and he came to New Orleans a lot, when he wasn't on the train, I only remember him bringing the train, that I can name, three times, but other times, he would stay in the apartment, the Absinthe House. Now this man was used to utter luxury. The Absinthe apartment was not utter luxury. But he loved standing out on the balcony, smoking, looking at the crowds, looking at the quarter, he just was a fantastic man. And, he helped us very much... Am I boring you all?

[02:05:40.27] JN: Uh uh.

[02:05:41.04] Jack Davis: It's great.

[02:05:42.00] JN: Not at all.

¹³ Robert Ruark (1915-1965) Was in his time a well-known columnist and authority on big game hunting in Africa.

[02:05:42.11] Jack Davis: It's terrific.

[02:05:43.25] Ella Brennan: Lucius was in town, and he was having lunch at our first restaurant on Bourbon Street, across from the Absinthe House, and he had been very kind to me so rather he had told- 'come be with me, come be with me,' so I was sitting with him. My brother Owen came in; we were sitting there, and we were talking, and Lucius had been very kind to me. He sent me books; he would tell me "read this." He would call on the phone and say, "Have you read this?" He was writing for *Gourmet* at the time. Now, that's how I got my subscription to *Gourmet*. He told me about gourmet Magazine. And we're sitting there talking, and... Owen was talking about the fact that there was Mrs. Keyes that had just written *Dinner at Antoine's*. And how are you going to compete with that? We're a new restaurant trying to get going, but jeez, Dinner at Antoine's? They're packing it in. And...so we complained to Lucius about this, of course Miss Keyes was a customer, I have to tell you, I know how to pronounce her name, it's KIZE... She told me so... So we're sitting there talking, and Lucius was talking about the fact that he... was beginning to like to eat in the middle of the day. He was thinking about, instead of "dinner" he enjoyed eating in the daytime much more. Go to someplace, twelve or one o'clock, and have a great meal. We're sitting there talking, and we're talking about how we're going to get our foot in the door, how we're going to get going. And he... started talking about this midday meal, and... somebody brought up, and I don't know who it was, it was a radio show named Tom Breneman's. Breakfast with Tom Breneman's.¹⁴ On the radio. And Owen said, "Breakfast at Brennan's." And he said, "Right there, god damn it, they can eat dinner at Antoine's and they eat Breakfast at Brennan's." And that's a true story. Lucius Beebe was sitting there, and when we started talking about writing a menu, that's when he said, "Write a menu for breakfast to me." And said, "Oh, a breakfast menu, ok. What do I know about Breakfast?" And he said, "Okay. You're not going to find breakfast in restaurants. But you can find it in the best hotels in America. Now I want you... to come be with me in San Francisco, I want you to go to New York to the Palace Hotel and Plaza, and I want you to go to the Hunt Cunard Grill and the..." What was the great old hotel on the river? Won't come to my mind right now. In London. And I went, and ate, and collected the menus.

[02:08:41.09] JN: With Lucius Beebe.

[02:08:43.04] Ella Brennan: No. He sent me. He told me where to go, where to eat, and what I was looking for. Brought all the menus back, and we said "We don't want to serve this in New Orleans. This isn't New Orleans food." And Paul Blange, who was our chef at the time, and no more of a chef than I was, was sitting next to me.

[02:09:05.19] Dottie Brennan: Great cook.

[02:09:06.16] Ella Brennan: Oh, fantastic cook. We called him our chef. He is. He had two books, they were covered in... .. butcher paper. They're old books, and he said, "Come with me, and we'll talk about eggs." And he opened this book, on the egg pages, and I'm reading all these egg dishes. Okay. And started talking about other things. So we got into this- cookbook, and his background was he'd come over from Holland, of all places, "Holland." We changed his name to "Blangé, instead of Blange we put and accent on it, and he became Paul Blange.¹⁵ So we're talking about these dishes, which were, I guess, originally, a lot of them were either English or French. But mostly French. But the cookbook was in English, but it was printed, oh, I mean, like, maybe before 1900. I'm not positive about that. Because somebody stole the book from me. It's gone. It was

¹⁴ The radio show was called "Breakfast in Hollywood" with Tom Breneman, and ran from 1941-1948. Breneman opened his own restaurant in Los Angeles in 1945.

¹⁵ Paul Blangé was the first chef at Brennan's Vieux Carré and then later Brennan's on Royal Street. He was born in Holland and died in 1977.

stolen. It wasn't borrowed because it never came back. And I used it for years and years and years. Paul and I sat there, and he cooked the dishes. And then we got into cooking things with calve's liver. Cooking things with... I remember eggs a la Turk, which were cooked eggs, I'd never seen eggs cooked like that in my life...I'm thinking they called them 'Curried Eggs.' Can't remember that. Wonderful dish. The yoke was hard, and it made a dark sauce, a brown sauce, that's when your old-type base was...And so we went writing the menu. From those cookbooks. And Lucius had been there the first day. Nobody tells that story, but that's a true story.

[02:11:15.12] JN: Lucius is one of the first people to write about Commander's Palace.

[02:11:19.09] Ella Brennan: In Holliday Magazine. Remember that? That magazine?

[02:11:24.25] JN: Seen it.

[02:11:25.14] Ella Brennan: Full-page picture on Bourbon Street, in the upstairs little room- which used to contain the air-condition units. We took them out, and we put red flock wallpaper on the wall. We didn't know any better. We tried to make it look like Lucius' railcar, or something. And we had... breakfast in that room, and they took pictures. Let me tell you this, about those pictures. He asked Owen to get two models. He wanted a man in a tuxedo, and a woman in green. Green. Especially if it could be a long, elegant dress. Elaina Lyons¹⁶, who was a big part of New Orleans, one of the most fabulous characters that lived in New Orleans, first of all, Owen called-

[02:12:13.23] Dottie Brennan: Stella?

[02:12:15.02] Ella Brennan: What was her name? One of the girls, she was a debutant type, I can't recall her name now... her husband eventually wrote a column in States Item... I can't remember their names, okay. So Owen called him, and he said, "Would you do this picture? Would you come tomorrow morning, at whatever time in a ball gown, if you've got a green one, that's what they're looking for." Robert Merrill was in town, that's another member of the family that died a couple years ago... the opera singer? he was in town, doing a concert. So Owen called him up and said, "Can I have this picture done for Holiday Magazine tomorrow, will you over?" He was staying at the Saint Charles Hotel; I'll never forget. And he came over, and he didn't have a tuxedo with him. Well why wouldn't he have a tuxedo if he was doing a concert? Must have been in an opera, because he didn't have a tuxedo or tails with him. So Owen went and got home and got his tuxedo, I don't think they rented them in those days, he had to go home and get his tuxedo and bring it over, and we had to tie it in the back, because Merrill was thinner than Owen. We had big safety pins, you know, in the back pinning it up. Elena comes in this magnificent, green, I falling to the floor evening dress. She was beautiful.

[02:13:28.22] Dottie Brennan: She was gorgeous.

[02:13:29.10] Ella Brennan: She was gorgeous. She was just one of the prettiest women, and Merrill was just... a smashing, smashing human being. Full of fun, full of love. They take the picture and it's a full page in Holiday Magazine. My brother was a hell of a PR man. I didn't know he was a PR man, but he was a hell of a PR man. It was born in him. He didn't learn it, it was in him. And when he met Maggie Ettinger, the lady from Hollywood that had came to our...They fell in love. Oh, I fell in love with her too. She was phenomenal. And, she would say to him, "I want to go to places you won't take me." And there was a cab driver that parked across the street from the Absinthe House; Slim was his name, and he said, "Slim, take her." And Slim took her to all the places, cheap, run-down, shoddy places that I was afraid to go to, but she wanted to go to. The publicity... the knowing how to sell New Orleans, came from these people. Owen had

¹⁶ Elaina Ortiz-Monasterio Lyons (1912-2002)

them all, and they went away selling New Orleans. Oh! Y'all got to stop! This is ridiculous... I'm having... memory lane. Down memory lane here tonight...

[02:14:55.19] JN: Let me slip over my page. Maybe I'll have different lanes to go down...The Foodies, when they met, in the kitchen...

[02:15:06.18] Ella Brennan: Well we...

[02:15:07.29] JN: your foodie group.

[02:15:09.20] Ella Brennan: Well we mostly met in the Patio.

[02:15:11.17] JN: Met in the Patio.

[02:15:12.08] Ella Brennan: And... if the weather was right, we'd go sit out...

[02:15:14.26] Dottie Brennan: If it wasn't raining then...

[02:15:15.15] Ella Brennan: My... ear... you got a camera on?

[02:15:17.01] JN: We do, but it's okay.

[02:15:18.25] Ella Brennan: I'm... going to take my earrings off.

[02:15:21.05] JN: I think that's perfectly fine.

[02:15:22.04] Ella Brennan: Tell my sister Dottie they hurt...So...

[02:15:24.27] Dottie Brennan: What Ella?

[02:15:26.21] Ella Brennan: My earrings. I'm taking them off. They hurt...Where are we?

[02:15:32.01] JN: ...The foodies, when you met, and talked about...

[02:15:35.02] Ella Brennan: Oh! We sat down at the table, and... the first thing we wouldd say; "Anybody know anything new? Anything going on? Anybody have anything they want to talk about?"

[02:15:43.01] JN: One of the things that's interesting to me is, you traveled all over the world looking at restaurants.

[02:15:48.16] Ella Brennan: No, I didn't go over all over the world.

[02:15:48.24] JN: Well, all the great...

[02:15:50.05] Ella Brennan: I got to see Spain, France, and Italy.

[02:15:52.09] JN: The western...

[02:15:53.10] Ella Brennan: A little bit in Switzerland. Huh?

[02:15:54.04] JN: The western world.

[02:15:55.03] Ella Brennan: Yeah, the western world. Right.

[02:15:56.06] JN: And you sampled a great deal of cuisines, and then you came back here, but it sounds like their were a great many dishes that you enjoyed elsewhere that you knew instinctively would not play here.

[02:16:08.27] Ella Brennan: Classic French cooking, is not what New Orleans wants. Let's choose French Pastry as an example. They don't generally use sugar. You're not going to sell that in New Orleans as a desert. People here want sugar. So... The food... I'm trying to relate it to you on a similar level... the food was very classic, they had the classic sauces, and... I mean, I would enjoy eating it, but I knew it wouldn't sell in New Orleans. It was too... I don't know what's the word...? It was too...

[02:16:49.09] Dottie Brennan: Sophisticated.

[02:16:50.23] Ella Brennan: Well... it was certainly that. But the taste was very classic...French. Now... you go to these great restaurants... my god, the food was magnificent, don't get me wrong, I would like to take those dishes and bring them over here and change them a little bit. I read all those cookbooks about the great chefs of France. I knew their restaurants before I got there. In those days, that was where you went. You went to the great restaurants of France, out in the country, down, you know, outside of Lyon. All those great restaurants. And the food was fantastic.

[02:17:30.10] JN: Do you think the sophistication level of New Orleans diners increased between the time that the family bought Commander's Palace in 1969, and say... the arrival of Emeril Lagasse, about a decade later?

[02:17:48.12] Ella Brennan: Yes. Because they were traveling. You see, after World War II, people didn't go to Europe. Much until, I'd say, the '50s. And they didn't go as often as they... eventually they went constantly. Everybody was going as fast as we could go. But there was a period there when they... weren't traveling. And they weren't as sophisticated about food. I think the travel began happening, and the publication of foodie magazines... cookbooks started happening, you know, there was always a few cookbooks in the past, but they were... sort of stereotypes and... all of a sudden, this thing was blooming. And I'll never forget... when I would go to New York, first I think I did was that great big [Trabinous]-¹⁷ ... isn't that the name of it on 5th Avenue? And I'd buy every book in the place. And I'd have a suitcase extra to carry them back because they didn't have them in New Orleans. And I started reading about them in Gourmet, and then the other magazines started coming out... I'm trying to remember the names of them but they would begin talking about cookbooks. And... cookbooks were there, but they weren't in our local bookstores like that. Now I bought every Louisiana cookbook that was published. You know, Up the Road, The original Louisiana cookbooks. They were phenomenal.

[02:19:31.11] JN: Did you...Did you ever go somewhere and then eat something, and say, "Well, you know, maybe, maybe we should try a version of this..."

[02:19:39.06] Ella Brennan: Sure.

[02:19:39.27] JN: "...back in New Orleans."

[02:19:40.29] Ella Brennan: All the time.

[02:19:41.12] JN: ...And you tried it, and it didn't work.

[02:19:43.21] Ella Brennan: Right.

[02:19:44.02] JN: What were some of the more memorable...

[02:19:45.06] Ella Brennan: Let me one of the fun things about that. Paul and I were into cookbooks. And I came up to Paul one day, and I said, "Paul, cook that." Now this is some French cookbook I happened to have, and Paul would say, "It's in French." And he's got this Cajun French in his head, and he doesn't know that he's reading, I don't know what I'm reading; it's in French. So he started trying, and he tries, and tries, and we go, we would get somebody to interpret for us, somebody who walked in the restaurant that speak both French or something, and say, "Tell us this. Give us this." And they'd tell you, I mean, this was a very friendly town. You know, you can ask anybody to help you, and they would. So, he cooks it. And he says to me, "What do you think... Look at this." I said, "Oh... mother." He said, "We cook that every day." Can't remember the name of the dish. But that was the conversation. Cannot remember the name of the dish. It was a classic French recipe. And, we cooked our version of it frequently. But we didn't recognise it as being classic French.

[02:20:55.01] JN: Were you ever ahead of the New Orleans Diners? Did you just put something on the menu that didn't work?

[02:21:00.28] Ella Brennan: I'm sure we did. Dottie help me.

[02:21:05.19] Dottie Brennan: I'm sorry, I didn't hear you-

[02:21:06.21] Ella Brennan: Put something on the menu that didn't work. What was some of those dishes?...There weren't many dishes. I can't remember.

[02:21:16.18] Dottie Brennan: Well, what about the... Celebration Desert?

[02:21:20.21] Ella Brennan: Oh! Gee! The Celebration Desert was a classic French ...not a mousse...

[02:21:29.08] Dottie Brennan: Bombe.

¹⁷ Brennan may have meant Brentano's, which, like all the other big book dealers, had flagship stores along 5th Avenue in this time period.

[02:21:30.22] Ella Brennan: Bombe. And... I knew about bombs... I'd ordered them in restaurants in New York, that kind of stuff, and we went to see this movie. Betty Hoffman. and I went to see this movie because it was...something about the great French chefs. It was... sort of a... maybe a mystery or something... I can't remember the name of the movie, but it was a movie. We saw the movie, and we said, "That's it. That's the desert we want." And we saw the tall...

[02:21:58.22] Dottie Brennan: Chocolate.

[02:21:59.09] Ella Brennan: ...I have lost the name again...

[02:22:01.29] Dottie Brennan: Huh? Chocolate.

[02:22:02.24] Ella Brennan: No... Bombe. And we- we went back to the restaurant. Immediately. Made it. Got out the books. Made the rest... and... had a mousse in the middle, and we had vanilla ice cream on the outside, and we made the ice cream, according to the recipe, put the chocolate on the outside, and said, "This is our Celebration Dessert."

[02:22:26.12] Dottie Brennan: And we served it with Raspberry Sauce.

[02:22:29.01] Ella Brennan: Oh! And... we'd... bring it in the diner, and make a r-raspberry sauce. Sugar, butter, and a little bit liquor of some kind, little sauce to pour over it. Well, the only freezer we had... we didn't... Freezers weren't a big part of our life in those days like they are now... so, we were putting into this freezer... I don't know... he used to keep bones and things for the stock pot in the freezer, I remember that very well... Frozen wasn't in our vocabulary at the time. Even though you could go to the grocery store and buy frozen vegetables and ice cream, in the restaurant... it wasn't part of us. So, we didn't know how to do the dessert. How the hell are we going to do dessert? So, we moved the chef's table, and bought a freezer, and put the freezer in the kitchen... put the bombes in this freezer, and the freezer would melt.

[02:23:25.09] Dottie Brennan: It would re-cycle, you know.

[02:23:28.04] Ella Brennan: It would recycle at night. And we'd have all this chocolate all over the place, which we immediately, as people would walk from the kitchen to go to the bar, we'd say, "Would you like a spoon?" We were... trying to get it out the freezer, "have some, here's a cup." Have some. It was hysterically funny, but people loved it. Then... when the freezer worked... it worked fine, but we never could figure out the cycling. We had every refrigerator man in town trying to cycle that refrigerator for us, so that we wouldn't put the dessert in...

[02:24:03.21] Dottie Brennan: At the wrong time.

[02:24:04.27] Ella Brennan: ...And when... it would freeze, you'd get it into the diner; you couldn't cut it... you'd finally wind up with a chef's big knife and... it was hard to cut. The customers were crazy about it! we couldn't make it. We could not make it. We could make one and serve it to you, but we couldn't make them... put it on the menu. That was hysterical, it really was. That was an experience.

[02:24:31.03] Jack Davis: That was at Brennan's?

[02:24:32.02] Ella Brennan: No, that was at Commander's.

[02:24:33.08] Dottie Brennan: Commander's.

[02:24:34.29] JN: Who failed to adapt in the 1970s, among your... restaurant peer group, your restaurateur peers you said you were friendly with restaurateurs, but...

[02:24:44.26] Ella Brennan: Always. Still to this day.

[02:24:46.01] JN: Yeah. And, who just didn't adapt well in the 1970s?

[02:24:50.20] Ella Brennan: Well, Jimmy Moran.

[02:24:51.25] JN: Yeah, well.

[02:24:52.29] Ella Brennan: ...I personally don't think Galatoire's did. Now I love to go to Galatoire's, I love the Galatoire family. But they sort of had this stable, their set menu. And so did Antoine's. This set menu. And they never changed. If I'm going to go to

Antoine's tonight, I'm know what I'm having before I go. Now, they're beginning to do things... I haven't been there a lot. But Yvonne Alciatore¹⁸ is owner of the restaurant now, and they're beginning to do things. I haven't been there. I don't think they've changed the major menu. It's in English, but I don't think they've changed it a lot. I love to go there, but I knew what I was going to eat before I went there. Now we hope, we try not to have a dish that you say, "You've got to go to Commander's and eat this." We try not to do that. We try to have the menu every day prepared with what's available. Like for instance, the other night I went in there, and I wanted to have a piece of fish. And it was prepared with melon, and some other fruit. And I said to myself, "Never thought I'd eaten this. I've got to eat this. What the hell is it doing on the menu?" It was delicious. But I'd never had that before.

[02:26:04.23] JN: Sounds delicious.

[02:26:05.26] Ella Brennan: May not be there again for a while.

[02:26:09.25] JN: I've read some stories where there were these moments of doubt when you took over Commander's and were trying to transform it, and you were running into difficulties, and then you related the Collin story, but on the flip side of that, was there a moment when you know you finally had made it, that Commander's was going to thrive?

[02:26:31.20] Ella Brennan: Well, that was a long time coming. I guess it happened...

[02:26:41.10] Dottie Brennan: When we started making money.

[02:26:43.04] Ella Brennan: That is it. We started making money.

[02:26:45.11] JN: When was that?

[02:26:46.15] Ella Brennan: ...when did we start making money?

[02:26:48.25] Dottie Brennan: Huh?

[02:26:49.06] Ella Brennan: When did we start making money?

[02:26:51.13] Dottie Brennan: Not soon enough.

[02:26:52.27] Ella Brennan: Not soon enough, Dottie says... I'll never forget, Jim Villas¹⁹, who's still alive today, living on Long Island, written a lot of cookbooks, came in and I had met Jim- I had known him, maybe he had been here before, maybe my sister Adelaide had entertained him, and they knew each other. And Jim called up. I knew Jim too. When I'd go to New York, I'd call him up and ask him to go... out to dinner with me... so I knew him. And he called up and said, "I'm coming down, and I'm going to do this...foods tour in New Orleans, and want a great story out of Commander's." And I said, "Well, come along." And he said, "Well look, first thing that I want to tell you is I want to do a great Gumbo story." And I said, "Ok." So...I called Miss Jill, who was our lady who purchased everything, and I said, "Mister Villas, I think you might have met him, he's been here a lot. I want you to put every ingredient that goes in the Gumbo on that table right there." And she did. When he walked in, he said, "Ok, you got me, that's my vegetable story, huh?" I mean, "my Gumbo story" I said, "Looks pretty good to me." And he took it out on the patio, all the vegetables out on the patio, the day the photographer came... he wasn't there with him... and I think Paul was in the picture. I was thinking it was the first time Paul got national publicity. Of... certainly any merit. And I think that was the day and I said, "Ok, we can do this. You know, we can make this restaurant, not only as good as we want it to be, but we can make it worthy of recognition." And we kept going. It was fun! Can you imagine doing that? That's fun.

¹⁸ Yvonne Elaine Alciatore Blount (1937-2022) was the fourth generation of the Alciatore family to run Antoine's. As of 2024, her son, Rick Blount is the fifth generation owner.

¹⁹ James Villas (1938-2018) A champion of Southern cooking and prolific cookbook author and food writer, Villas won four prestigious James Beard awards over his career.

[02:28:52.06] JN: That's great... that's great... I think... I do have one last question about dress codes...

[02:29:02.13] Ella Brennan: Mhm.

[02:29:02.26] JN: In the drift of dress codes...

[02:29:04.04] Dottie Brennan: Wait a minute, I didn't hear. What?

[02:29:05.01] Ella Brennan: Dress codes.

[02:29:06.10] JN: Dress codes.

[02:29:06.29] Dottie Brennan: What did you say?

[02:29:09.09] Ella Brennan: He wants to know the... What do you want to know?

[02:29:12.04] JN: Well, I wanna know... I mean, there was sort of a tug-of-war with dress codes for a while.

[02:29:17.16] Ella Brennan: Still is.

[02:29:17.29] Dottie Brennan: Still is to this day.

[02:29:20.10] Ella Brennan: Still is. They'll stand in the front door now and say, "I'm sorry, we can't serve you." I read on the outside of our... who's restaurant was it the other day? No... I saw it on...television with...

[02:29:30.14] Dottie Brennan: With no flip-flops...no shorts, no tee shirts.

[02:29:33.07] Ella Brennan: No... you have to get that explicit. No shorts. No Flip-flops. No tank-shirts...

[02:29:41.22] Dottie Brennan: Hats on.

[02:29:43.14] Ella Brennan: No hats. Got to take your hat off. I'll never forget my brother Dick walking in the main dining room one day, and it's before we took the wall out. That was a long time ago. There was a deuce table against the wall, and there was a man and a woman sitting in there with his hat on. He had a coat and a tie on, but he had a hat on like... a dress hat, you would call it. So my brother walked over to him and said, "Would you mind taking your hat off, sir?" He looked at my brother like he was crazy, and didn't take his hat off. But everybody in the dining room had seen Dick go up there, Dick's Six-feet three. When he walks over to a table, you see him. Man didn't take his hat off.

[02:30:22.17] JN: I read a story about Bill Cosby coming to Commander's Palace.

[02:30:28.08] Ella Brennan: I don't remember that. What was that story?

[02:30:30.11] JN: About him wearing the coat that said "CP" on it.

[02:30:33.03] Ella Brennan: Yeah.

[02:30:33.10] JN: Yeah, and it being a certain amount of mirth about it.

[02:30:35.06] Ella Brennan: Well... I mean... I would have asked them all to put coats on. I mean... we had to.

[02:30:41.21] Dottie Brennan: For it to work, we thought it.

[02:30:42.29] Ella Brennan: What?

[02:30:43.07] Dottie Brennan: We thought people wouldn't steal them if we put "CP" on them.

[02:30:47.03] Ella Brennan: Yeah. They wouldn't... walk out with them on. They'd have the "CP," maybe they'd send them back. You know, they were blazers.

[02:30:52.26] Dottie Brennan: Yeah.

[02:30:53.14] Ella Brennan: And... they thought that they'd have their own coat on them. And we've lost many a coat. But the feeling always was, you know New Orleans is the sort of city where you go out to have dinner, you go out to... enjoy the food, enjoy your company, enjoy conversation. That's what New Orleans is all about. And sitting next to one of these... I mean, I'll never forget, my brother John was talking to one of the boys in the family, who was going someplace, and he didn't have a coat on. And John said, "You must be insane to go without a coat. And you should always have a blazer in the trunk of your car."

[02:31:39.03] Dottie Brennan: My daddy used to say that to the boys all the time. And we had to have a skirt.

[02:31:45.03] Ella Brennan: Oh, I'll never forget when the pants came along. And boy, are they wonderful things for women, look at me... you know, you've read all those stories about the skirts, but... the coats were the big deal. A very big deal. I'm trying to remember... any particular incident that... you didn't know the people, because the New Orleans people came with coats. It's that simple. They didn't think of coming without coats. But there were a lot of incidents at that front door. When people... "You're insulting me," and that kind of stuff. And you feel like saying, "Well you're insulting me," but you couldn't do that. Poor Dottie faced it for years. Dottie worked the front door of the restaurant from the time you came back from San Francisco, when your baby was born, was how many years ago?

[02:32:38.04] Dottie Brennan: ...fifty... six?

[02:32:42.00] Ella Brennan: See, Dottie was the youngest in the family, and she got married and went to San Francisco for two years. Wasn't that tough? And we sent her, every week, checks, to go out and eat. Eat in the best restaurants in San Francisco and tell us all about it.

[02:32:54.22] Dottie Brennan: They used the excuse...

[02:32:55.14] Ella Brennan: Huh?

[02:32:56.18] Dottie Brennan: That they needed the menu, so we had to go out and eat.

[02:32:58.19] Ella Brennan: Yeah, you should go to eat, and get the menu, and send the menu home.

[02:33:01.11] JN: Sounds like a real cross to bear.

[02:33:02.21] Ella Brennan: Oh, it was terrible.

[02:33:03.13] Dottie Brennan: It was a real cross.

[02:33:06.13] Ella Brennan: But the coat situation, when California went casual, boy, that shook up the world. Because New York still...

[02:33:13.28] Dottie Brennan: Well, Southern California was.

[02:33:15.22] Ella Brennan: All right, Southern California. Yeah. Not San Francisco. Southern California. But the people... and the '60's were horrible, with those people, you know, they'd come to the front door, and you'd just have to barricade the door until you came in. No room. And she did. And what she frequently says, I'd disappear, I'd run up to the attic, where our office... and let her face it.

[02:33:37.28] Dottie Brennan: Everybody thinks that Ella's this mean-faced strong person, she's not.

[02:33:43.26] Ella Brennan: She says I'm the biggest chicken.

[02:33:50.11] JN: Any closing thoughts?

[02:33:51.05] Ella Brennan: I don't think I have any thoughts.

[02:33:54.03] Dottie Brennan: What?

[02:33:54.14] Ella Brennan: I think- I don't think I have any thoughts.

[02:33:56.17] Dottie Brennan: On what?

[02:33:57.23] Ella Brennan: He said, "Do you have any finishing thoughts."

[02:33:59.16] Dottie Brennan: Oh.

[02:34:00.10] Ella Brennan: I said, I think we've covered the waterfront now.

[02:34:03.08] JN: Well, thank you very much.

[02:34:04.20] Ella Brennan: Speaking of the waterfront, that's a pretty nice river out there.

[02:34:07.10] JN: It's a great river.

[02:34:08.05] Dottie Brennan: It's wine time, if y'all would like to stay for a glass of wine.

[02:34:09.21] Ella Brennan: Yeah. Yeah, you'll have wine...

[02:34:14.08] Dottie Brennan: It's raining, you can't go home anyway.

[02:34:15.14] Ella Brennan: We'll all have a glass of wine.

[02:34:16.05] JN: Yeah. That sounds wonderful.

[02:34:17.28] Ella Brennan: Sure. And Dottie will go open some of our, what we call house wine...