

*Hurricane Ella: Miss Ella Brennan's Journey to Forge
a Legacy in New Orleans' Top Restaurants*

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Abstract: Even though cooking is an activity associated with women, restauranting is a man's game. Regardless of industry, women entrepreneurs are forced to tackle both social and legal gender inequities and face myriad leadership challenges that their male counterparts do not. As evident as gender inequities in the workplace are today, the factors of discrimination were compounded in mid-1950s America. The unique case of Miss Ella Brennan poses a compelling and inspiring women's leadership story. Without a formal education, she rose to the top of New Orleans' kitchens, becoming one of the most renowned restauranters in the country and earning the nickname "Hurricane Ella". Nevertheless, a divisive family rift forced her out of New Orleans' top kitchens and left her to start anew with nothing more than a decaying building and tarnished family name. As she got back on her feet, Miss Ella had to evaluate her life's work and determine how to best rebuild in the restaurant industry at a time when America was unwilling to let a woman compete in a man's game, let alone win. Being unafraid to lead change and remaining brave in the face of challenges, Miss Ella's story counters narratives that formal expertise is necessary to achieve great culinary success. Her case serves to exemplify the value in breaking tradition and the necessity of self-assurance and grit to do so.

Becoming Ella Brennan

Getting Started on Bourbon Street

Miss Ella Brennan's¹ childhood revolved around food and was characterized by large Irish American family dinners. She was a child of the Great Depression, and her family did not have the income necessary to eat out in New Orleans restaurants. Growing up, "the real entertainment, even though we didn't think of it as such, was the meals, which took on aspects of a performance" (Brennan and Martin 2016, 22). While Miss Ella herself never picked up a pot or a pan in her life, both cooking and family were always the most significant aspects of her upbringing (Anderson 2017).

In 1943, Miss Ella graduated high school as an average student without a clear trajectory (Brennan and Martin 2016). She entered a small New Orleans business school, where the professors taught her secretarial skills such as typing. She only lasted about four months before

¹ After her divorce, Miss Ella Brennan went on to identify as "Miss Ella" in public spaces, given the plethora of famous "Brennans" in New Orleans (Brennan and Martin 2016).

quitting, later explaining, “I wasn’t going to type for any man. That wasn’t in my DNA (which I didn’t even know I had in those days)” (Brennan and Martin 2016, 28). Shortly thereafter, Miss Ella’s older brother, Owen, invited her to run operations at the Old Absinthe House, a bar he owned on Bourbon Street. Owen was 15 years older than Miss Ella and was looking for someone to cover his early morning shifts. Given the reputation of the “horrible, horrible” French Quarter, with its drunks, gamblers, and prostitutes, their mother resisted the idea (Brennan and Martin 2016, 29). Miss Ella pursued the opportunity nonetheless and found herself running a bar on Bourbon at the age of 18.

When Miss Ella took over daytime operations at the Old Absinthe House, the bar had just become a financial success. Owen had originally opened it to create a family business that could provide for their parents’ retirement, but he strived to turn the bar into an upscale and sophisticated venue. When local restaurateur “Count” Arnaud Cazenave publicly doubted a “dumb” Irishman’s ability to run anything better than a burger joint, Owen found even more motivation to move beyond his initial scheme (Associated Press 2016). In addition, if he made the venue more upscale, he would be able to attract a wealthier crowd and charge more for drinks. To start, Owen turned his focus on hospitality and music. He hired a local artist, Walter “Fats” Pichon, and created a performance area for him in the back of the restaurant. He also personally chatted with each and every one of the bar’s patrons, doing his best to make every customer feel like they were special. This not only helped with profits, but garnered Owen the nickname “impresario of the French Quarter” (Brennan and Martin 2016, 33). As he developed the family name, Owen also founded the Krewe of Bacchus Mardi Gras parade (Krewe of Bacchus 2016). During this point in time, Mardi Gras parades and Carnival balls were only open to those inside of New Orleans’ high-society circles (Krewe of Bacchus 2016). Given that the majority of his bar clients were seasonal visitors, he invested a large heap of money into creating a Krewe, as well as grand balls, that were accessible to all of Mardi Gras’ tourists (Krewe of Bacchus 2016).

Miss Ella’s founding notions of restaurateering were heavily influenced by Owen and her time at the Old Absinthe House. He offered important lessons in creating a dining experience, rather than simply serving quality drinks. She remembers, “Owen just knew what it took to make people happy. It was an instinct. He understood hospitality and he understood service, and he taught them to us all” (Brennan and Martin 2016, 33). At the same time, Owen was constantly looking expand, and the opportunity quickly presented itself with the Vieux Carré.

Vieux Carré

Together with his father, Owen bought an upscale restaurant in the French Quarter called the Vieux Carré. The purchase came just as Miss Ella was about to turn 21 years old, and about three years after she left secretary school to work at the Old Absinthe House. Miss Ella had only recently gotten comfortable with her original posting managing the bar, however, always an eager student, she devoted her free time to learning all that she could about the restaurant industry and the culinary world at large. She read constantly, focusing on cookbooks, business books, and books on how to run restaurants (Mullener 2014). She would take the time of anyone “who might have something to teach her, anyone who would put up with her endless questions. She talked to sophisticated diners, she talked to wine merchants, she sat in the kitchen by the hour and talked to the cooks” (Mullener 2014). She studied wine, learning about the origins of different producers and what types of wine went with different styles of cooking.

Quite unorthodoxically, one of Miss Ella’s most influential learning experiences came from Café Lafitte’s, a Bourbon Street bar that attracted an eccentric, gay crowd. Miss Ella

famously said, "Some girls went to finishing school. I went to Lafitte's" (Mullener 2014 n.p.). Owen was the first to introduce his younger sister to Lafitte's nightlife, and it was here where she learned more about drinks, politics, and social mixers. Her brothers taught her to drink Scotch and water because "it was a drinking-man's drink" (Brennan and Martin 2016, 51). Such genderization of food and drink reflects the social prestige of male-oriented cuisine. Her preferred vodka cocktails were not sophisticated enough for their liking, or rather, they were too feminine. Masculine identities are so deeply embedded in gourmet restaurateuring that women themselves are both historically and contemporarily absent from top positions across the American culinary industry (Hermelin, Hinchcliffe, and Stenbacka 2017).

Besides what Miss Ella learned from books, speaking with chefs, and her many nights at Café Lafitte, her only real experience remained working at her brother's bar. Still, she knew enough about dining experiences that she viewed the Vieux Carré as "just blah" (Brennan and Martin 2016, 37). Miss Ella remembers:

I kept bitching and moaning to Owen — "Your restaurant stinks! It just stinks!" — until he'd finally had enough and said, "You think you're so smart? Well, go fix it, smarty pants." And so my career as a restaurateur was launched. I was scared to death and very insecure about being in an environment with grown-up people who seemed to know what they were doing. But we got right to work fixing the operation (Brennan and Martin 2016, 37).

Primarily, Miss Ella saw the food as paling in comparison to the cuisine she grew up with and could not believe people would pay for that type of bland cooking. At the same time, the restaurant was quickly losing money. Owen started to fall into debt. He even fired Miss Ella on three separate occasions, but each time their mother forced him to rehire her. Nearby restaurants, including Arnaud's, Galatoire's, and Antoine's, were bursting with profits, yet the Brennans struggled to keep Vieux Carré afloat. Soon enough, the rest of the Brennan siblings came together to help with the business. Owen encouraged his Old Absinthe House patrons to try out his new restaurant, and Miss Ella rewrote the menu in English, rather than French, so that the customers would have an easier time understanding it. She worked with the chefs to keep the food French, but to Americanize it and add Creole influences. Simultaneously, Miss Ella continued to absorb everything the chefs had to offer her. She studied their tactics and eventually rewrote the Vieux Carré menu herself. Meanwhile, Owen was holding her to extremely high standards and gave her strict orders to cut food costs by 60%.

As the restaurant began to produce a profit, Miss Ella devoted her time to developing the service. The majority of the waiting staff came from bayou country and did not have any formal training. So, she took it upon herself to mold them into the type of employees she wanted for her restaurant. Miss Ella describes her tactic:

Besides teaching the nuts and bolts of the job, I began to cultivate personnel skills: you spend time with one guy at a time, you relate to him as a human being and you make him want to come work for you. And you start with mutual trust and respect. That one-on-one conversation where you tell them you want to earn their trust and respect is how it all starts. You learn about an employee as a person

and commit to helping them ... I work to earn your trust and respect, and you work to earn mine (Brennan and Martin 2016, 41).

Even with her natural leadership qualities, Miss Ella was a young woman living in a time when sexism deeply permeated all aspects of life. Women had very different opportunities than men and as a result, industries faced rampant gender segregation in leadership tiers. As one of the superiors of the restaurants, leadership came naturally to her, but “to teach [the employees] and get them to listen to me and understand that I mean business took awhile” (Brennan and Martin 2016, 41). Miss Ella had to grapple with the challenge of getting taken seriously as a boss, yet not being too assertive that she lost the mutual respect of her staff. Women in top positions in restaurants have to manage “professional competency requiring assertive, agentic behavior” with “gender normativity that stresses passivity and commitment to communal goals” (Harris and Giuffre 2015, 131). That is, female leaders in kitchens must negotiate between being seen by their subordinates as authoritarian “bitches” or incompetent “girly girls” (Harris and Giuffre 2015). The “double bind” of women’s leadership traps women in a lose-lose position. If Miss Ella chose to disregard traditionally feminine characteristics, she wouldn’t be liked (Kawakami, White and Langer 2002). If she chose to act as society expects, in a nurturing manner, then she wouldn’t be respected as a leader (Kawakami, White and Langer 2002).

Rather than taking on either label, Miss Ella refused to confine herself to any particular gendered leadership style. In consequence her workers responded to her differently than they did to Owen (Harris and Giuffre 2015). In one incident, a chef created a ruckus in the kitchen and when she told him to calm down, he followed her into her office and came at her with a butcher’s knife. She promptly fired him and Owen scolded her for this, citing the chef’s talents in the kitchen. Still, she remained steadfast in her self-assurance and continuously proved herself to be a capable leader in the restaurant.

After a few more years developing the restaurant, it began to pull a profit and the family officially changed the name to Brennan’s Vieux Carré. The booming business allowed Miss Ella to travel to New York and Europe to explore the international food scene and see first-hand how the world’s top restaurants operated. But just as the positive reviews were beginning to pile up, the family’s lease was nearing its expiration at the end of 1956. At the same time, Owen and Miss Ella had their eyes set on something much greater. They wanted to create a luxurious restaurant with such high standards that it would put New Orleans at the forefront of the global food scene. About two years before the lease on Brennan’s Vieux Carré expired, Owen made an offer to lease a grandiose yet entirely dilapidated building from Tulane University. Located at 417 Royal Street, it was here he believed the Brennan family had the potential to create the restaurant that would change New Orleans.

Brennan’s Restaurant

Upon opening Brennan’s, Miss Ella had over 10 years of management experience under her belt. Even so, she felt ill prepared for the challenge. The restaurant industry was not welcoming to women at any level of management, let alone head restaurateur. Upscale restaurants in general showed a preference for male over female waiters, based off the idea that male waiters add to the ambiance and cause the restaurant to be taken more seriously (Carton and Kleiner 2001). Even recently, a National Bureau of Economic Research survey submitted resumes of equal qualification to restaurants varying in quality and found that over 8 out of 10 offers went to men at the high-end restaurants (Carton and Kleiner 2001). When women are hired, they are judged differently. Joseph

Gregg and Paulette Johnson surveyed sample groups from the Florida International University's School of Hospitality Management over the course of six years and found that female competence performance is judged by a different set of standards than its male counterparts, leading to a disadvantage for women seeking power, promotion, and financial growth (Gregg and Johnson 1990). Being a female restaurateur, Miss Ella had to face the gendered challenges that stemmed from the industry's sexism, as well as the lack of faith in her abilities as a leader. Throughout her career as a businesswoman, she faced discrimination that ranged from "chauvinism" to "carefully-contrived covert prejudicial treatment" (Gregg and Johnson 1990, 10). Moreover, along with managerial skills, research shows that one of the top two most significant factors in the performance of female entrepreneurs is higher education, and Miss Ella did not have any formal restaurant training or time spent in college or university (Huarng, Mas-Tur and Hui-Kuang Yu 2012).

For Owen, the building housing Brennan's was itself a risk. It was both spacious and beautifully built, but in a state of utter deterioration. Miss Ella's father remained optimistic, saying "This is one of the best buildings in the French Quarter. The bones are extraordinary. It's going to work" (Brennan and Martin 2016, 56). The family aimed to open by May of 1956, and each sibling took their own part in the planning process. Miss Ella's sister Adelaide focused on interior design, Owen worked with restoration architects, and Miss Ella went from shop to shop on Royal asking stores to keep their lights on when they left to make Royal Street more inviting to customers.

The planning process carried on smoothly until tragedy struck the Brennan family in November of 1955. Owen had a heart attack and passed away, leaving behind three young sons, a wife, and an unfinished restaurant. Miss Ella was heartbroken; the older brother she had always idolized was gone. She grew up in his footsteps, and his death crushed her. She lost both her hero and her mentor (Mullener 2014). A few days after his death, the bank pulled its loan on Brennan's. The family was six months from opening and deeply invested in the restaurant, but the bank "wasn't going to back a project headed by a woman" (Brennan and Martin 2016, 59). In response, Miss Ella and her siblings mortgaged their homes and turned to their in-laws for loans. She looks back:

It came out to about \$1 million, enough to allow us to open. In the mid-1950s, spending that enormous amount of money to open a restaurant was absolutely unheard of. But the project was in motion. The train had left the station as they say. It was open or bust (Brennan and Martin 2016, 59).

Luckily for the Brennans, family friends with backgrounds in finances stepped in to assist with the fiscal planning. Miss Ella could then adequately focus her energy creating a successful restaurant. She worked with her sister Adelaide to completely redecorate the interior and revitalize the outside. On opening day, Miss Ella and her friends staged a jazz parade, dancing with pots and pans over their heads throughout the restaurant. The whole restaurant was a big party, with toasts to Owen filling the air and flashes from the media's cameras going off in every corner. Everyone was singing and dancing, and despite the incredible food, not a soul was documented sitting down to enjoy their lunch.

For the next 18 years, the Brennans continued with the family traditions that made their restaurants successful in the first place. Brennan's grew at a quick pace. In the late 1950s, the

national magazine *Holiday* put Brennan's on its list of the Top 100 restaurants in the US, and, in response, Miss Ella hosted a party with all of America's top chefs. She remembers:

I felt truly fulfilled in my career for the first time. Our hard work had paid off. Within about 18 months after opening Brennan's, we repaid the loans to all of those who had stuck with us and began to take some salaries for ourselves. I had established myself in a male-dominated field, and thanks in part to the *Holiday* gatherings, was accepted by my peers (Brennan and Martin 2016, 74).

Across the board, the restaurant was met by critical acclaim. On any given day, celebrities were filling up the dining room, and at most points in time, the tables were permanently kept under reservation for weekday lunches (Mullener 2014). Still, the majority of their customer base were locals and loyal patrons who followed the family from Vieux Carré. Without doubt, Miss Ella was at the top of her game.

The End of Brennan's for Miss Ella

Brennan's went on to rock Royal Street into the late 1960s and early 70s. It had established its reputation as a top New Orleans food destination and was growing at a quick pace. Miss Ella and her siblings began to look at expansion opportunities to see how Brennan's could "accommodate the ambitions of the next generation" (Brennan and Martin 2016, 89). Brennan's success financially secured Miss Ella and her siblings, but its current size would not support the plethora of nieces and nephews preparing to enter the business. And so, they began to expand.

In 1964, the family purchased a seafood restaurant called The Friendship House. It was located in Biloxi, about an hour off the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and was much more casual than their other ventures. A row of cabins belonging to a small hostel lined the backyard of the restaurant. During summer months and holidays, the Brennan family would each take up a cabin and pass their days by "fishing, crabbing, sailing, water skiing, playing softball and volleyball, and telling ghost stories at night" (Brennan and Martin 2016, 90). The restaurant, as well as Biloxi, had a lot of emotional value for Miss Ella and her family.

Additionally, Miss Ella and her siblings created a strategy to open three new Brennan's branches in Dallas, Houston, and Atlanta, three cities where the family name was already well established. Miss Ella reasoned, "If a family member were to run the restaurant in each of those places, it would be good for everybody and be a key to each new restaurant's success" (Brennan and Martin 2016, 90). Investors were even willing to cover the initial costs in order to get a Brennan's to open. Unfortunately, none of the family members were willing to leave New Orleans to run the restaurants. And so, they had outsiders managing day-to-day operations and consequently left behind their Brennan On Duty "BOD" philosophy. A staple of their restaurant culture, the "BOD" policy dictated that there must be a member of the Brennan family working in house at all times. On account of no one being willing to move states, Miss Ella and her siblings were constantly traveling to oversee the restaurants. This brought great financial success, but "the operations were wearing [them] out" (Brennan and Martin 2016, 90).

In 1969, around the same time as these purchases, Miss Ella closed a deal to purchase an old and distinguished building in the Garden District, Commander's Palace restaurant. Her sister Adelaide had lived near Commander's and always admired it. She told the previous owners, Elinor and Frank Moran, that if they ever were to sell it, she wanted to be at the top of their list of potential

buyers. When the day came for the couple to retire, Adelaide and Miss Ella began negotiations. The sisters mortgaged some of their real estate properties to fund the purchase and within a few weeks the restaurant was officially theirs. Coincidentally, the deal closed on Miss Ella's daughter Ti's ninth birthday, becoming one of her "Top Ten presents" to date (Brennan and Martin 2016, 93).

In the midst of this, Miss Ella was privately struggling in her marriage. Her husband, Paul Martin, was a lifelong alcoholic, and she married him thinking she could change him. In 1970, after he intoxicatedly tumbled down the stairs in front of his children one too many times, Miss Ella made the decision to divorce him. For a young, Irish Catholic woman whose life was strongly rooted in the values of family, this was an especially difficult time. She chose to never date again, going on to joke that she gave up men for Lent and never looked back (Brennan and Martin 2016).

Over the next few years, Miss Ella's relationship with Maude, Owen's widow, declined. Even though the restaurant was a roaring success and was led by an experienced management team, Maude wanted to be the boss. She and her sons, Jimmy, Ted and Owen Jr., saw the restaurant as their father's legacy (Yerton and King 2002). Maude assumed that the three of them would go on to own the family restaurants, despite the plethora of cousins who were also eager to take part. Moreover, she had growing concerns that the new expansions were overextending the business by sacrificing quality for quantity (Yerton and King 2002). Overtime, disagreements over the direction of the restaurant grew. The subsequent death of Miss Ella's father led to a redistribution of business ownership shares, causing Maude and her sons to have control of 52 percent of the business (Morago 2016). In 1973, the literal butting of heads led to a fractured skull, permanently removing Miss Ella from Brennan's. After a combative family meeting, Maude's family fired Miss Ella. Miss Ella's family joined her in leaving and found an attorney to determine how to divide the family assets. Maude kept Brennan's, and Miss Ella and her siblings kept the Friendship House, the three new branches in Texas and Georgia, and Commander's Palace. At the time, "[Brennan's] value approximately equaled the value of [their] five other restaurants" (Brennan and Martin 2016, 93).

With the family split came a devastating personal loss for Miss Ella, for whom family was everything. Miss Ella unapologetically cried her heart out. She writes, "Nearly 20 years' worth of hard work, creativity and financial success were ripped from us. I'd spent the best years of my life there building a successful brand, and all of a sudden it was gone" (Brennan and Martin 2016, 93). Still, both Miss Ella and Maude did their best to keep their family drama internalized, with Maude especially staying out of the public spotlight in New Orleans.

At this point, Miss Ella took her two children and moved into Adelaide's home on Prytania Street. Miss Ella says she "holed up to lick my wounds and reassess my life. I was 49 years old and had reached what I thought was the peak of my career — and now I would be starting over again" (Brennan and Martin 2016, 94). Miss Ella had a hefty life decision to make, as well as several options. Most of which, however, were not safe or certain.

Miss Ella's Life Decision

After the devastating family drama, Miss Ella had several options. She could relocate to Mississippi, where her family owned the Friendship House and had strong emotional connections. The "Gulf Coast Paradise" had years and years of happy memories waiting for her, as well as an opportunity to grow her own business (Brennan and Martin 2016, 90). Alternatively, Miss Ella could go work on one of the three other Brennans' branches in Houston, Dallas, and Atlanta. The restaurants had established their reputations and became big money makers, but badly needed a

Brennan family member to take over management. The siblings were still reluctant to leave New Orleans full time for another city, so this offered Miss Ella an opportunity for a new beginning. Before she divorced Paul and was fired from Brennan's, Miss Ella and Paul even thought about moving to Atlanta. The move offered a promising opportunity, because "if [they] were to run it, it would give that restaurant its best chance to succeed, and it could be a fresh start for [them]" (Brennan and Martin 2016, 91). Even with the path her marriage took, Miss Ella could create a new beginning for herself in a nearby city. Plus, Adelaide was spending a great deal of time in Atlanta, as well as in Texas, to oversee the branches. She wouldn't be too far from loved ones.

Finally, Miss Ella could invest herself in Commander's Palace, the old building in the Garden District that she purchased with Adelaide. Emile Commander originally established the restaurant as a saloon in 1893, but he died from tuberculosis during its grand renovation in 1906 (Times-Picayune 2011). Emile's brother, Peter, took over operations with his friend Sam Falco, and the restaurant gained a less-than-revered reputation. During Prohibition, the police busted Commander's for selling alcohol on multiple occasions, and rumors began to spread across New Orleans that steamship captains could find live entertainment from local women in the second-floor lounge (Times-Picayune 2011). New Orleans gossiping circles continued these rumors well into the childhood of a young Ella Brennan, whose mother "warned [her] not to walk on the side of the street of 'that Commander's'" (Brennan and Martin 2016, 116). On top of this, the restaurant was nowhere near considered high class dining. Newspaper ads from the era show a Christmas dinner priced at just one dollar, a bargain even for the 1920s (Times-Picayune 2011). In the 1930s, Commander and Falco sold the property to Elinor and Frank Moran, the couple who Miss Ella and Adelaide purchased the building from, but the restaurant still failed to become a dependable source of income. Ella Brennan looks back:

By the time we bought the place in 1969, Commander's was coasting with a boring, traditional Creole menu and had suffered under careless and sometimes fuddy-duddy management. We had brought over a few people from Brennan's to oversee the staff that was already in place, but they couldn't seem to pull it together (Brennan and Martin 2016, 116).

And so, Miss Ella faced a decision. She could move out of New Orleans to a new beginning in either Texas or Georgia and develop the already successful branches of Brennan's. Alternatively, she could return to the happy memories of The Friendship House by the Gulf. Perhaps the riskiest option, Miss Ella could take on the grandiose building in the Garden District, Commander's Palace, that was badly in need of repairs (Anderson 2017).

Aside from the fact that Miss Ella was a young single woman navigating the American South during a time of unrestrained sexism, restaurantering in itself was a high-risk career choice. She needed a strong marketing strategy, a smart hiring strategy, consistent innovation, as well as a brand revival (Investopedia 2018). Even though Miss Ella had the success of Brennan's behind her, the family feud caused the family name to lose credibility. At one point, the family made headlines when New Orleans police were called to the original Brennan's on Royal when one member of the family attempted to have a staff meeting without the approval of their other relatives (Associated Press 2016). The altercation ended without violence, but nonetheless created unflattering headlines for the Brennan family (Associated Press 2016). Regardless of what path Miss Ella chose, she was looking at a steep, uphill climb.

Epilogue

After the settlement over the Brennan family restaurants concluded, Maude and her sons continued to develop Brennan's on Royal. Miss Ella and her siblings decided to keep up business in each of the four restaurants they remained in possession of — the Friendship House, the two Texas branches and the Georgia branch. Building on this, they decided to turn Commander's Palace into the family's new flagship. Although the restaurant was not a source of dependable profits and was at risk of becoming obsolete, they carried on with the mantra of "let's just go to work, again" (Brennan and Martin 2016, 116). The siblings decided to continue the BOD policy, and each assumed the role of what they could do best. This put Miss Ella in charge of both the menu and the chefs. She also had to figure out how to keep the business from falling deeply into debt. Her son, Alex, was in his mid-teens at this point, and he remembers the strength she carried with her throughout the fear: "Mom, I am sure, was scared to death, and she let us know that it was going to be a scary time, but she took it on as a challenge and never, ever looked back" (Brennan and Martin 2016, 95).

Miss Ella went from the peak of her career to a period of great doubt and confusion. She had two kids to care for and a reputation to defend. Although she was defined by her strength and resilience, "Hurricane Ella" struggled emotionally:

Mentally transitioning from running a thriving, shiny gem into reviving a dowdy, out-of-date operation was tougher than I expected. I admit that I moped around for a while, causing my siblings to label me "Pitiful Pearl." One day, I found myself sitting in a little coat-check room near the entrance, bawling my heart out. 'I can't work in this place! I'm ashamed of it! How can I ask people to come here?' (Brennan and Martin 2016, 117).

Although Miss Ella was weighed down by grief, she decided to act rather than wallow away in self-pity. She began by completely redesigning Commander's, tearing it apart from inside out. With the support of her siblings, she relocated the bar, modernized the kitchen, and redecorated the main dining room. She then knocked down the back wall of one of the upstairs rooms to create a "Garden Room" that overlooked the great oaks in the courtyard. After a "formal word-of-mouth campaign," the Garden Room became "one of the city's most coveted reservations, and it gave [them] much-needed traction" (Brennan and Martin 2016, 118). Miss Ella was determined to "make Commander's Palace into something extraordinary, like this city and country had never seen" (Brennan and Martin 2016, 120). To signify this transformation, Adelaide painted the exterior of the building aqua blue, a stark contrast to the pale paint that had covered it before. The family was sending a clear message to the city of New Orleans that Commander's Palace was no longer an antiquated dining establishment; it would become something even bigger than they had started on Royal Street.

During the time of the renovation, Miss Ella continued to educate herself on the directions of cuisine and restaurants across the world. She studied the patterns of food culture in the United States, and from there, incorporated tradition and revolutionary style into a dynamic cuisine. She came out with a type of food called 'Haute Creole' by taking the favored parts of modern French cooking and "Creole-izing" them. Commander's would be the perfect channel to disperse this type of cuisine. Still, without the proper chef, the idea would be impossible to execute and developing a culinary talent strayed away from industry norms. A good chef would produce a good restaurant,

and not the other way around. Miss Ella says, “In those days, no one was paying attention to developing people. A restaurateur has to be part of a team to make something everyone can be proud of” (Anderson 2017, n.p.). Two traditional European chefs passed through the early days of Commander’s, but neither could provide the service Miss Ella sought. She did not think she was going to be able to find a chef who matched her idea; that is, until Paul Prudhomme came along.

Prudhomme first caught Miss Ella’s eye working as a chef at Le Pavillon Hotel, and from there she brought him on the Commander’s Team. Having grown up on the bayou, Prudhomme also brought Cajun flares to traditional New Orleans French Creole cooking. He brought the unconventional Creole twists she was seeking, as well as Cajun flares to traditional New Orleans French Creole cooking. At the time, Cajun food was considered lower class and the New Orleans food scene looked down upon it, but Miss Ella was never one to shy away from a risk. She jokes that “it became clear Paul was trying to make us into Cajuns, while we were trying to make him into a Creole — and all of us loved every second of it. The end result was something that would shake up the city and, ultimately, America” (Brennan and Martin 2016, 125).

Miss Ella’s devotion to the old, deteriorated building in the Garden District turned Commander’s Palace into a prized gem of New Orleans. Throughout the restaurant’s growth and development, Paul Prudhomme and Miss Ella worked together to create a variety of signature dishes, some of which went on to gain nationwide fame. Blackened fish, for instance, was born at Commander’s when Prudhomme recreated a classic childhood meal—cooking freshly caught catfish in a cast-iron skillet over an open fire—in a professional restaurant kitchen. Under Miss Ella’s leadership, Prudhomme became one of America’s first celebrity chefs. Eventually, he left Commander’s to start his own restaurant with his wife, K-Paul’s. His departure ushered in a long line of chefs to Commander’s, working under the leadership of Miss Ella and becoming stars in their own right. Other alumni include Emeril Lagasse, Jamie Shannon, and Tory McPhail (Mullener 2014).

On the other side of New Orleans, Maude and her sons ran Brennan’s into bankruptcy. For nearly 40 years, they struggled to keep the restaurant afloat, and in 2013 it eventually shut down. Ralph Brennan, Miss Ella’s nephew, bought the restaurant at a sheriff’s auction, and shortly thereafter reopened it under the same name. In Mississippi, the Friendship House suffered an ill fate; Hurricane Betsy left the property in ruins and the family was forced to sell it. Similar to what happened to the Friendship House, a fire during Hurricane Ike destroyed the Brennan’s branch in Houston in 2008 (Nelson 2010).

To this day, Commander’s Palace has thrived as one of New Orleans’ top restaurants. It became the centerpiece of a family empire that included 14 restaurants. Until her death at age 92 in June of 2018, Miss Ella lived in a grandiose home next to Commander’s, keeping the chefs on call for takeout day in and day out. In her lifetime, she employed almost 1,400 people and left a deep mark in the American culinary and hospitality businesses (Anderson 2017). Tim Zagat, founder and publisher of Zagat Restaurant Surveys, said "There's nobody who has had a role as dominant in any other city that I'm aware of. I don't think there's anybody, even a male. I look at restaurateurs all over the U.S. every day and I think she's up there with the best of them -- and maybe ahead of any of them” (Mullener 2014 n.p.). Hurricane Ella proved herself a force to be reckoned with, and there’s not a storm in the entire Gulf that could wipe away the legacy she has left on the city of New Orleans. Although she was one of few women restaurateurs, she did not let tradition, nor the doubt of others, stop her from forging her own path. She showed the value of women remaining unapologetically strong-willed and the great capacity they have to create change

in everyday settings by remaining true to their resolve. A pioneer for her gender, she made the power of women's leadership evident to the culinary industry and proved that it is not necessary to be a man to make it in the industry. By staying faithful to her values and remaining headstrong, she helped pave the path for women at all levels of restaurant work.

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