



# CRESCENT CITY CELEBRATION

COMMANDER'S PALACE IN NEW ORLEANS  
OFFERS A SPIRITED MENU STEEPED IN  
SOUTHERN COCKTAIL CULTURE

By Owen Dugan  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DENNY CULBERT

Lally Brennan (left) and her cousin  
Ti Adelaide Martin (right) co-own  
New Orleans staple Commander's Palace,  
a *Wine Spectator* Grand Award winner  
since 2012. At center: Executive chef Meg  
Bickford and "wine guy" Dan Davis.



The Commander's team includes (from left): Operations manager Kenny Meyer, Martin and Brennan's aunt Dottie Brennan, Davis, Martin, director of business strategy & talent development Lelia Lambert, Martin's partner Leslie Iwerks, Bickford and Brennan.

**“I hate the history,”** says Ti Adelaide Martin, co-owner with her cousin Lally Brennan of *Wine Spectator* Grand Award winner Commander's Palace in New Orleans. “I don't care. That's not what we're about. Yes, it's slightly interesting that some restaurants in New Orleans are much older. But what's more interesting to me is what you're trying to do now, and what we're pushing toward is so cool. We're just not going to stand still. It's just not who we are.”

Despite Martin's feelings on the matter, that history is singularly important to the celebration and elevation of regional cuisines, both in Louisiana and across the U.S. The late Ella Brennan, Martin's mother and known as “Miss Ella” to all, had worked at her brother Owen's New Orleans restaurants and, in 1956, helped open Brennan's. She left that establishment in 1973 after a family dispute and, with some of her other siblings, bought Commander's, which has been at its current location since 1893.

Brennan was universally known as tenacious and caring, and her contributions were many. Chief among them were her elevation of regional cuisines, her discovery and promotion of talented chefs (Paul Prudhomme and Emeril Lagasse among them) and her

commitment to investing in and educating herself on wine before that was commonplace. She was also a national figure in her own right (you can watch a documentary about her, called *Ella Brennan: Commanding the Table*, or read her memoir, *Miss Ella of Commander's Palace*).

But her greatest legacy is the forward-thinking that her daughter mentions: “That's the culture of this restaurant. You know, a lot of that just comes from my life, and my mom. She was the main person who yanked New Orleans out of the past and pushed for the future. So we're very busy, still yanking. I think some of the most exciting food in my history is happening in New Orleans right now.”

One of the great treats of visiting New Orleans is discussing food with the locals. They talk about food more than Bostonians talk about sports—and take it as seriously. This culture raises the bar considerably. “Eating out in New Orleans, it's hard to go wrong. You can, but it's really hard. When I was a brand-new, young-baby restaurateur, they'd say, ‘Who's your competition?’ And I'd say, ‘home cooks.’ You're not saying that in any other city. Because people here know what they're talking about, and they can

## WINE SPECTATOR MENU

### Jumbo Lump Blue Crab Ramos Gin Fizz

Do Ferreira Albariño  
Cepas Vellas 2019

### Briny Oyster & Absinthe Bisque

Sandhi Chardonnay  
Central Coast 2020

### Sazerac Barbecue Braised Shank

Neyers Zinfandel Borden Ranch  
Vista Luna 2018

### Figgy Bread Pudding

Thierry & Pascale Matrot  
Vin de Table de France  
L'Effronté Moelleux 2019

cook. It's serious business; it's also fun."

Hiring Prudhomme was a masterstroke. He brought Cajun cooking—previously seen as country food—to the white tablecloths of the city and shined a light on its rich history, sophistication and reliance on local produce. "Hey, America, we should try fresh food again," Martin says. "Food that's growing nearby. We had so much to work with."

Lagasse, conversely, was a blank slate from New England. His gift was discovering the cuisine with fresh eyes yet with serious classical technique. As his education continued, he broadened the palette at Commander's, bringing in more of the region's diverse flavors as well as from his Portuguese and French Canadian background.

The current executive chef, Meg Bickford, who supplied the recipes for this menu, honors her deep Louisiana roots but also brings real invention, as in the Blue Crab Ramos Gin Fizz recipe, which is flat-out brilliant in its simplicity and effect.

There was occasional blowback. Martin remembers that around 1993, a food writer challenged her with a question about whether gumbo should be changed. She replied: "Do you think gumbo has been the same since the beginning? This is a melting pot of a city if there ever was one. This cuisine has taken on the influences of everything we had around us. It's our push to keep it evolving."

It would be incorrect to say that Commander's Palace was the only restaurant to celebrate these cuisines. But it is undeniable that Miss Ella presided over real innovations ahead of others and took canny risks, while simultaneously mastering promotion on a national level.

New Orleans has a long history with wine, too, going back centuries, as with other North American regions colonized by wine-loving Europeans. As the country expanded, consumer tastes shifted, in many cases due to availability, away from wine—not so in New Orleans. Unlike in much of the country, wine was ever-present during Martin's childhood, and her mother discovered and invested in California wine very early on.

"My mom certainly was always into wine," Martin recalls. "The great winemakers came through New Orleans, because it was different than the rest of America at that time. Because we drank wine. We were a little European in our lifestyle. I mean, we had wine at our family dinners, certainly at any holiday dinner, but even just, you know, kind of regular weeknights. There was a lot of Laforêt and things like that hanging around. Mom met—and I think fell crazy in love with—as she would say, 'Bob' ... Mondavi, and it was people like that who were around my house. 'Jim' was James Beard."

Martin and Lally Brennan extended that love of wine and invested in it heavily.



Executive chef Meg Bickford has been with Commander's for 14 years.

Endlessly affable Dan Davis was brought in with a mandate to build, and given the title "wine guy" to head off any intimidation guests might have regarding an old-school sommelier. By 2012, they had a *Wine Spectator* Grand Award; today, they list some 2,400 selections and an inventory of 20,000 bottles.

Martin and Brennan took the reins in 1997. Brennan handled more of the business side. "The wine thing was always kind of my baby," Martin recalls. "I had certainly inherited that itch from my mom. I told Dan I wanted the wine list to really be something, and one of my favorite memories is Dan, he presents me—maybe six months in—with his new list, and I'm like, 'This is amazing, but it's not enough.' He's like, 'What are you talking about?' His face just dropped. I told him, 'We cannot just have a great wine list. We need a culture of wine.'"

To build that, they instituted staff training. To date, Martin estimates that 150 employees have completed their course. She also instituted a course at New Orleans Culinary & Hospitality Institute, of which she is a co-founder and board member, with family. Commander's offers public education, too: CP Sips was an on-site tasting series that began during the pandemic. Staff was put to work delivering wines locally and shipping elsewhere. Davis, Brennan and Martin hosted as many as 1,000 people per tasting. Live guests included winemakers from around the world and even cheesemakers.

They've also built their by-the-glass list with a similar goal: "We're serving unbelievable wines by the glass. You can have them by the half glass, because that way you can pair and that's so exciting. I don't mean to brag or anything, but I'm not seeing a better by-the-glass list."

Liquor is present in all of the dishes in this menu, and two use specific cocktails. Martin doesn't say Commander's is in food or hospitality; she says, "We're in the business of creating dining memories. A great meal begins with a well-made cocktail. We were part of the cocktail revolution in America because we grew up with well-made cocktails, but even in New Orleans they weren't great everywhere. We really pushed that. And we opened the Swizzle Stick Bar downtown, and then did a cocktail book."

For all her dislike of history, Martin does recognize her and Brennan's place in this centuries-old regional culture: "You know, one of our sayings is that Lally and I may hold the keys to Commander's, but it really belongs to New Orleans. New Orleanians have something figured out: Life is meant to be lived, not endured. We might take that a bit far on occasions, but I prefer it to the opposite."

"We want Commander's to be at the forefront, but we're doing this for the whole city," she continues. "We want New Orleans to be the Paris of America, and we're not gonna stop now. We punch above our weight, that's for damn sure."

#### COMMANDER'S PALACE

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## Jumbo Lump Blue Crab Ramos Gin Fizz



“Ramos gin fizz is one of my favorite cocktails. But the effort that it takes to make a proper gin fizz should not be underestimated. And Louisiana blue crab is one of my all-time favorite foods. It’s something that I grew up eating. My mom’s motto when I was a kid, and I now use with my daughter, is that if you can’t clean it, then you can’t eat it. I wanted to put these two beautiful things together but it never worked. And then it dawned on me that I was trying to make it too complicated. And it should literally be those two things together.”

—MEG BICKFORD

### BLUE CRAB GARNISH

8 ounces cooked jumbo lump crab, picked clean of all shells

12 chives, chopped

Juice of ¼ lemon

Salt and white pepper to taste

Louisiana bowfin caviar (optional)



Combine crab, chives and lemon juice in a medium bowl. Gently mix and season to taste. Spoon the mixture evenly into 8 shot glasses. Reserve chilled until the Gin Fizz is ready to strain over each. Garnish with caviar if desired.

### RAMOS GIN FIZZ

1 ½ ounces gin

½ ounce simple syrup

1 large egg white

2 teaspoons lemon juice

2 ounces heavy cream

4 drops orange flower water

Add ice halfway up shaker and add all ingredients. Shake until frothy, approximately 10 minutes. Strain over the crab and serve immediately.

**Note:** This recipe is for one full order of this cocktail, which makes enough for 4 of the crab dishes. For 8 servings, find a partner in crime to shake the second batch simultaneously.

## WINE MATCH

### Do Ferreiro Albariño Cepas Vellas 2019

“You want a citrus-driven wine, and one with some salinity and some acid. The crab and Gin Fizz together present a sweetness on the palate. Albariño can be brilliant for that. These vines are 125 years old, and there’s sea spray coming into the vineyards that I think carries through into the wine. A lot of people who really love Albariño say this is the single best expression of the grape. It’s expensive for an Albariño, but for a great singular wine it’s a steal—if you can find it.”

—DAN DAVIS

**WINE SPECTATOR ALTERNATES:** Bodegas La Cana Albariño Rías Baixas La Caña 2020 (91, \$30); F. Tornatore Etna White 2021 (91, \$35)



# Briny Oyster & Absinthe Bisque



“This combination of flavors and textures was always a favorite of Miss Ella Brennan. And there have been a lot of great dishes to come out of the Commander’s Palace kitchen to honor that. This was also the very first thing I learned to cook when I started here. I feel incredibly fortunate that I got to spend the time with her that I did. The things that we know she loved will always have very special places on our menus and never be forgotten. She will always be celebrated here.”

—MEG BICKFORD

## HERB ROASTED ARTICHOKE

2 twelve-ounce jars premium-quality cooked artichoke hearts  
2 ounces extra-virgin olive oil  
Zest of 2 lemons  
½ cup fines herbes (thyme, parsley, basil, tarragon, chives), chopped  
Salt and white pepper to taste

Preheat oven to 425° F. Drain artichoke hearts from jars and gently pat dry. In a medium bowl, mix olive oil, lemon zest and herbs. Taste and adjust seasoning. Let artichokes marinate for 30 minutes, then transfer to a large roasting pan and roast for 5 minutes. Rotate pan 180 degrees and roast for an additional 5 minutes until artichoke hearts are light-golden brown. Remove from oven and reserve.

## OYSTER, ABSINTHE & SHALLOT DOUBLE CREAM

12 ounces smoked slab bacon, diced small  
2 ounces unsalted butter  
12 shallots, peeled, diced small  
6 ounces all-purpose flour  
14 ounces absinthe  
3 quarts heavy cream  
1 recipe Herb Roasted Artichokes  
2 pints shucked oysters, picked for shells, liquor strained and reserved  
Salt and white pepper to taste

1. Render bacon over low heat in a large, heavy-bottomed stock pot for 30 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add butter and shallots and sauté until shallots are tender and translucent. Add flour and stir to combine. Cook the blonde roux over low heat for 5 minutes, stirring constantly. Deglaze with 10 ounces of absinthe, scraping the bottom of the pan with a wooden spoon. Add heavy cream and bring to a simmer over medium heat (any clumps of roux can be incorporated by whisking aggressively).
2. Once simmering, reduce heat to low. Simmer for 30 minutes and add artichokes, oysters, strained oyster liquor and remaining 4 ounces of absinthe. Gently stir to combine, return just to a simmer. Once oysters begin to curl, remove from heat and adjust seasoning to taste.



## WINE MATCH

**Sandhi Chardonnay Central Coast California 2020**

“Every bite of this dish is rich and intense, so you need a wine with great acidity. Raj Parr and his winemaker at Sandhi are making some of the most Burgundian expressions of California Chardonnay. It’s reserved in all the right ways and expressive in all the right ways. One of the hardest things for a winemaker to do is nothing. They know when to get out of the way. This is *grand cru* Burgundy from California.”

—DAN DAVIS

**WINE SPECTATOR ALTERNATES:**  
Calera Chardonnay Central Coast 2019 (91, \$26); Avancia Godello Valdeorras Old Vines 2020 (92, \$35)

# Sazerac Barbecue Braised Shank

"I've never wanted to miss a party. Anything that I can do in advance that is still going to be grandiose and impressive, I'm all for it. These can be done in the morning so that you can enjoy your party because you're just heating them up. The Sazerac is a big-girl drink and can stand up for itself, which is why it works so well with this dish. The flavors aren't masking each other but complementing."

—MEG BICKFORD

## SAZERAC BARBECUE BRAISED SHANK

½ cup rendered bacon fat  
2 large yellow onions, diced small  
4 ribs celery, diced small  
2 large carrots, diced small  
12 whole garlic cloves  
12 ounces Bourbon  
6 ounces absinthe or pastis  
1 ounce Peychaud's bitters  
½ cup prepared horseradish  
¼ cup Creole mustard  
½ cup dark brown sugar  
½ cup Worcestershire sauce  
½ cup apple cider vinegar  
1 bouquet garni (15 sprigs thyme, 5 bay leaves)  
1 gallon trotter or chicken stock  
8 pork or veal shanks, osso buco cut (request ahead from local butcher)  
Salt and black pepper to taste

**1.** Place bacon fat in a large heavy-bottomed sauce pot over medium heat. When fat begins to sizzle, add onion, celery, carrots and garlic. Stir

vegetables to coat in fat and adjust flame to low. Deeply caramelize vegetables over the next 20 minutes, stirring every few minutes with a wooden spoon to scrape and incorporate all the fond that develops on bottom of pan. Add Bourbon, absinthe, bitters, horseradish, Creole mustard, dark brown sugar, Worcestershire and apple cider vinegar. Increase heat, stir to combine and reduce liquid by half. Add stock and bouquet garni, bring to a simmer. Hold heat at a low simmer and gently reduce by a quarter for about an hour, skimming any excess fat that rises to the top.

**2.** Remove from heat and allow to cool briefly. Using a regular kitchen or immersion stick blender, puree in small batches. Pass through a fine mesh sieve with a small ladle and adjust seasoning, including alcohol, if needed. This jus can be prepared up to 3 days ahead. If reserving, be sure to properly cool before refrigerating.

**3.** While sauce is simmering, prepare shanks to braise. Temper shanks for 30 minutes. Preheat oven to 400° F. Season shanks liberally with equal parts salt and black pepper. Place them on a wire roasting rack inside a roasting pan. Place in oven and roast for 15–20 minutes, until deep golden brown caramelization occurs. Remove from oven, set aside and lower oven temperature to 300° F. Place the meat in a single layer in 1 large or 2 medium-size roasting pans. Pour prepared jus over pork shanks and cover pans with tight-fitting lids. Braise in the oven for 3 ½ hours. Remove and check meat for



**ON PEYCHAUD'S**  
"On any bottle of Peychaud's bitters, it says, 'good for what ails one irrespective of malady.' It's fabulous. We were doing a dinner at an amazing restaurant in New York, and we were going to serve a Sazerac. But they didn't have Peychaud's bitters, so I said, 'Well, change the drink.'"  
—TI MARTIN

tenderness—if necessary, cook for an additional 30 minutes. Like all braised meat, the pork shanks are perfectly ready to serve immediately but will only taste better if cooled in braising liquid and gently reheated the following day.

## LOUISIANA FIELD PEA & CHARRED CHICORY RAGU

1 large bunch collards or other hearty greens  
½ pound unsalted butter  
1 large yellow onion, diced small  
2 green bell peppers, diced small  
1 red bell pepper, diced small  
1 yellow bell pepper, diced small  
5 ribs celery, diced small  
¼ cup minced garlic  
2 quarts trotter or chicken stock  
¼ cup Worcestershire sauce  
¼ cup Crystal hot sauce  
¼ cup apple cider vinegar  
1 bouquet garni (15 sprigs thyme, 5 bay leaves)  
1 pound individually quick frozen field peas (black eyed, pink eyed, crowders, baby limas)  
Salt and black pepper to taste

**1.** Prepare a hot grill or place oven broiler on high heat. Remove greens from stem in whole leaves if possible. Place into cold water bath and gently stir with your hands to help any dirt and sediment fall to bottom of bowl. Leave greens undisturbed in water bath for 5 minutes and remove carefully from water. Repeat this process with fresh water until water runs clear and greens are free of any grit. Toss damp greens in a splash of olive oil, salt and black pepper. Place directly onto grill or under broiler in a roasting pan with tongs and towels on hand. Flip greens after 30 seconds and remove from heat once nicely charred on both sides. Briefly cool and julienne into ¼-inch wide strips. Reserve to finish ragu.

**2.** Place butter in a medium heavy-bottomed stainless steel sauce pot over medium heat. When butter begins to sizzle, add yellow onion, bell peppers, celery and garlic. Stir to coat vegetables in butter and adjust heat to low. Over 15 minutes, gently caramelize vegetables until light-golden brown. Add stock and bouquet garni, bring to a simmer. Add Worcestershire, hot sauce and apple cider vinegar. Simmer an additional 5 minutes. Add field peas and return to a simmer. Cook very gently over low flame, braising the field peas until just tender in this aromatic broth. This process can take 15 minutes to an hour, depending on the peas.

**3.** Once cooked to preferred texture, remove from heat. Fold in charred greens and stir to combine. Season with salt, black pepper and additional Worcestershire, hot sauce and apple cider vinegar to taste.



## WINE MATCH

Neyers Zinfandel Borden Ranch Vista Luna 2018

"What this dish wants from a wine is fruit. When I taste it, my mind goes to fruit compote. When Bruce Neyers met his wife, Barbara, she was working in the kitchen at Chez Panisse. When I'm in California, I like to impose on them for a meal. One time she made these braised lamb shanks. Bruce pulled a bottle of this wine from his cellar and gave it a slight chill. It was one of the best food and wine matches I've experienced. The best Zinfandels are fantastic, and fantastic values, and great food wines."  
—DAN DAVIS

WINE SPECTATOR ALTERNATES: Klinker Brick Zinfandel Lodi Old Vine 2018 (90, \$19); Ridge Lytton Springs Dry Creek Valley 2019 (94, \$45)

# Figgy Bread Pudding

“This is a more refined bread pudding, using bread crumbs instead of stale bread and a very rich custard layered with boozy dried fruit. It’s moist and decadent. At Commander’s, we age our eggnog for months to achieve a richer, more complex flavor. In this recipe, we are going to cook the custard to achieve that rich velvety texture without the time or space needed.”  
—MEG BICKFORD

## SPIKED EGGNOG

6 large eggs  
¾ cup granulated sugar  
1 quart heavy cream  
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon  
½ teaspoon vanilla extract  
2 cups Cognac  
Fresh grated nutmeg

Set a large saucepot over a medium flame, half full with hot water. Bring to a simmer and reduce heat to low. This will be used as a double boiler to make the eggnog custard. Place eggs, sugar, cream and cinnamon in a large stainless steel bowl. Whisk to combine and place over simmering pot, making sure the water does not touch the bottom of the bowl. Whisk continuously until the custard is thick and frothy, using a rubber spatula to scrape the sides and bottom of the bowl. This will take 15–20 minutes. Use a kitchen thermometer to monitor the temperature and remove from heat when it reaches 160° F. Pass through a fine mesh sieve and chill in an ice bath. Once cold, stir in Cognac and vanilla. When serving, garnish with a pinch of fresh grated nutmeg.



## FIGGY BREAD PUDDING

8 large eggs  
1 ¼ cups light brown sugar  
2 cups heavy whipping cream  
1 ¼ teaspoons vanilla extract  
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon  
⅛ teaspoon ground nutmeg  
⅛ teaspoon ground cloves  
1 orange, zest only  
6 cups bread crumbs  
1 cup dried figs, stems removed, diced small  
1 cup Cognac  
2 tablespoons dried cranberries  
2 tablespoons golden raisins  
2 tablespoons dried apricots, diced small  
2 tablespoons light brown sugar

1. Preheat oven to 265° F. In a large bowl, add eggs, brown sugar, heavy cream, vanilla extract, cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves and orange zest. Whisk until smooth, add bread crumbs and stir to combine using a wooden spoon. Allow to stand for 1 hour.
2. While waiting for batter to set, combine dried figs and Cognac in a small saucepot. Place over low heat and bring just to a simmer. Strain off figs and reserve, and return infused Cognac and remaining dry fruit to same pot. Bring to simmer over low heat and reduce by ¾, until fruit is rehydrated and Cognac has become a syrup. While boozy dried fruit is simmering, add figs to the batter and stir to combine.



Co-proprietors Brennan and Martin share a meal with their aunt Dottie.

## WINE MATCH

**Thierry & Pascal Matriot**  
Vin de Table de France  
L’Effronté Moelleux 2019

“Usually their Aligote comes in before Chardonnay but one year because of weather they had an emergency harvest of Chardonnay first. By the time they harvested the Aligote it was overripe, so they decided to go ahead and make it. They loved it, but it comes from a small parcel so there isn’t much. I had an absolute connoisseur over this wine. I went crazy for it. It’s called L’Effronté, which means one who causes an affront. He named it for his daughter Elsa.”  
—DAN DAVIS

**WINE SPECTATOR ALTERNATES:** Jorge Ordoñez & Co. No. 1 Selección Especial 2019 (90, \$16/375ml); Joh. Jos. Prüm Riesling Auslese Mosel Graacher Himmelreich 2020 (94, \$66)

3. Spray 8-by-8-inch baking pan. Pour half the batter into the pan. Gently spoon and spread ¾ of the boozy fruit over the batter, reserving the rest to garnish the finished plate. Spread the other half of the batter on top and bake for 1 hour, rotating pan 180 degrees after 30 minutes. Test that a toothpick or cake tester comes out clean before allowing to cool for at least 30 minutes. Pudding can be sliced in the pan or spooned directly onto plate. Garnish with remaining boozy dried fruit, Creole cream cheese ice cream and a shot of spiked eggnog.