

NOLA 101 features Ralph Brennan at Ralph's on the Park

The New Orleans: Proud to call it home committee continued its successful NOLA 101 series Tuesday night with both a delicious and insightful visit to Ralph's on the Park.

Amidst delicious dishes of redfish with crabmeat stuffing, jambalaya, bread pudding and lemon squares, owner Ralph Brennan walked attendees through his family's regal restaurant history.

The family dynasty all started with the original Brennan's restaurant, which moved to its present day Royal Street location in the late 1950's, from its original location on Bourbon Street.

It's here that the legendary dessert Bananas Foster was created. A member of the Brennan family was in the produce business, so the family started looking at different ways to use fruit. A captain in the dining room came up with a concept that is today a quintessential calling card of New Orleans dessert cuisine.

There are 12 Brennan restaurants owned by 4 different groups of the family. Ralph Brennan owns Red Fish Grill, Bacco, Ralph's on the Park and Jazz Kitchen in California.

He says the secret to his success: "Try to find a niche, an opportunity for each restaurant to be different."

Bacco came about because of this principle. Brennan noticed there wasn't much Italian food available in the Quarter. Today, Bacco has evolved into a Northern Italian establishment and will celebrate its 20th anniversary next year.

"Opportunity presents itself everyday. You just have to be smart enough to recognize it," Brennan says.

Such was the case with the ever-popular Red Fish Grill. Brennan leased the space on Bourbon Street as soon as it became available, before he had any concept what he would put there. Later he decided that section of Bourbon Street needed a great seafood restaurant offering a casual atmosphere. Red Fish was one of the first restaurants to re-open post-Katrina.

Ralph's on the Park is Brennan's most "local" establishment. Overlooking City Park, it caters to locals more than tourists, another niche Brennan thought needed to be filled in the city.

Brennan credits his success to building a company based on values: guest service, innovation, professional and personal growth, community and personal responsibility, honesty and personal integrity.

"We have to keep changing. We can't get stagnant. If you get stagnant you'll lose...As good as we are today, it won't be good enough next year," Brennan says.

He's still looking to create and expand. Brennan says he's now looking at opening restaurants in Metairie or on the Northshore.

Special thanks to Christian Generes and Ralph Brennan for this lovely evening!