

**ELLA BRENNAN**  
**New Orleans, LA**

\* \* \*

Date: April 13, 2005  
Location: Interviewee's home - New Orleans, LA  
Interviewer: Sarah O'Kelley  
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs  
Length: 47 minutes  
Project: SFA Founders

**[Begin Ella Brennan Interview]****00:00:00**

**Sarah O’Kelley:** Okay. So at first I’m just going to say, you know, my name is Sarah O’Kelley and today is the 13<sup>th</sup>—April 13, 2005. And we’re here in Ella Brennan’s home, and this is part of the Founding Members Project for Southern Foodways Alliance. And so I just need to verify that you know that you’re being recorded and people will be able to listen to the tape and read the transcripts of the interview, and so if y’all could just say you know I’ll sign the release and that’s—.

**00:00:38**

**Ella Brennan:** Fine. I’ll be happy to sign.

**00:00:39**

**SO:** Okay, great. So and y’all can you know—you know if y’all—both can like add into the different questions ‘cause we’re speaking not just with Ella but also with Ti Martin, her daughter. And okay, so first of all could you please state your name, age and occupation?

**00:00:58**

**EB:** Yeah. Ella Brennan, I was born in 1925, which makes me going to be eighty this year.

**00:01:12**

**SO:** And your current occupation? Some of these might seem like repetitive but they just want like a real—.

**00:01:18**

**EB:** I've been in the restaurant business since I was about seventeen, eighteen years old, and I attempt to be in the restaurant business to this day.

**00:01:27**

**Ti Martin:** Still in the restaurant business.

**00:01:29**

**SO:** Terrific. And where does your family come from?

**00:01:31**

**EB:** Oh. My mother and father's mother and father were born in **[inaudible]**. Their parents were born in Ireland. And I've been in New Orleans all my life; I've lived within—what six, eight blocks of this house. That's how I—except for very what—when we were teenagers we were up on Eleanor Street. But we were—this is—we consider this neighborhood our—our home.

**00:02:03**

**SO:** Terrific. Okay. And before you—I do just want to—. Okay. So what was it like when you grew up here in New Orleans?

**00:02:11**

**EB:** Well you know I've been a lot of places in these eighty years and I have to say to you, I—I see so many wonderful things in so many other places, but this is home. And New Orleans is an awfully attractive city with so many outstanding people to be friends with and to meet. If you're in New Orleans you meet people just about everywhere constantly.

**00:02:45**

**TM:** When you were young there weren't a lot of restaurants.

**00:02:49**

**EB:** No. There were not a lot of restaurants. There was three major big ones and then the couple—two others maybe almost and then two neighborhood restaurants, of course, but we were—restaurants—it was really the beginning of the restaurant business in New Orleans. We were the—I think, let's see, yeah, we were the—the really first Americans in the major restaurant business in New Orleans. Everybody was born in France, and they'd come over here to—for whatever reason - and we were considered the up-start but we were determined—I was taught by my older brother that the first thing you do is make friends with people that are in your business. So it worked—it didn't take very long to make friends with all the people in the restaurant business and we became sort of a nice knit group that we could call upon each other and talk to each other. And we became a restaurant community. It was very small. And over the years it has grown very, very good. But we still try, and my daughter Ti sitting here with us is very interested in the same things that I am. She's—she likes to know the people in the business; she likes to be friends with them. And the chefs—and what was my original question?

**00:04:35**

**SO:** Yeah; growing up in New Orleans and—well, what do you miss—?

**00:04:38**

**EB:** Well the growing up in New Orleans was very important because the food in New Orleans in the homes was extraordinary—at least in my home. And my mother was an extraordinary cook and we had a black woman who worked with us in the house, Leona Nichols and she was a fantastic cook, too. So every day there was this feast on the table and I thought everybody lived that way.

**00:05:07**

**SO:** And like this kind of ties in. So the next question is like what do you miss most about those days?

**00:05:13**

**EB:** I guess—the good *[Laughs]* as I said, we jokingly say we don't eat in restaurants, but that was the family sitting around the table, whatever neighbor popped in, whatever friend popped in; the table was the place at dinnertime and it was lots of fun. It's where we spent the most time with our father and—

**00:05:42**

**TM:** And how old were you when the TV—? I mean that was—?

**00:05:45**

**EB:** Oh TV—oh, TV well was right after World War II.

**00:05:49**

**TM:** So all those years.

**00:05:49**

**EB:** So I guess there was no TV until about I'd say the early, early, early fifties before you had a TV in your house, so we were in business for about eight or nine years before that. And so people's entertainment was around the dinner table. People would visit, "Who are you going to have dinner with tonight, what are you going to have for dinner, so and so is coming in town next week, what are you going to do about dinner"; I mean the whole thing was dinner and conversations and the center—center point of the meal was always the food, who was cooking what, what we were going to have, and we were very fortunate in New Orleans—hunting, fishing was a big thing in families. And you had—always had great something there to really cook and—and work with.

**00:06:48**

And I think my mother had a vegetable man that came up to the door, a man who used to deliver in the morning the milk and the eggs and the Creole creamed cheese every morning to your door. And I'm trying to think what else—bread was delivered and it was just different than it is today. You knew those merchants; frequently they would be sitting at the kitchen table talking to your mother. You walked into the room and they'd stop in and have their coffee or if there was something—the iced-tea and you—I mean food was a very focal point, major focal point in my life.

**00:07:28**

**SO:** That's great. And what did you think—or how have things changed here since then? I mean you talked a little bit about that but maybe—

**00:07:42**

**EB:** Well I think the way we live today is very differently in the fact that a lot of women work and there's an awful lot more eating out. I think people still try to on occasions eat at home on weekends and things like that. You have a lot of men cooking. But basically it's a big restaurant town and local people—local people eat out or they dine out frequently. And when they're dining out it's generally with friends, with friends, with friends around the table, conversation with friends. I—I just made a list last night of people I hadn't seen in a while and all I want to do is sit down and have dinner with them and each one I have a different subject I want to—I'd like to talk to them about, something they are very interested in and very much a part of and I want to know more about that.

**00:08:39**

**SO:** All right; and what did you want to be when you grew up when you were younger?

**00:08:44**

**EB:** I had no idea. I came—it was 1943 and I just graduated from high school and the War was—World War II was still going on, so there wasn't a lot of this thinking about the future and where you were going and what you were going to do and it was—what was going to happen when the War was over. And I was very young, so I was much more interested in having a good time and being with my friends and enjoying life as a kid at that time, and I didn't really think about what I was going to be and I fell into the restaurant business. And that was—

00:09:28

**TM:** Because of your brother.

00:09:29

**EB:** —yeah my brother, older brother, fifteen years older than I was, bought this restaurant with my father and I got involved in it and I've been there ever since. It never changed. I mean it just was a way of life. And it was very, very—I would say if you have to work for a living it's a very nice way to do it.

00:09:53

**SO:** Well yeah; now I've—actually well my next question was how did you get into the business, which—through your brother and then the next question was exactly what your job entails, what it has entailed, and do you like it? What do you like most about it?

00:10:10

**EB:** Well when I first went into the restaurant business, I—I—we, I, us, family group—knew nothing about the restaurant business. My brother was very interested in buying a business that my father could retire into and enjoy himself and—which he did. Believe me he did; the last twelve years he was like—he was in the restaurant business and he had a marvelous time. We did not know the restaurant business, but we fell into the situation where we had two unbelievably great cooks, the chefs, Jack Ames and Paul **[inaudible]**, and I spent a lot of times with those guys, not all me, but my family; we all got to know these men very well and they taught us everything they knew about kitchens, about cooking, about how to build the kitchen, how to



build a staff, how to write menus, how to—a lot about wine started happening in that particular time. And so you just kept working and learning. You read every book you could get your hands on. You met very—you were very fortunate because your location, where we were located down in the French Quarter we met a tremendous number of people traveling from all over the world. And I was very fortunate to have three, four, five other people mentor me over the years. I could always call on them for whatever I needed them for or I needed to know or they would send me what they thought I needed to know.

00:11:47

**TM:** Like what ma?

00:11:48

**EB:** Well let's see; I think—

00:11:51

**SO:** Roy—?

00:11:51

**EB:** Huh?

00:11:51

**SO:** Roy—?

00:11:53

**EB:** Roy [**Inaudible**] could not have been nicer to me. He was a neighbor and an extraordinarily friendly generous helpful type person. I was very, very—

**00:12:07**

**SO:** A mentor?

**00:12:07**

**EB:** Well it was more Ralph. Ralph Alexis was this man who taught us how to figure out how to make money. We were doing fairly well with the restaurant business before we decided to figure out how to make money at it. And then I—some out of town people came along that were—just couldn't have been more delightful. Lucius Beebe was a very famous bon vivant in America; he was one of the first of the *New Yorker* and he wrote this glorious column in—in *Gourmet* in its very early stages. And so he was very, very helpful, very warm and friendly and directed you in what you should be reading and what you should be doing—talked through. We have I guess the most important thing I can say about any of those people in that—or others that I can name that the twenty-one families in New York City—very generous with their time in letting us hang out in their restaurant and they would come to New Orleans and you'd go there and spend a lot of time up there. And I'm trying to think who else was particularly anxious to help with the food-end of it. Well James—Jim Beard, Helen McCulley; I met what's his name, the very nice French chef that we liked at Helen's house when we were both in our early twenties? What's his name—?

**00:13:44**

He—he runs the French Academy Cooking Academy in New York, the television star?

00:13:52

**TM:** Oh Jacques?

00:13:52

**EB:** Yeah; Jacques Pepin. Jacques and I were both learning from Jim Beard and Helen McCulley. Helen was one of the outstanding women editors at that time. She ran *McCall Magazine* for years and then she—what else did Helen do? She wrote many cookbooks and then they would introduce you to people as they were coming through New Orleans and it seemed everybody was coming to New Orleans because World War II was either just over and people were—Europe wasn't—nobody was traveling yet; people hadn't gotten their lives back together. We had a few people that were in Paris or in France in the restaurant business, who had got there somehow or another on the GI and stayed. But mostly people came home and so we were all trying to start up in the restaurant business and everybody was helping everybody out because we all needed a lot of help 'cause we were very intimidated by the French. We thought only the French could cook.

00:15:02

**SO:** Uh-hmm. And where—and how did you—you learn to cook? You said you were learning—?

00:15:08

**EB:** No, I'm not a cook.

00:15:09

**SO:** You don't? Okay.

**00:15:10**

**EB:** No, I'm not a cook. I'm a restaurateur. The restaurateur is the umbrella of the whole thing.

The—

**00:15:22**

**TM:** Of course she wrote all the menus and—

**00:15:24**

**EB:** Well yeah; that's what I'm saying. You write the menus. You study to write the menus.

You write one and what else you study and become knowledgeable about—about the wine list.

**00:15:38**

**TM:** Is that why we drink? Just checking.

**00:15:41**

**EB:** You have to drink wine to like wine. So then there was an awful lot of—the learning of all of that and then learning about people, how to work with people, and how to build a team of people, and how to make customers, how to make your restaurant do well—all these little talents, it's like a small business, you got to know it all so you had to do it all. And I have family, brothers and sisters who were there all the time. And one of the nicest things about when I was a kid in the restaurant business was that we did not have to worry about having a life. I mean we—we were a family and we would take time off and enjoy ourselves and everybody—but there was

always three or four of us at work. And we each did what we felt was—the thing we went to naturally, the thing that we felt we could do and so we all had our various parts of the business. And but we all tried to learn it all and it was a family affair, small—you know how a small business—.

**00:16:55**

**SO:** Uh-hmm. When did Commander's open since—?

**00:16:59**

**EB:** We didn't go Commander's—I spent thirty years at Brennan's on Bourbon Street to Royal Street and then thirty years up here so it's been about sixty years.

**00:17:09**

**TM:** Commander's Palace, the restaurant opened in 1880. And this year is the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Commander's being opened we just realized. And but they bought it in 1969 and came to work here day in and day out in 1974.

**00:17:26**

**EB:** Yeah, so we—.

**00:17:29**

**SO:** And devoted all your time to—?

**00:17:31**

**EB:** All of it.

**00:17:31**

**TM:** And we've always had other restaurants but this was always home-base.

**00:17:34**

**EB:** Yeah; this was home-base. This was my home-base. I mean I helped as much as I could in the other restaurants but this is where you know the heart was.

**00:17:46**

**SO:** And could you describe when y'all bought it like you know when you took over the like kind of reopening of it?

**00:17:56**

**EB:** We actually didn't have a reopening. We bought it and we just sort of—what do I say—we just sort of I got—as I always said I came out of my front gate which was over on Prytania Street and instead of going left I went right and walked over to the restaurant and just went to work. And at one point in—in—we sat around and we talked every day, every night, out on the patio and visit and we would say, “What are we going—?” I finally burst into tears one day and said, “I can't work here; I'm not proud of this place.” And so we just sat down and we decided—my brothers and sisters and we decided, “Well, what are we going to do?” We said, “Well, okay; we're going to build here the best restaurant we know how to build and hopefully we can make the best, best, best restaurant we can make.” And we've been trying to do that ever since.

**00:18:45**

And you never quite reach your goal. You get there and then you bump it a little higher you know.

**00:18:54**

**SO:** Yeah; and could you describe what the style of Commander’s Palace—I mean speaking about the one here like it’s the food and the physical appearance?

**00:19:03**

**EB:** Can my daughter answer—?

**00:19:06**

**SO:** Sure; uh-hm.

**00:19:07**

**TM:** Describe the food and the physical appearance?

**00:19:08**

**SO:** Uh-hmm, like the style.

**00:19:10**

**TM:** Okay, the style, well we call—mom and them made up a word years ago for the food that is called ode to Creole and we used to always have like ode to cuisine in France or whatever, so they made up that. They were always trying to do it and we’re doing the same thing today which is to evolve Creole and New Orleans cuisine and do the best Creole and New Orleans cuisine

that—that there can be and—and do it on a high level but constantly pushing the boundaries, pushing, pushing, pushing, because you can't ever stop and say that's it; this is New Orleans food; that's the end of it because it's always been evolving and I think people who don't keep evolving are really making a mistake. At least that's our philosophy that that's what we wanted this place to do.

**00:19:54**

And as far as the appearance, they have dubbed this architecture here, Dottie and Mom and Adelaide they call it Victorian coo-coo and that's because it's just kind of a crazy old building [*Laughs*] and they decided to paint it aqua blue when they took over after it had been tasteful beige and since then I have to say that you can go to the paint store now and ask for Commander's blue and you can get it [*Laughs*] and the whole neighborhood has a lot more fun colors than the day they did that. And the day they painted it aqua blue I came by on my bicycle and saw a huge patch of aqua blue on the building and pedaled home curiously and announced to mom that I couldn't possibly go to school the next day if they were going to paint the building that color because it was an embarrassment because every house was brown or white or beige.

**00:20:39**

**EB:** No brown.

**00:20:42**

**TM:** You know that brown I'm talking about, really light, light, light beige, really I guess. Anyway but that's the kinds of things they did. And then they—they just kept pushing it you know and improved the food and created a jazz brunch and just went from there.



**00:20:58**

**SO:** Uh-hm; great and then if you could also tell me about—because I know this has been a big, big part of the success about the employees that you’ve had and like standout employees especially and the chefs obviously.

**00:21:10**

**EB:** Well it really did start with Jack Ames and Paul [**inaudible**]. They were just fantastic for many, many years. And we made the mistake, and I’ll say mistake—loved the guys, hated what they did, brought a couple people over from Europe who were German and oh that was a big—.

**00:21:30**

**TM:** If you never see Cecil again that’ll be all right. [**Laughs**]

**00:21:31**

**EB:** If I never see Cecil again it will be all right with me. And these two particular—but they did teach us things along the way. Everybody that came and worked in the restaurant taught you things, but the—the Germans taught a lot about organization in the kitchen and about how to make things flow more easily, how to be able to handle the amount of business we were doing better and as I always say, every system in Commander’s came from somebody working there—they came up with the idea of why don’t we? So why don’t we and why don’t we and why don’t we, and that’s how we got where we are.

**00:22:10**

And then we had, let’s see. At Commander’s we had Paul—No, at Commander’s we had Paul Prudhomme came and worked with us for about eight years and did a magnificent job of

teaching and helping to begin the ode Creole phrase and the fresh, fresh products. The country had gone through a period after World War II where so much was considered modern to use frozen foods.

**00:22:44**

**TM:** And canned.

**00:22:44**

**EB:** And canned; whatever you can see it in packaged in. And Paul was part of the big drive to get us food—use all fresh products from farmers, locally. And we had these, what we called foodie meetings. That’s how the word foodie came about. In fact, I think it was created at Commander’s Palace. We would sit around every week; we used to do it on Wednesday afternoons after lunch and eventually it got to Saturday morning, but we would sit around and all we’d do is talk food. Nothing else could go on; if we three were in the meeting it would be, “What are you thinking about food? I mean what—what have you seen and what have you heard; what—what’s on your mind or whether you love what we’re doing or you hate what we’re doing or have you been any place, like something better, have you—?” And we just talked food. We traveled a tremendous amount and went around the country eating and every conceivable restaurant.

**00:23:48**

And I keep forgetting the questions.

**00:23:51**

**TM:** What was your original question there?

**00:23:53**

**SO:** Yeah; yeah—

**00:23:56**

**EB:** Yeah, we had Paul and then when Paul was there, I believe he told us that his wife had opened this place, and we all knew it and he said start looking for somebody. I'll start looking for somebody for you. Well we found Emeril Lagasse. And Emeril stayed with me for about eight years and was a tremendous chef, I mean in the sense that he had this passion and this love of people, and we Creole-ized him. His name was—well I won't say—he asked me not to say that the other day. So I won't say that. Somebody—. Emeril Lagasse—

**00:24:38**

**TM:** Didn't know anything about Creole food.

**00:24:39**

**EB:** —didn't know anything about Creole food. So we took him by the hand and took him to very restaurant in New Orleans, the holes in the walls to the—“This is how you boil crawfish” and you know out on the lake and “This is how you eat the best food New Orleans has to offer.” And we had our meetings and they weren't just on Wednesday; that's how we got to Wednesday and Saturday and the next thing you know we were talking every day all day long about food. And Emeril—we Creole-ized Emeril, and he did wonderful things with us. We enjoyed working with him. And he's still a dear friend.

**00:25:17**

We now have—then we found after Emeril we found Jamie Shannon who was in our kitchen for about eight years before he became chef. Emeril had hired him as a Sous chef. He was a kid who had come down from New Jersey and had gone to the—what do you call it?

**00:25:36**

**TM:** It was CIA and then—

**00:25:38**

**EB:** CIA in—

**00:25:40**

**TM:** —in Trumps.

**00:25:41**

**EB:** And he had—one of his apprenticeship jobs was Ivana Trump's and then he decided he was going to get in his car and drive around the country and learn all American cuisine. Well he got to New Orleans and he never left. He stayed here eight years and then he was chef for about eight, huh?

**00:25:56**

**TM:** No; I can't remember, like maybe—something, I think it was twelve years.

**00:26:06**

**EB:** Twelve, so he was with us about twenty years, but—so let's say—

**00:26:09**

**TM:** And that's about right because he was forty when he died.

**00:26:11**

**EB:** And he died just—he was going to make forty and he died. He got lung cancer and it was a terrible thing. He and Ti were very close. They had just written a cookbook together. Right then they were out in an airplane going to sell the cookbook. You know you go to bookstores around and they were out doing that and she noticed he was limping and he had a terrible, terrible—and about nine months and he died. He was absolutely on his way to being the number one chef in this country. He was just that good.

**00:26:52**

And then we had after Jamie this young man that Jamie hired—or you hired?

**00:26:58**

**TM:** Jamie hired him.

**00:26:59**

**EB:** But he worked with you.

**00:27:01**

**TM:** His first job was here and then he came—Tory McPhail we're talking about—came to work with me in Palace Café and was a Sous-chef with me and then he left to go to Europe and work in the islands.

**00:27:14****EB:** Yeah.**00:27:13**

**TM:** He likes the island life. Anyway we found him there and brought him back to Las Vegas and he was a Sous-chef and we opened a restaurant. Well anyway when Jamie was sick we knew what we—you know what we were going to be faced with and so we brought Tory back and I think a lot of people were at the time like you know, “Who is this new guy?” Well I had worked with Tory off and on for twelve years, so he wasn’t new to me or any of my family. And we knew what we were going to do there and we’re four years into that now.

**00:27:43**

**EB:** And it’s the same way; you constantly have your food meetings, you talk nothing but food, you talk, talk, talk. You write menus together. You—you clip everything you read that interests you about food and—there’s this big fish article for you and remind me to give it to you because it’s important. And it’s—

**00:28:06**

**TM:** The thing about Tory was that you know at this stage of the game to come into this job, bless his heart, the first day of the job and I knew it would happen. The first day on the job he had interviews coming in from you know around the country and here and the local television station wanted to come film him that first pre-meal meeting you know—whatever and we had just gone through all this—all this stuff here and wanted to have our own little moment. But we

knew we weren't going to be allowed that so—and then we had this television show that Jamie had originally been starting and we were trying to save that. So I used to take Tory; first we would go to my house and practice so nobody was around and then we would—started coming here like four in the morning and I got a big television camera just like the one they used and a television set and it would be just he and I in the kitchen because he had never even done a demonstration. Most of them haven't when they become chefs. And so we would practice and I would film it and then we would look at right then and film it and look at it right then so that we could attempt not to lose the television show that we were all enjoying, showing people how to go hunting and fishing and back. So he had so much to deal with [*Laughs*] at first and he did extraordinary with that but he's done extraordinary ever since.

**00:29:19**

**EB:** Everything he's done is extraordinary. He's been one of the extraordinary people. We've been very fortunate to have found—or they found us; we found them, I don't know how it works—to have people who have such a passionate—passionate and intellectual interest in food.

**00:29:35**

**TM:** Gentleman for such a young guy you know and a pleasure to be around and one of the most positive people you'll ever meet. So anyway that's some of the employees. But I think a lot of the great employees that this company has ever had are here right now and they're not all chefs. I mean Steven Wooters has been the backbone of this company as General Manager and Operations of all of them, of our little group anyway for fifteen years. And there's just a host of people—

**00:30:01**

**EB:** And then Tracey [?] could be chef anywhere in the country. I mean he's just outstanding and he's number two here. And but you need two people in a restaurant like Commander's because we go seven days a week, two shifts a day.

**00:30:16**

**TM:** And then Jorge Torero [?] running the front is just exceptional service fellow and again a young gentleman. So that's a few.

**00:30:26**

**SO:** Yeah; that's terrific. And then if you could describe the clientele as another big part of it?

**00:30:37**

**TM:** Well I think it runs the gamut here. You know that's a fun thing about working here is you know we love that we have a great local following you know and every day it's people you know and people you don't even know from here and they're here just because it's Tuesday or because they're celebrating. Today they're here for the beautiful patio and they knew they could come sit on the patio or they're here because they know it's strawberry season and we'll have strawberry—. So the people—they run the gamut from you know Aunt Bessie who comes once a year on special occasions to, you know, we have major business types and politicians.

**00:31:11**



**EB:** There's—about that—. [*Speaking at Once*] The, whoever's president of Tulane generally eats at Commander's a lot and we had a lot of the faculty. We'd get the Medical School people that go to LSU.

**00:31:23**

**TM:** It's a broad range and there's a huge swath of visitors that we're lucky enough to get and then the food world, you know; they all come parading through and a lot of them—and recently it's been you know you're looking at somebody and going, “How do I know that lady? I wonder if I went to school with her or she's a good customer.” It turns out they are some actress. There's so much filming going on here they just look familiar to you but you know you have these characters. So—

**00:31:45**

**EB:** Well you do get to meet a lot of show-business people and people who write books and because they travel and the first thing they do when they get someplace is look for a meal. And when they get there they make friends.

**00:31:57**

**TM:** Yeah; for brunch the other day there was Johnny Apple who is the *New York Times* writer, so it's just kind of constantly like that.

**00:32:01**

**EB:** But he's an old friend. And you get—you just become friends with people from all over the country who become—when you eat a lot in a restaurant and we know you well we call you a

regular. Well there are a lot of regulars from out of town who are always here. You know they're coming here from Memphis or they're coming in from Atlanta or Houston. And then we do have a restaurant in Houston which sends us customers back and forth. My son runs that restaurant over there; it's called Brennan's of Houston. And they do very well. They're in the top two or three all the time in Houston. And they—they—they do very, very well.

**00:32:43**

**TM:** Texas Creole—

**00:32:43**

**EB:** Texas Creole.

**00:32:44**

**TM:** —and been there since the sixties.

**00:32:46**

**SO:** And if you could just tell me a little bit about the menu in terms of food and pricing and how it's changed over the years?

**00:32:54**

**TM:** Well pricing real quick, what we try to do is offer the best food in town at not-the-most expensive in town. In fact, we try to be—whoever the most expensive restaurants are in town, we try to be a good tier below them in our pricing. Now for example, right now you can come here and get a three-course meal for thirty-two dollars at dinner all the time. I mean you can also

order craziness, foie gras and caviar and whatever and have you know—or a seventy-five dollar tasting menu for seven courses or whatnot, but we've always, always, always tried to offer value for the—so the regular New Orleansais or whoever can you know come here often.

**00:33:36**

And then at lunch we do this crazy thing; it's thirteen or fourteen for two courses. I mean it's just a steal. You can't go to Copeland's for that you know or any of these chains, so—.

**00:33:45**

**EB:** We have twenty-five cent martinis, which we have had since Bourbon Street.

**00:33:48**

**TM:** Well we didn't have it for a long, long time, and now we have it again for like the last four years and it's just kept. The money is probably—a lot of twenty-five cent martinis and it's just hysterical and it's just fun. And we didn't think it would work frankly but thank god we're consistent and we tried it again and I don't think we'll ever be able to get rid of it, it's been such a bit hit, so—. But yeah; we try to really offer value. We know that we can charge a lot more than we do and get away with it but we don't. It's just not our philosophy.

**00:34:14**

**EB:** Plus we try and make the restaurant fun. As hard as we work on the quality of the food and the wine list, and that takes a lot of our time, service, training, developing people, service—we want it to be fun when people come in. We don't want to have a stuffy restaurant. We want people to walk in the front door and hello. How are you? Good to see you. Come on in, you

know; relaxed and what—what can I say about that? We want it to be a fun restaurant where you get a great meal but you can have a good time. We don't genuflect in front of them.

**00:34:50**

**TM:** We don't want you to be intimidated.

**00:34:53**

**SO:** Uh-hm; and what about—I know y'all have grown from—I mean into lots of restaurants now between your you know entire family—if you could just tell me briefly about the other restaurant and what the—?

**00:35:05**

**EB:** [Inaudible]

**00:35:07**

**TM:** Well I mean our whole group right here right now is Brennan's—Commander's New Orleans, Commander's in Las Vegas, which is four—three years old, and Brennan's of Houston and our new baby café Adelaide down in the Loew's Hotel is only about fifteen months old. So that's the little group that we operate but over the years they had—Mr. B's and I started you know Palace Café with my cousins Dickie and Brad. Dickie runs that now and he has Bourbon House and Dickie Brennan's Restaurant too and Ralph's [Inaudible] Grill and Bacco and—.

**00:35:43**

**EB:** Bourbon House—

**00:35:43**

**TM:** Bourbon House he had and you know [*Speaking at Once*]—. We've got one in LA; you know—

**00:35:57**

**EB:** But the children in our family grew up all—except the education and all worked. They tried to drive somewhere to go, what you do as far as they all went away and came back. They wanted to be in the restaurant business. I think they thought we were having so much fun.

**00:36:23**

**SO:** That's great; yeah. And what about the future as far as just future plans for business, yourselves?

**00:36:31**

**TM:** You know our little group anyway, you know we're not interested in doing a gazillion restaurants but we—we are all—we always listen to interesting opportunities and they get presented to us you know fairly regularly. And some we pursue ourselves on occasion, so there will be other restaurants over time.

**00:36:48**

You know right now we also have some cookbooks in the works, a couple different books and things in the works, one based on the hunting and fishing that we talk about so much in the television show, so we have a lot of things like that. And you know the television itself

takes a lot of our time and then the—you know the books take time and then the restaurants and the new restaurants, so we—

**00:37:12**

**EB:** The restaurants need a lot of attention still. I mean it's not the sort of thing that you can put it in gear and forget it and it's going to take care of itself. It doesn't work that way. You've got to be there and you've got to know what's going on and you've got to know your people very well.

**00:37:30**

**TM:** I knew one, Café Adelaide—just one—you know *Esquire Magazine* named it in the top twenty best restaurants in the country and Bon Appétit named it in the top fifty restaurants in the country which always aggravated me that Commander's is never in that list but Café Adelaide got in that list this year. So—so that's been good and that takes a ton of time and we're going to keep playing around with it and evolving and developing Café Adelaide as one of the great, great **[inaudible]** chefs.

**00:37:55**

**EB:** He's a great chef.

**00:37:58**

**TM:** New Orleans boy, so all that and you know and then Commander's Las Vegas. You know we may do something else out there and we have a wonderful team who came from here, Brad Brennan, **[Inaudible]** son runs it and Mike Smith, Carlos Guia from here. You know they had all

been from here—running it and doing a heck of a job, so—. We’ll do other stuff but you know—

**00:38:19**

**SO:** Yeah, time will tell.

**00:38:19**

**TM:** Yeah, right.

**00:38:21**

**SO:** And do you have any regrets? Is there anything you would have done differently?

**00:38:27**

**TM:** Do we have enough time on that tape for that? [*Laughs*]

**00:38:31**

**EB:** Well, I think everybody, when you reflect on your life, you could have done some things differently. But I guess if I—the truth of the matter is that it’s been pretty good. And we’ve enjoyed it and—it hasn’t been pretty good; it’s been extraordinarily good. I mean where do you get to work with people that you really care for, where you get to work with—you get to meet so many exciting people in the dining room, just plain ordinary great people as customers? You’re exposed to—you can travel a lot and go see what’s going on. Steve is headed for Spain is where you were telling me he’s going right, trying black fish. He’s had two trips already, so I hope he gets there and—.

**00:39:20**

**TM:** You know for the businesses we—you know it's always a deal here you—you could skip that one, you know but there's been a lot more that you passed on that you think back later, "Oh, glad I passed on that one." *[Laughs]* And we missed a lot of bad ones and we've missed a few good ones, so you know.

**00:39:40**

**EB:** Yeah; there's always the—you know it's just an exciting business. It's very challenging. People ask me, "How can you do the same thing every day for sixty years?" I said, "You don't. It's—it's a challenge every day."

**00:39:53**

**TM:** I had somebody call today and wants us to do a restaurant—and we're not going to do it. Most of them are bad deals, you know but—.

**00:40:01**

**EB:** She didn't even tell me about this one.

**00:40:02**

**TM:** Well it's not worth it. *[Laughs]*

**00:40:06**



**SO:** Well about do you have any favorite moments or memories? I'm sure there's lots again but—

**00:40:11**

**TM:** Louie.

**00:40:15**

**EB:** Louie?

**00:40:15**

**TM:** Armstrong.

**00:40:17**

**EB:** Oh. [*Phone Rings*] I'm a Louie Armstrong fan and I—at one point we were still on Bourbon Street and it was when television was all live and very new. And we had—had the pleasure of—there was a show done in the intersection of Bourbon and [*Inaudible*] Streets and Louie Armstrong was the—was going to be—it was called *The Comedy Hour* and he was going to be the lead musician on the show. He arrived on this Sunday and went downstairs and started playing wherever he was going to be on camera and we were standing up on the balcony of the restaurant looking down into the street. And it was like the pied piper; he played *Way Down Yonder in New Orleans* and I mean it was—there wasn't anybody with a dry eye.

**00:41:17**

**TM:** Standing on the corner by the Absinthe House?

**00:41:18**

**EB:** Yeah; between the Absinthe House and—Vieux Carré – or across the street from Vieux Carré. And he was right there in the middle of the street and it was just one of the most thrilling experiences because he played his heart out. And it just was exciting, exciting; it was one of the—it was sort of a spontaneously wonderful thing.

**00:41:39**

Other good things that happened; I kind of liked the James Beard—they picked us the best restaurant. No; they picked—

**00:41:48**

**TM:** The most outstanding restaurant in America and I think we got it maybe the third or fourth time they gave it.

**00:41:53**

**EB:** Yeah; whatever—like the third one they gave out.

**00:41:55**

**TM:** When the—when the James Beard Awards came along, what was exciting about that was the first time that your peers were voting for you instead of—believe me, it's lovely when whatever magazine says that you're the top this or the top that and, in fact, in just last month's issue or this month's issue of *GQ Magazine* wrote an article unbeknownst to us that said ten restaurants that still matter, you know, restaurants that had been around—number one, Commander's Palace, number two, French Laundry. So I mean that's kind of fun. So when you

get those things—but it's a-magazine, a-person deciding this and you take it and you're thrilled. But when all of the sudden thousands of people across the whole country are voting on—

**00:42:35**

**EB:** People in the business.

**00:42:35**

**TM:** —yeah people in the business so you figure they have a clue, you know I mean sure there's favoritism and stuff but that was just—that had never happened in our industry before. And so it was a really, really big deal to get that national award you know the first few times out you know.

**00:42:51**

**EB:** And I think it was the next year or the next year that we got the best service in the country.

**00:42:56**

**TM:** The best service award and Jamie won—.

**00:42:59**

**EB:** So that's fun.

**00:42:59**

**TM:** And that—even Tory was nominated for best new chef you know maybe his first or second year here. And I remember I had the phone call standing at the front door and I go running

through the kitchen and he's just standing there and I started hugging him. And he's like, "What?" *[Laughs]* So those things are so much fun.

**00:43:16**

**EB:** You know because we like it so much we're—we're passionate about it. We work hard.

**00:43:20**

**TM:** But there's so many fun just regular—any old night can be a lot of fun in the restaurant. And just to go back to one where we talked about great employees that the restaurant has, we can't—we can't fail to mention George Ricoh.

**00:43:33**

**EB:** Oh god.

**00:43:33**

**TM:** Last year who was—had been at Commander's before our family, I think forty-four years or forty-two years and he—he was the maitre d' at the end of all—.

**00:43:42**

**EB:** He wasn't that old; he started as a very young kid in his early teens.

**00:43:46**

**TM:** Had a heart attack—

**00:43:46**

**EB:** As a bus boy.

**00:43:47**

**TM:** —and died this past year, I mean like eight months ago. So anyway he—and what makes me think of him when you talk about favorite memories and fun, George was an absolute blast to work with and the customers loved him and we loved him and he was bad too but he was fun to work with. [*Laughs*] So a lot of fun—oh silly bad; you know—so.

**00:44:10**

**EB:** But you know working with some great, great, great people and we've always tried our best—somebody said to me recently, oh somebody—George I guess—he had died and we had to find somebody to take his place and they said, “It must be awful to train people to work with them always and then they leave and go someplace else.” I said, “No; it's very much like people come in and they learn as much as they can learn and if they find a place where they can go and learn some more you got to allow them the opportunity. I mean you can't get angry with them for moving on.”

**00:44:53**

**TM:** We got a spot for them, we keep them. If not you go on and how can we help you?

**00:44:58**

**EB:** I mean it's a grow and go. You know it's like you're a doctor or a lawyer that's what they seem to do in those professions.

**00:45:03**

**TM:** It's not like a place where people leave and they're mad at each other. It's not; no.

**00:45:08**

**EB:** Oh no; we don't operate that way, no. Even we got one young man right now who is getting ready to go to New York.

**00:45:16**

**TM:** Did he come out?

**00:45:17**

**EB:** Chris, Chris Lusk.

**00:45:22**

**TM:** Oh Chris Lusk is going—yeah and we're sending Alex to London for—.

**00:45:25**

**EB:** And Alex is going to London and Chris Lusk is going to go to New York. And I said, "Now, remember; if you don't get the job you want, I know where I can get you a job and I know he needs you right now." So it's nice to have that feeling; they're leaving but they're not—they can come back.

**00:45:44**

**TM:** Yeah; you can get a lot of good meals that way—go and visit. [*Laughs*]

**00:45:48**

**EB:** Yeah; we could visit. Like all our kids went with Emeril one year and opened some of his places but that was—people said, “Did you get mad about that?” I said, “Why would I get mad about that?” You know we don’t think that way. We go on and we get some new blood, fresh young guy, let’s go and see what we can do, so—.

**00:46:10**

**SO:** Well is there anything else you’d like to add just about your life or the restaurant or—?

**00:46:18**

**EB:** We covered the waterfront.

**00:46:21**

**SO:** Yeah; I think that was really good. I think that really is a lot of great information and I know people enjoy this you know from—for years. And so this is the end of our interview with Ella Brennan and Ti Martin. Thank you.

**00:46:36**

**[End Ella Brennan Interview]**