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FEATURES

An American Harvest

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By Brian P.J. Cronin

Photographed by Dkol Photography

An American Harvest

With European-style fine dining on the wane, a celebrated chef comes to the Hudson Valley to discover what's next

Terrance Brennan was barely a teenager when he realized that he wanted to be a chef, but the epiphany wasn't about food.

His father retired early from the Central Intelligence Agency, bought a small restaurant in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, DC, and enlisted his son to help make pizzas and sandwiches. "It was the environment that got me on working in the kitchen," he said. "My dad was always singing and whistling while we were working together. It was fun. I didn't know that I was also developing a passion for food."

That sense of fun and adrenaline carried the young Brennan through high school jobs, from firing hundreds of rounds of shot at night at the local steakhouse for the hotel where the chefs did everything from carving beets into delicate roses to paring knives to shredding giant blocks of ice into the shape of a swan with chain saws. But the hotel was also where Brennan first realized how brutal a career in the kitchen could be. Mentors he admired were fired at the drop of a hat for no reason. Eighteen-hour work days, 5,000 covers a day, always working holidays and weekends. "I was close to the executive sous chef there," said Brennan. "He had three kids he never saw. I forced him to let me work Christmas in his place one year so that he could spend the day with his kids. Right there and then I made a decision: I wanted to be so good at what I did that no one was ever going to fire me, and that I could take Christmas off without worrying about my job. And for that to happen, I needed to get into a fine-dining restaurant and learn as much as I could."

For that, Brennan knew he had to go to New York City. Only he didn't know anyone in New York or the names of the fine-dining restaurants there. And in the pre-Internet age of the 1980s, there wasn't any easy way for him to do research. So he grabbed a stack of *Gourmet* and *Food & Wine* magazines and wrote letters of inquiry to any New York restaurant that had ads in them, even though he didn't know anything about these places.

He got only one response. On European-style stationery, with a fancy letterhead that spelled out "Lutèce," a two-sentence letter: "I don't have an opening in my brigade at the moment. But if you are ever in New York, stop by my place." It was signed André Soltner.

Brennan didn't know that Soltner was one of the most celebrated French chefs in the world, and that Lutèce was New York's most revered temples of French cuisine. He didn't even know what a brigade was. But he knew that New York City was willing to meet him. Brennan went to New York on his next day off and headed straight to Lu

"He still didn't have an opening, and I still didn't know anything about fine dining," said Brennan. "But he sat down and talked with me for 30 minutes. And he made two phone calls."

One of the calls was to Alain Sailhac, chef at the legendary Le Cirque. A job opened up. Suddenly Brennan was in Long Island with a bunch of insomniac punk rockers and taking two buses into Manhattan every day to cook in what was, at the time, one of America's few internationally recognized bastions of fine dining. It was trial by fire.

"It was very busy and we were in the weeds every night," said Brennan. "Everything was written and ordered in French. I didn't know any French, and I was the expeditor! Alain got the best ingredients, and it was the first time I saw white truffles, fresh porcini, shad roe, sweet breads. It was great training. I lovingly refer to my time at Le Cirque as "the cuisine boot camp."

Brennan used his new connections at Le Cirque to set up what he refers to as his finishing school: a two-year stint of traveling and cooking all over Europe at the most prestigious Michelin-starred kitchens on the continent.

What Brennan got out of the experience was how important the quality of the ingredients is and how organized, efficient, focused and pristine the kitchens were. "I realized that if we could get the same quality ingredients in America, we could cook on the same level as the Michelin-starred restaurants in Europe."

When he returned to New York, it wasn't long before he was running two restaurants—the Mediterranean-focused Picholine and the French bistro-inspired Artisanal—that sought to do just that. He also helped define the concept of a cheese course in America and eventually opened Artisanal Premium Cheese, the country's first affinage center. At a time when the conventional wisdom stated that American cheeses were simply pale imitations of French cheeses, Brennan helped prove that there were cheesemakers here at home who were making some of the greatest cheeses in the world.

As the city's economy recovered in the years after 9/11, business was good. Then the economy recovered a little more, and soon the cost of doing Michelin-style fine dining in the city was too high. Brennan then remembered the reason why he had trained so hard to make himself irreplaceable: so that his career wouldn't have to come at t

expense of the people he loved. He sold Artisanal and closed Picholine, since the lease had expired and the rent doubled, and moved with his girlfriend to Poughkeepsie, three doors down from her parents.

"It's worked out quite well, actually," he said. "Her parents can pop in whenever they want, which I like. It's like living in a city."



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very costly, what comes next? What is the new luxury?

He then realized he was living in it.

"I had always bought from Greenmarket [Farmers Markets] when I was a chef in the city, so I knew how much good was coming out of the Hudson Valley, but I had never really explored up here before," he said. "It's extraordinary agricultural richness, the food culture, the beer and ciders, the wine and cheeses, and everyone's willingness to support local farms. It got me passionate again."

For Brennan, the new luxury isn't necessarily about the most expensive ingredients, but the right ingredients and a chef's relationship to them. He jokingly refers to his new philosophy as farm to chef. "Farm to table is a phrase that's been abused," he said. "So many chefs buy ingredients from across the country and all over the world and call it farm to table. Here in the Hudson Valley, it is the epicenter of farm to table. I am sourcing from farms that are just a few miles away. And it's not about organic either, because the other day I tasted an organic carrot that tasted like nothing. It had to have soil that's rich in nutrients so that the food tastes like something. So I'm going around and meeting farmers and asking them: What's your farm like? Are there animals on it? Do you practice crop rotation? What's your soil management program? I want to really absorb this, not just speak to it. But to get it, feel it and cook it. We all know the adage you are what you eat, but you are what your food eats as well."

The Hudson Valley will get its first taste of Brennan's new focus on sustainable luxury this fall as he takes over the kitchen at the Roundhouse in Beacon. He speaks excitedly about the local purveyors he'll be featuring—the vegetables from Common Ground Farm, the cheeses from Sprout Creek, the milk-fed pork from Black Sheep Hill Farm. He has connections with a forager. He's already laid out a plan to make sure this sustainable luxury doesn't shut out Beaconites, still a town of blue-collar creatives. "We'll do prix fixes on Monday and Tuesday nights, I think," he says. "Braised meats, pastas—nothing expensive, but really good food."

And once the Roundhouse is running smoothly, he'll be expanding. He's about to sign a lease for a "farm to che in Poughkeepsie and is thinking about a farm-focused pizzeria. He's even talking to people about a restaurant t glass cube in the middle of a farm field. "Okay, that one will be super high-end," he says with a laugh.

Besides, views are changing. He points out that the Michelin guides just awarded a star to a street hawker in Sir who sells chicken rice for \$2 out of a cart.

"In the end, it really is all about the food," he said.

For more information about Chef Terrance Brennan, visit www.terrancebrennan.com.

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