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Photo: Tiffany McGinty

A Conversation with **Miss Ella** of **Commander's Palace**

by Wendy Warren

“Who would want to hear about this?” Ella Brennan said when asked why she’d waited so long to write her book. “I just didn’t think people would want to know about me and my work in the restaurants.”

Her

memoir, titled *Miss Ella of Commander's Palace* and co-written with her spitfire of a daughter, Ti Martin, is one you will not be able to put down. Chock-full of food memories, she also tells stories of family connectedness, personal heartbreak, and the drive to overcome adversity in the midst of turbulent times. There are even threatening ruffians and a call for help made to a New Orleans mob boss.

"There's a lot to be said about Ella," Chef Frank Brigtsen said. "She has a sharp mind and sharp palate. She is a quick read. She can look at a dish, taste it, and immediately tell if it's a winner or not."

When you read the book, it will seem like Miss Ella is sitting right next to you telling you these remarkable stories about her family history — her parents, Nellie and John; her beloved older brother, Owen; her glamorous sister, Adelaide; and her other siblings, John, Dick, and Dottie. If you've ever experienced the legendary hospitality at one of the family restaurants, especially Commander's Palace, you will begin to understand the underlying Brennan philosophy of hospitality.

From the book: "He [Owen] was always saying to us, 'You've got to make these people feel that you're happy to have them. You've got to make them feel, and you just don't show, you feel.' That was a big word — feel," Miss Ella said.

Miss Ella never learned to cook, even though she was thrust into Owen's first restaurant when she was barely 20 years old. To hear her tell it, the place was a pitiful excuse for a restaurant. The shrimp were tiny, the menu boring, and she would tell Owen constantly, "Your restaurant stinks." Finally, to shut her up, he challenged her to fix it.

"She won't tell me what's wrong with a dish; she'll just tell me something's not right," said Tory McPhail, executive chef at Commander's Palace. "In the beginning, I'd ask her to tell me what's wrong and she doesn't know, and I'd have to go back through all the ingredients and reevaluate each component until I

got it right."

A breakfast of scrambled eggs and sautéed bananas like her mother made is to this day one of her favorite things.

"Thankfully, my sister Dottie has mastered the art of making that dish just like my mother," she said. "I live right next door to the restaurant and when the chefs make it for me, I have to coach them on how to do it right."

When asked what her favorite meal is right now, today, she replied, "Whatever the chef says is fresh. I love a good soft shell crab and redfish or trout." Ti quipped, "She loves fish."

If you ever wondered how Paul Prudhomme came to be at Commander's Palace alongside Ella Brennan, the book tells the story. Brigtsen said, "She and Dick took a dramatically bold step in hiring Paul, and together, they broke the mold of New Orleans

cuisine of the time and evolved it with a freedom that revolutionized Louisiana and New Orleans food."

Ella remembers reining in the dynamic chef. "He'd put a sauce on part of the dish and another sauce somewhere else, and I would find myself saying, 'Stop it, Paul. Calm down. Let's do something simple,' and he'd respond, 'But did you taste it?'"

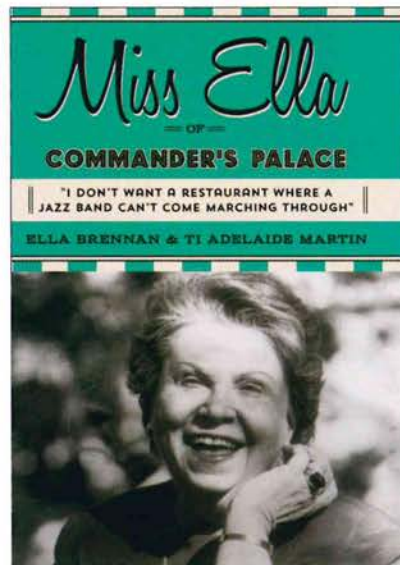
Emeril was a baby of a chef when he began at Commander's, and she didn't think much of him at first, but he came to be a good leader and mentor to others. Today, she is proud of the mark he made on Commander's and the culinary world at large. "Emeril furthered the evolution of Haute Creole cuisine and expanded on what

Paul had been doing with Cajun, but he also brought his French-Canadian/Portuguese heritage — and his own insatiable curiosity — to bear on the menu."

Tales of Emeril's hand-selected replacement, Jamie Shannon, and his cut-too-short life, and Tory McPhail are educational insights on identifying and fostering talent within the four walls of the restaurant.

All of this behind-the-scenes work was done with the diner first and foremost in mind.

Ella is passionate about her patrons having



an unforgettable experience, complete with a feeling that they are family. As I've been lucky to experience on a number of occasions, dinner at Commander's is course after course of conversation-stopping, mouthwatering cuisine — my favorite meal at Commander's goes like this — the Shrimp and Tasso Henican, followed by the boudin-stuffed quail lacquered with bourbon or cherry brandy, and the bread pudding soufflé, or strawberry shortcake when strawberries are in season.

Upon first meeting Ella, many people have reported how truly intimidated they were, especially chefs, Brigtsen said. "While she is direct and to the point, she is never rude and would never use a mistake to tear you down, but rather use the experience to build you up and make you better."

In the beginning of his career at Commander's, Ella would meet with McPhail regularly in the restaurant kitchen. She taught him early on that every dish has to tell a story, and that she wanted something on the menu from the grill.

"How do you make steak on a plate tell a story?" McPhail asked. "We are not a steak house, but if you want a steak, we know the Louisiana farmers of Black Angus beef and for the first time ever, we are aging our beef on the second floor of the restaurant. Pair that with fresh vegetables from Covey Rise Farms on the Northshore and you've got a great local story."

Everyone who has had the opportunity to sit with her tells of her ability to get them thinking about things from a different perspective.

Her peers in the industry speak of her as someone who is always doing for others, giving to the community and averse to any fanfare. One of her most notable admirers is Leah Chase of Dooky Chase Restaurant, who sang Ella's praises.

"Let me tell you how exceptional Ella is," Chase said. "Our restaurant had gotten the worst review from a critic and I was ready to take it on the chin. But Ella wasn't going to stand for it, and she got everyone she knew in a huff about it and ended up talking to the writer about it. She sent me the biggest bouquet of flowers. That's the kind of woman she is and I'm proud she's my friend."

"She does this thing called trust and respect," Martin said. "I come to work every day, and I have to try to earn your trust and respect. As an employee, the cook, the dishwasher, general manager, you don't owe me any trust and respect, I have to earn that, and you got to earn mine. If we can work from that premise every day, we can do some magical things."

Miss Ella of Commander's Palace is scheduled to hit newsstands September 13; a documentary directed and produced by Academy and Emmy award nominee Leslie Iwerks is also slated for a fall release. ♦

Miss Ella's favorite guilty pleasure — a garlic bologna sandwich made with fresh French bread.

LKC: What is your favorite guilty pleasure food?

EB: A garlic bologna sandwich with fresh French bread. Good bologna, not that stuff you get at the grocery store.

LKC: Do you feel your culinary tastes have changed much over the years?

EB: I'm open to trying new things, but there's just something about the classics ... Chicken Pontalba, Veronique, a prune sauce with duck, figs with any game, and a good stuffing. Oh, I digress.

LKC: There's a combination described in the book that I haven't been able to stop thinking about, and more understanding is in order. Creamed horseradish and bananas?

EB: <<Laugh>> Oh, it's delicious. The dish is a chopped steak, well seasoned, placed on the creamed horseradish and topped with bananas. It sounds odd, but trust me.

LKC: We are approaching afternoon cocktail time. What will you be drinking?

EB: Oh, it is that time? An old-fashioned, definitely.

LKC: In the book, you talk about your and Owen's dream of having New Orleans be the Paris of America.

EB: I'm proud of how far the city has progressed during my life and especially given the challenges of 2005, but I believe we've yet to come close to our potential. And it's not just New Orleans; I'd like to see more visitors exploring beyond her borders and seeing how beautiful Cajun country and the bayous are, and how good the food is, and how lovely the people.

LKC: What advice do you have for the readers of *Louisiana Kitchen and Culture*?

EB: You can learn from every person and experience you have and you should. Eat the food that's local, fresh, and in season, and remember to have fun when you are dining out.