APRONS FULL OF CASH

Flush times in down-and-out New Orleans

BY JUSTIN NYSTROM

L. Kasimu Harris

FOR MANY YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE 1970s, New Orleans was, to borrow a line from "Basin Street Blues," a "land of dreams." Leaving Middle America, middle-class and working-class white kids planted roots in this fertile garden of reinvention. As the region faced down an economic crisis and the city embraced tourism as its economic engine, they built lives on hospitality. In the French Quarter, these new arrivals waited tables and washed dishes and tended bar. They lived cheaply, ate and drank lavishly, and never looked back.

Measured by coldly objective means, times were tough. Between 1970 and 1990, the Orleans Parish homicide rate tripled and one hundred thousand people fled the city. The oil economy death-spiraled and the 1984 World's Fair proved an economic belly flop. And yet they came. Today, many of them look back on those twenty years as a golden age.

In the summer of 2019, for the SFA, I interviewed a range of people who have worked or still work as waitstaff in New Orleans restaurants. Some began that work more than forty years ago. Scott Harrington and his girlfriend took the train from St. Paul, in 1972, for what was supposed to be a week-long vacation. "It was twenty below zero in Minnesota," he told me as we sat in my studio, the recorder flashing. When his return date drew near, Harrington fretted. "I kept going to Pat O'Brien's because it was such a fantastic place, and it was 4:00 in the morning and people were walking around in short sleeves," he said. When his break came, Harrington sent girlfriend home on the train and called his parents to let them know he wasn't coming with her. At nineteen, he'd just won a job at Pat O's.

Server Harold "Rick" Hughes folds napkins at Gabrielle restaurant in New Orleans.

Back then he didn't know an old fashioned from a hurricane, Harrington told me. But he learned the job, and learned to loved it. "I had to buy a pair of black shoes to wear to work, and I remember going back to this little room I had. And the shoe box, I just kept throwing money in there." With that cash in his pocket, wearing one of the same green blazers he wore to work at Pat O's, Harrington dined at the city's finest restaurants. "They'd let me sit by the kitchen door on a deuce table," he said. "I would order filet mignon with béarnaise sauce and shrimp remoulade and all this stuff I'd never heard of.... I had so much fun."

Back then, most restaurants ran on cash. And cash had to be managed. One year during Mardi Gras, Pat O's owner Sonny Oechsner asked Harrington to stay late and help count the till. Still amazed, more than forty years later, Harrington told me about how he walked into the courtyard as morning approached. "[And] there were like eight or ten tables set up like you have in a lunchroom, where like eight people can sit on either side, you know, that big a table, fold-up tables, and they had 1's on one table, 5's on another, 10's, 20's, and 50's, and 100's." Drinking iced longnecks, the staff silently counted and banded bills. An hour later, they headed off to Johnny White's to drink into the morning.

By the late 1970s, Harrington left Pat O's to tend bar at Lucky Pierre's, a late-night joint infamous for prostitution. The money was great. But after watching a cop named Jan Poretto gun down a waiter in the bar, Harrington feared for his safety. Instead of working bars, he moved on to fine dining, first at the Court of Two Sisters. About that time, he convinced his younger brother, Jeff Harrington, to leave Minnesota and join him. When the younger Harrington landed a job at Brennan's, the elder Harrington followed.

Run by siblings Teddy Brennan and Pip Brennan, the pink Royal Street landmark was a machine in the 1980s. Fueled by a dramatic increase in hotel space that attracted conventions and free-spending corporate attendees, the restaurant and its staff raked in cash.

"We'd work breakfast, big Sundays," Scott told me. "It wasn't unusual to have 1,000 people on the book for Sunday morning. [We'd] do another 400 at night with a private party thrown on you for 50 people up in the Red Room, with two different kinds of wine, Champagne at the end, and after-dinner drinks, and they want to do cocktails and cigars outside afterwards." Tough duty, especially when you're serving a four-course dinner and flaming desserts.

At Brennan's the Harrington brothers met "Rick" Hughes, who moved to New Orleans around 1981 after going bust in the oil fields. The French Quarter lifestyle appealed to him: "I just liked it. You know, it was cheap, you know, at the time... You could always find a job, always... I can remember times that there'd be signs all over the place, WAITERS WANTED, WAITERS WANTED," Hughes explained. "if you paid more than $200 a month rent, you were living in a nice, nice place."

Hughes got his job through a small deception. Working at La Boulangerie, where flush Brennan's waiters sometimes drank, Hughes learned that a gentleman named Richard French had been promised a job at Brennan's. Before French could get to Brennan's, Hughes showed up to claim that lucrative job. A few days later, when the real Richard French came in, Teddy Brennan called Hughes into his office, and asked, "What have you done?" Hughes answered quickly and pleadingly, "Well, Mr. Ted, I really wanted to work here. I really wanted to work here. I've always heard—and *I really, really wanted to work here*." Brennan decided that if Hughes wanted the job that badly, he could keep it. Hughes has answered to "Rick" ever since.

Brennan's was a "slaughterhouse" back then, Hughes told me. "New Orleans, in those days, did such a huge convention thing that, I mean, you know, 20,000 people...and then right after that, 40,000 people... just over and over and over again." The money was great, but it was hard work. "You would do five turns on your station, and it was just, like, frantic.... And if a waiter couldn't handle it...he was in trouble."

One block over at K-Paul's, the Chartres Street restaurant owned by Paul and Kay Prudhomme, servers worked at the white-hot center of 1980s American restaurant culture. K-Paul's was known for bold flavors and informal, sometimes quirky, service. Upstate New York native Jeanette Meyer, who moved to New Orleans in 1982 and landed a job at K-Paul's, remembered, "If you had four people at a table and they all came in and they said, 'We all want the blackened redfish,' you could not let them order the same thing. You had to make them order something different." Prudhomme would refuse the ticket and send the server back to the table, she told me. "You'd have to entice them to get something else."

Waiting tables at K-Paul's meant dealing with oddities. When women kicked their shoes off under the table, which they sometimes did on summer evenings, Prudhomme went bonkers, Meyer told me. "He would have one waitress distract them. The other waitress would get on her hands and knees, grab the shoe, take it in the back room, and hold it hostage." Prudhomme would walk out of a back room and announce that a shoe sale was about to begin. "And we could sell it back to them. Chef would say, 'Get whatever you want for it.' Sometimes, people would have to pay us twenty dollars to get the shoe back." As the bids went higher, Prudhomme listened and laughed.

Today, New Orleans is richer, cleaner, and safer. Restaurants have matured, and the roster of dishes they serve has diversified. It's hard to imagine a restaurant today that matches K-Paul's for oddity and popularity. Or the old Brennan's for profitability. Much has changed. Training manuals and pooled tips have replaced instinct and hustle. And in the age of plastic, nobody goes home with an apron full of cash. But the stories of the 1970s and 1980s remain, proof that, in their youths, these career servers witnessed a key pivot in the city's economy and ushered in a new sort of New Orleans restaurant culture.

Denny Culbert

L. Kasimu Harris

BELOW: Hurricanes at Pat O'Brien's; OPPOSITE: Jeanette Meyer at Pascal's Manale.

Justin Nystrom is a professor of history at Loyola University in New Orleans and the author of Creole Italian: Sicilian Immigrants and the Shaping of New Orleans Food Culture. *Visit southernfoodways.org to explore oral histories of career servers in New Orleans, Charleston, Birmingham, and Atlanta.*