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Kitchen Ambition:
A Look Inside Bourbon Blue

The Burgeoning Business Of Beds
Chanel, Hermes And Prada Oh My
A Piece Of The Pie
“Cooking is always something I’ve had a passion for...”
Tangled Up In Bourbon Blue
One couple’s devotion to a restaurant on Rector Street.

By Leo Dillinger

Photography By Susan Beard Photography
(susanbearddesign.com)

What does the word “home” mean to you? Do you think of the house where you grew up or where you live today? Or maybe you recall the moments shared with family and friends.

For Brendan McGrew, home is a restaurant nestled at the bottom of Rector Street in Manayunk where he’s invested the past 13 years of his life.

As a senior at St. Joseph’s University majoring in criminal justice, Brendan took a job as a line cook at Bourbon Blue when it first opened in October 2002. Having worked in the service industry since he was 14, Brendan found Bourbon Blue to be a pleasant change of scenery from the former restaurants he worked at.

“Cooking is always something I’ve had a passion for,” Brendan said. “As I transitioned from working at a bunch of different corporate restaurants when I was younger to an independent restaurant like this, I could see the work that I did had a direct effect.”

By the time he graduated in 2003, Brendan excelled in the kitchen working 50 to 55 hours each week. For a time after college, Brendan considered leaving Bourbon Blue to pursue a career in the city until he was offered the position of Sous Chef.

“I just said absolutely,” Brendan said. “I wasn’t ready for a 9 to 5 world nor do I think my personality fits in a 9 to 5 world.”

As Sous Chef, Brendan and his Head Chef completely revamped the kitchen to a more traditional hierarchy among the cooks. This format allowed each staff member to showcase their talents, integrate them into their weaker areas, and ultimately reach their full potential. Past and present staff rave about Bourbon Blue being one of the best places they’ve ever worked because they were instilled with the determination to advance as both workers and individuals.

Growing tired of the kitchen’s four walls and wanting to learn more about the business, Brendan seized an opportunity to become Bourbon Blue’s Front of House Manager. He gained a deeper perspective into marketing and event planning and by 2005, owner Sean Coyle – who now owns The Goat’s Beard down the street – asked Brendan to take over as the General Manager. Despite the extra responsibility, this opportunity
made Brendan one of the youngest GMs in the city of Philadelphia.

Brendan discovered the art of innovation and the need to balance consistency while constantly adapting to change. He studied the financial side of running a restaurant, subscribing to numerous culinary magazines and blogs to read up on the latest trends in the restaurant world.

“I think the hardest challenge in running a business is making the numbers work, finding ways to operate within your means, and knowing there are times you’re going to go over and times you’re going to be under,” Brendan said. “But it’s not just focusing on the day-to-day. You need to continue to look ahead.”

By 2008, he approached Sean to discuss his future at Bourbon Blue. Brendan illustrated his ambition to make the restaurant a success and his desire to be an owner. After talking out the details, Sean knew Brendan would be the ideal candidate to take full control of the business. But Sean wasn’t the only factor Brendan had to consider before buying Bourbon Blue.

One Sunday night in the winter of 2006, Brendan was working at Bourbon Blue when he met a girl sitting at the bar. Her name was Melissa Gregory. Brendan introduced himself and after talking for several hours, he asked Mel out on a date. She said no.

Brendan asked her again. The answer was still no. He asked her once more and once more, her answer was always no. After much convincing and deliberation, Mel finally accepted Brendan’s invitation and they went on their first date on January 7, 2007.

Brendan and Melissa had been together for more than a year when Sean officially offered him Bourbon Blue. Knowing his decision would

“You’ve got to learn how to live together and work together. Then the rest would just fall into place.”
impact Mel as well, Brendan asked for her opinion.

"I said to her, 'I have a question I need to ask you. You know how we've talked about life together and our future. I'm going to ask you once: Do you want to have a ring or a restaurant?""

"I went with the restaurant," Melissa said. "I figured that was just as much of a commitment. You've got to learn how to live together and work together. Then the rest would just fall into place."

"I told her I agreed because a restaurant could afford us a ring and hopefully more down the road," Brendan laughed, his face beginning to blush. "And, we're still working on that."

Brendan and Mel have been together for nearly nine years and in that time, they've worked tirelessly to provide their guests with the optimum dining experience. From the rustic, elegant décor to the featured "New American cuisine" on the menu to the amiable wait staff, Bourbon Blue thrives on making their patrons feel at home.

Brendan told me, "I've always wanted this place to be the comfort level where you feel ok if you stop in and have a beer or you stop in just to say hi. If you want to sit down for a first date or if you want to have an anniversary party, we are able to have all of that because of the comfort, the ambiance and the service that we provide."

Ever since Brendan started at Bourbon Blue, he was taught "food comes first." If your food is great, guests will come in and order drinks. Once he took ownership, Brendan made sure to keep the signature dishes consistent like the Southern Fried Chicken, Cheesesteak Eggrolls, and Jambalaya. Brendan hasn't changed those recipes in five years and for good reason. I've tried all three and each one made my taste buds tremble with flavor.

Another aspect of the restaurant that Brendan and Mel emphasize is guest development. This task isn't just getting people in the door. It's about maintaining relationships with those who frequently come in to Bourbon Blue. Even when they aren't actively working, you can find Brendan and Mel interacting with guests, making sure they are being treated like family.

"Guest development is the single most important part of any business," Brendan said. "You can have the best product, but if you don't know how to get it out to people nobody's ever going to buy it because they don't know about it. The best way to get people to know about it is to get to know people that are here."

For Brendan and Mel, Bourbon Blue is their home. It's a place where they've relished in the good times and endured through the bad. Out of all the perks that come with running a restaurant, the most rewarding experience for both Brendan and Mel is contributing to the happiness of their guests. Bourbon Blue has been the home to first dates, marriage proposals, rehearsal dinners, birthday parties, anniversaries, and reunions just to name a few. Watching their regulars return to celebrate the many different stages in their lives truly makes all of the hard work worthwhile.

"It is an awesome thing to be a part of so many good people's lives," Brendan said. "Through seeing all those changes that have happened to them and for us here as a business, that's growing up. That's what life is. And as much as I would do some things differently, I wouldn't change the end result whatsoever."