

\$4.00 - November 2007 - Vol 3 Issue 9

www.nyrestaurantinsider.com

# New York Restaurant Insider

## Terrance Brennan

*The re-energized Picholine  
chef readies Artisanal  
Bistro for expansion*



THE MAGAZINE FOR NEW YORK CITY'S RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

# TERRANCE BRENNAN

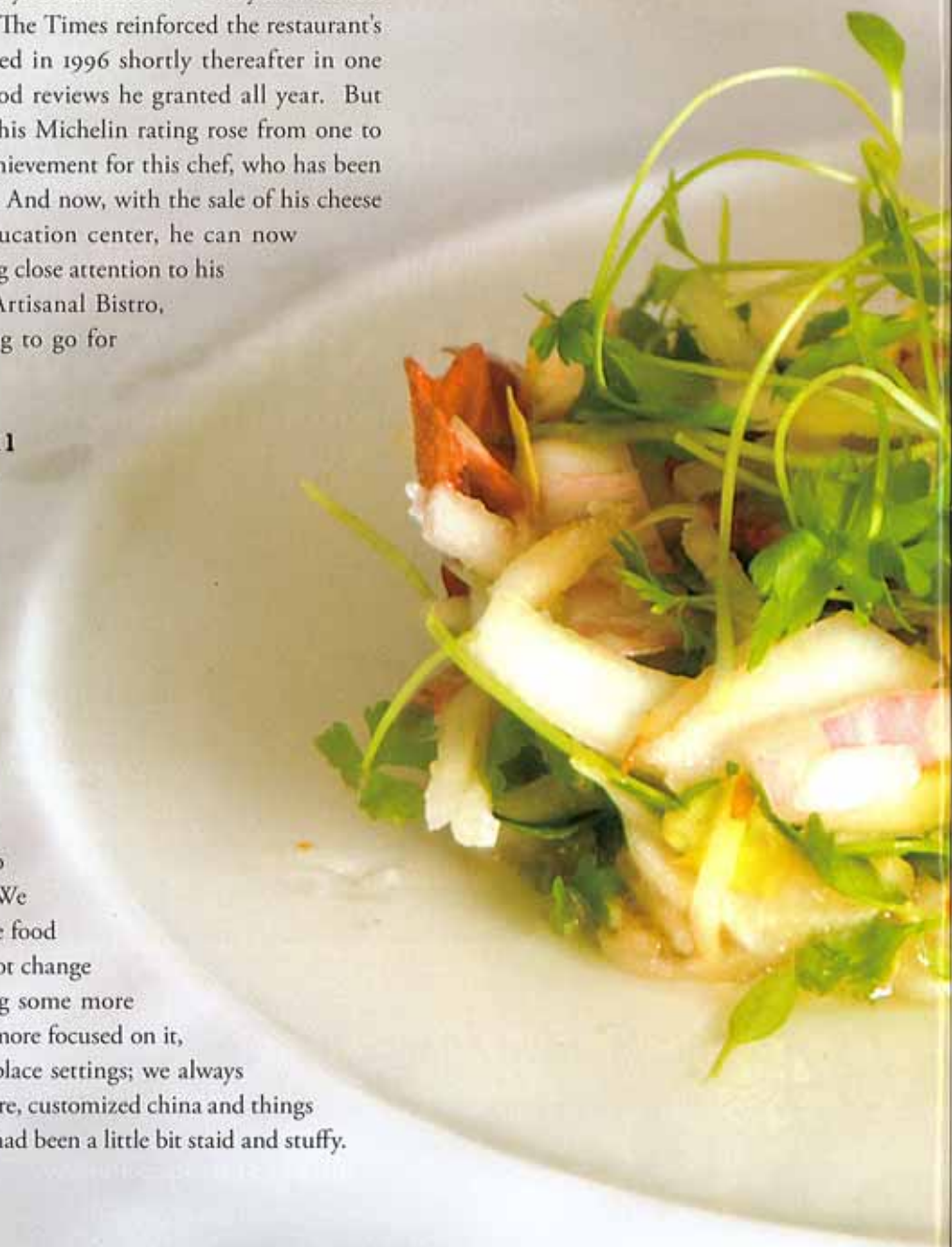
THE RE-ENERGIZED PICHOLINE CHEF READIES  
ARTISANAL BISTRO FOR EXPANSION

**O**ne year ago, Restaurant Insider ran a story on Terrance Brennan's "re-invention" of Picholine, his flagship fine-dining restaurant. Stating that it was time after 13 years for an upgrade, he also stressed in that interview how important it was to keep up with the desires of customers. He said that it was important to "pay close attention to your restaurant, and have the ability and flexibility to make appropriate changes to meet the needs of your customers." One year after the changes, the results are in. The Times reinforced the restaurant's three stars originally granted in 1996 shortly thereafter in one of Bruni's most positive food reviews he granted all year. But perhaps more importantly, his Michelin rating rose from one to two stars, a monumental achievement for this chef, who has been cooking since the age of 13. And now, with the sale of his cheese wholesale business and education center, he can now spend even more time paying close attention to his restaurant, expanding his Artisanal Bistro, and possibly start preparing to go for star number three.

**NRWI: First of all congratulations on earning two stars from Michelin for Picholine, do you think that the updated décor made the difference?**

*Terrance Brennan:* Michelin says that the service does not come into play, that it is all about the food, but it has to come into play in some percentage. We put a little more focus on the food certainly, but the food did not change dramatically. We are doing some more interesting things and I am more focused on it, but we did not change the place settings; we always had silver and crystal glassware, customized china and things like that. I will be honest; it had been a little bit staid and stuffy.

by  
*Matt DeLucia*  
Photography by  
*Diana DeLucia*



Warren Pear and  
Endive Salad  
Roquefort Mousse and  
Sauternes "Mirror"



Sea Urchin Panna Cotta  
Chilled Ocean Consomme and Caviar





**NRWI: Were any service changes made?**

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*Terrance Brennan:* None as far as style of service, just new uniforms and ties, which we made a little more polished and crisp. Any time you get something custom-made, six months later it's a pain in the butt to get them remade for new employees. I wanted grey, so we went to a uniform company to keep them standard, so they're easy to get and easy to maintain. A grey shirt and a grey tie, it's a stylish look, but it is not like Armani or anything like that.

**NRWI: Your first experience in a kitchen was at your parent's restaurant in Virginia. Was that serious cooking?**

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*Terrance Brennan:* My parents had a restaurant when I was 13 years old called Brennan's. It was in the suburbs of Annandale, Virginia on a major highway, and it was a breakfast, lunch, and dinner pizzeria type of place. I worked with my dad during the summer and then during school I worked on the weekends. My dad was always whistling and singing and making up these silly songs about the Blodgett oven, so I think it was more the ambiance that I enjoyed and being with my dad. Also, I used to ride motorcycles then and we had this little Opel Cadet that I used to ride after lunch and before dinner. The restaurant had a paved parking lot and behind that was gravel, and I had this track set up where I could go into the gravel, go around some barrels, do a little spin out and come back again. That was also a bonus of being there.

**NRWI: Did you eventually go to culinary school after working at your family's restaurant?**

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*Terrance Brennan:* I did not. During high school I worked in different restaurants and hotels in the Alexandria area and when I was in ninth or tenth grade, I knew I wanted to be a chef. After I finished school, I worked at a steakhouse called Victoria Station in the salad section. One night the broiler chef did not show up and they stuck me on there, so I was thrown into the fire. I was there for about two years, then I went to the Hilton in Springfield Virginia, and that was the first real professional chef I had worked under. Luke Murphy was his name, a little short guy, what a character. It was quite an experience because it was not a huge hotel, maybe 250 rooms, but we worked like dogs; 18 hour days. Everyone got a little delirious and silly and the chef had a good sense of humor.

**NRWI: What did you learn during this period of time, or were you just having fun and making money?**

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*Terrance Brennan:* Proper cooking techniques, proper sautéing, but not so great French cooking because he did not

have that background. Back in the 70's, the hotel chefs just had a different mentality, it was about cranking food out and long hours and face time and not so much of a focus on high quality ingredients. I wanted to go to the Culinary Institute, but at this point my parents were divorced and part of the reason was because of the restaurant and the long hours, so my mother did not want me to get into the restaurant business. She started crying, she said, "Oh my God, you will be like your father!" So I left for Europe and traveled around and lived in a couple of places and came back and then realized, "You know what, I really want to cook."

**NRZI: What was your first trip to Europe like, did you work in restaurants or were you just traveling for enjoyment?**

*Terrance Brennan:* When I was at the Hilton, I was 19 and I met an Aussie who was a master carpenter and he just traveled the world. He never cooked but he talked his way into this kitchen at the Hilton. He told me that he was going to Cardiff in the U.K. to see a girlfriend of his, why don't you come along, and I said sure why not. In Cardiff we would go to job interviews together; if we were trying to get a job in a kitchen, I would carry him, and if we were to get a job in carpentry, he would carry me. One time we were building forms for a building's concrete footings, and I had no idea what I was doing. They pulled me away from my friend to go into the building and into this huge hole where they had to build a cement form box so they could keep the water pumping in there. I was like, "Oh my God. What are they going to ask me to do? I am going to be found out here." So I go down in the deep hole, mud up to my waist, and I'm banging on this big wooden box. I get up and the box is all crooked, but the concrete truck was waiting to pour and they were like, "Hurry up get out of there." All I could say was "Oh my God."

**NRZI: So your carpentry career was in jeopardy.**

*Terrance Brennan:* Definitely, so then I went to Ireland and cooked a little bit at a bar in a B&B, but it was not about cooking then, it was just about traveling. I got back and I realized I really wanted to cook, so I got a job at the Sheraton Hotel in D.C. I went the hotel route when I was 18, 19, and 20, and I rose very quickly up the ranks. I was executive Sous Chef when I was 21 and I was technically in charge of five restaurants. They were doing \$20 million in a big banquet facility, I wasn't the chef but I oversaw it all.

**NRZI: Were you satisfied at that point with running hotel restaurants?**

Pear "Torchon"

Smoked Maple Ice Cream and Chocolate Soup





*Terrance Brennan:* Well, there was a German sous chef there named Helmut Bauer and he was 30 years old with kids, and he worked like a dog and never saw his kids. I decided I wanted to be so damn good that I could take holidays off. I was thinking ahead when I had kids and a family because it is a tough business on a family. I realized I did not have a French cooking background, and when I was offered an executive chef job at a small hotel, it was decision time. Do I take that or do I really refine my cooking skills?

**NRZI: Obviously you chose the latter, did you go to France for that?**

*Terrance Brennan:* Not right away. I didn't know about all of these restaurants in Manhattan, so I got Bon Appetite magazine and wrote to La Cote Basque and Lutece. I wrote about a dozen letters and Andre Soltner wrote me back. I will never forget it; it was two sentences that said "I do not have an opening in my brigade at the moment. If you happen to come to New York, please stop by and see me." So during my next two days off, I came up to New York. I had never been here before, and I actually was offered a job at the Helmsley Hotel, thank God I didn't take that! So I knocked on Andre's door but he still did not have an opening, but he called Le Cirque which wasn't even on my radar, I didn't even know about them. I remember walking into Le Cirque, and at that time Alain Saille was the chef and he had this little cubby hole of an office. He had my resume pinned up and I was standing up outside the door while he was talking to me, and that was the interview, probably ten minutes. He said, "Okay, I will let you know." I went back to D.C. and he called me a week later and said "I have a job." I didn't know anyone in New York, so I asked one of my friends if they knew anyone there. Three weeks later I was sleeping on a couch with two punk rockers out in Nassau County, who were friends of a friend.

**NRZI: Sounds like an appropriate introduction to New York, was that in the early 80's?**

*Terrance Brennan:* That was January 1982, and I had no idea what I was getting into. When I got to Le Cirque, the person I was replacing was gone already. I did not speak any French and I had only one day of training from the sous chef and then I was on the line. My job was to expedite from behind the line of the tickets, so all the chef would say was "Pick up table 18, pick up table 22, pick up table 24, pick up five, pick up four." Luckily I had a very patient saucier, Ralph Tingle, who is in California now. I didn't know any French, and all the ordering was in French and the tickets were written in French. When I was executive Sous Chef I was not cooking on the line, I was organizing, checking, and orchestrating. I worked long hours at the hotel, but it was not really bending

over physically doing stuff, and the intensity at Le Cirque was insane. Alain is a great chef but he is old school, and we had 18 people in the kitchen. When Daniel came, there were 38 people in the kitchen. We were just always in the weeds everyday because he ran a tight ship and I was just blown out of the water with the screaming and the yelling, and I was like, "What the hell did I get into, man?"

**NRVI: You must have liked something about it to have stayed there and put up with it?**

Yes, it is a rush to be on the line every night cooking and the intensity and the action. The beginning was really quite an adventure, but I worked through it all.

**NRVI: So how long were you at Le Cirque altogether, and were you there when Daniel Boulud came on?**



**Casco Bay Cod  
Manila Clams, Cranberry Beans and Parmesan Gremolata**



*Terrance Brennan:* About two and a half years. I was in Europe when Daniel came. It was a great experience, I like to look at it as boot camp for cuisine because it was not the greatest and finest dining experience but they really got the best ingredients. It was the first time I came across white truffles, porcinis; all the really great ingredients. Le Cirque had a great reputation. It was three stars in the New York Times, and every time European chefs came to New York, they would always come there. That is why I met some of these other great chefs, and that's how I lined up my "finishing school" in Europe.

**NRWI: What was your "finishing school" like, working in Europe at places like La Gavroche in London, where Marco Pierre White and Gordon Ramsay got their starts, and Les Crayeres in France?**

*Terrance Brennan:* Back in the day, La Gavroche was the only three-star restaurant in London, but it was a nightmare. They had a bulldog for a chef de cuisine. It was the Roux brothers, but what they did with their chef de cuisine was, if they worked many years and they did a great job, they would help them set up their own restaurants, so he would be barking orders and it was so uncivilized there. The cooks slept on wood benches in a shack behind it, there was no break and they thought this is what three-star cooking was so about, so they just accepted it. It was almost comical, the chef's name was Steve, I do not remember his last name, but he was always saying "you're not gonna fuck with my stars!" It was very classic French and good training but everyone was miserable because we were all working 16 hours and inhaling food. That was not a terribly great experience. Gerard Boyer's Les Crayeres was a three-star restaurant in the Champagne District, what a beautiful kitchen! I saw a lot of things - for instance they froze stuff - and it made me understand that we could do just as well in this country.

**NRWI: You worked with Roger Verge during this time?**

*Terrance Brennan:* Yes, Le Cirque closed for three weeks or a month, so everyone went on vacation and I went in and worked with him. I had had a private dinner at Sirio's house with Verge and his saucier, who was the main dude in that restaurant and still to this day. Even here at Picholine the saucier is most

important, besides the chef of course, but the saucier has a very important position. That is being lost today because a lot of these contemporary restaurants do not make sauces so much anymore. They make dressings or emulsions and cooks are not getting a great training as far as that.

**NRYS: Do you consider yourself a good mentor to your chefs?**

*Terrance Brennan:* I am working on that. Maybe when I was younger I was so focused on perfection that it was hard. I was hard on myself, hard on the staff; then I realized that does not work very well. I have learned to not let my standards down but to be a little more flexible and more accepting of people's negatives and positives. I do not allow any profanity or yelling in the kitchen, although I used to be that way myself ten years ago. I am not saying no one ever yells but we try and keep it very professional. We treat the dishwashers with the same amount of respect all the way up to me and the managers and staff. I am working on that part of it, to be more nurturing, to build a company that provides good living for people, good benefits and the opportunity to grow.

**NRYS: How do you take the kind of creativity that you have developed yourself and foster it in your young chefs?**

*Terrance Brennan:* Well, number one, I do not say "this is my cuisine or this is my food." I have a new chef now that I am working closely with, so it takes a little time because you cannot just hand over the kitchen and let him do his own thing because we have certain dishes and the clientele and I have to like it. They can still be creative, but it takes a little while to get matched up and get it in sync. It's a fine line not to just say, "this is what I want to do," but sometimes you have to do that to protect the integrity and the quality.

**NRYS: Your chef de cuisine for four years left recently, Craig Hopson. Did you collaborate well with him?**

*Terrance Brennan:* We were on the same page, but it did take a while, it took six months. But he knew what I liked and he knew what I wanted. I just would come in and if he did something, I just tweaked it a little bit or left it alone. When they are young cooks they have not found their own style yet, so they are influenced by where they work and the style of that restaurant.

**NRYS: So who is your new chef de cuisine?**

*Terrance Brennan:* Scott Quis. He was with Daniel, so he has that classical training. I did a couple of taste tests with him and the most important thing is that someone has got to

be able to cook. You'd be surprised that you will find chefs and they cannot cook. So during his auditions, he knew the style of food we do, but we let him cook and everything was cooked properly.

**NRYS: How do you stay ahead of the pack here at Picholine and make sure you have great ingredients?**

*Terrance Brennan:* Well, first it starts with the purveyors and farmers. You start with selecting the purveyors and the farmers that have the same mentality of the "best quality" and from there, it's communication. We still check everything every day because it is a business, but once you develop a very strong relationship they realize that you are checking things and that you will send it right back if something is not right. I have no problem with taking something off the menu if the quality is inferior. As a matter of fact, I think our customers appreciate that. It does not happen a lot, but if we say "Listen, the halibut was not up to Terrance's standard today and we are serving this instead," then our customers say, "Well, okay, he is really watching out for me." So we work with the best purveyors that have the same integrity and the same high standards that want to provide the best, and they are passionate.

**NRYS: Usually you have to pay a little more for that passion though, don't you?**

*Terrance Brennan:* A lot more. It is a struggle, because Jamison lamb for instance is extremely expensive, but it is the best. There is something in between too that is a very high quality. And when you do organic and sustainable which we try to do when we can, we buy from local farmers and support that, it is more expensive. Just the beef alone, if you want non-hormone and naturally raised, it is 30% more. That is a big number.

**NRYS: But it appears that, more and more, the fine dining public seems to understand and accept that.**

*Terrance Brennan:* The buzz words now are sustainable and organic. Stores like Whole Foods are helping promote that and I think customers realize that it does cost more. There is a lot that goes into this type of dining. It is costly in its labor; there are a lot of hands that do this type of food.

**NRYS: Can you give me an example of a new and upcoming ingredient that you are excited to try?**

*Terrance Brennan:* When we get Iberico hams that will be a big thing, because that's the best ham in the world. I am looking forward to working with that soon. Bringing it here was a legality issue, because they did not have the FDA approved processing plants. They are finished on hazel nuts



**Wild Scottish Grouse  
Spiced Pain Perdue and  
Cranberry-Ginger Coulis**



and herbs and the meat has this silkiness to it, but it's going to be very expensive. It's going to be like caviar prices. I also came across a new vegetable that I liked a lot.

**NRZI: What was it?**

*Terrance Brennan:* Celtuce. It's from the romaine family. Dan Barber from Blue Hills grows it in on his farm. I ate up there a few weeks ago and I said, "What is this?" They showed it to me, you take the core out of it and it's just an interesting vegetable. So I'm going to get some seed from Dan and have one of my farmers grow it for me next year.

You do stuff like that, you find something interesting and you talk to the farmers.

**NRZI: You just sold your wholesale cheese business, tell me what sparked the sale of that business.**

*Terrance Brennan:* It took a lot of my time and energy and it took me four years to finally get to a point where it was profitable. It is not like a restaurant where you open and the cash flow is good, but it did well and I am still a consultant there, but I do not run it day to day. My objective is to get back into my restaurant which I have been doing the last

several months, and then open some more. I am also very close to doing a deal in Chicago.

**NRZI: Would the place in Chicago be the same concept as Artisanal Bistro, or Picholine?**

*Terrance Brennan:* Artisanal. I am going to add a twist to it by adding a new component. I am going to do a cheese and wine bar. Like a sushi bar but with cheese, where you sit and get a slice of this and that, a Mediterranean food bar but with cheese being a big focus of it. We'd use artisanal products, promoting sustainable, and include a high end pizzeria with wood burning ovens; more of a flat bread style but really cool and interesting flat bread pizzas. I have more time now to look at real estate where I did not before.

**NRZI: What locations are you interested in?**

*Terrance Brennan:* These will be neighborhood places; I want to be downtown or in Chelsea. I don't want to hop on a plane to go to San Francisco, I want to stay in the same time zone. I love Chicago; I'll do a bistro there and then maybe Boston where I'd do a bistro and café. I think Boston is another great town.

**NRZI: Do you think that this will always be your only Picholine?**

*Terrance Brennan:* Yes, I think so. I would entertain moving it into a bigger space because if you take a peek in the kitchen it is very small, it is a tough space to work in. If something came along that made good business sense I'd maybe move it.

**NRZI: When you first opened Picholine that must have been difficult, was your mom still worried about you?**

*Terrance Brennan:* No, she was okay. I started getting some good press and she was very proud of me. She actually even lent me some money. I opened Picholine with \$90,000. I think my budget for redoing it was 50 grand. I wanted to keep 40 for operating. It was tough in the beginning, I was under-capitalized and I did not really want to do a pre-theatre restaurant. It was a bistro then, and I didn't have the money to

do a real fine dining restaurant with all the silver and the high-end kitchen. But I think what's great about this business is that you have a brand new opportunity every day to do it better. Back when it was a bistro I just kept on tinkering with it. It was not really filling up after eight o'clock, so unconsciously I said "maybe I'll make it more of a destination restaurant." It was not a total game plan like "over the next five years I'm going to transform into fine dining." It was just me and a couple of cooks, and one manager/maitre d'/sommelier. As we grew, we got better and better reviews and our customers responded. It just organically grew into a fine dining restaurant.

**NRZI: Which chefs do you admire most in New York?**

*Terrance Brennan:* I am French trained so I guess now I'm old school. I like the cooking style of Ducasse. He is Mediterranean. Daniel and I have a lot of the same background in our training. He worked at Roger Verge, he worked at the Polo Westbury Hotel where I was a chef. I see some similarities in our cooking, that classic French base. I like Jean-Georges for that contemporary stuff. I am not real crazy about molecular cuisine, but what Ferran Adria does is to take a classic combination and he works with the flavors that already worked before; then he does all his tricks with it. For me it is really about the ingredients, the quality, the execution, the marriage of flavor.

**NRZI: Your Sommelier Jason Miller is a very important part of your team here, matching wine with your French-inspired menu. How important is that to the overall experience at Picholine?**

*Terrance Brennan:* What some people forget nowadays is the wine that goes with the food. A lot of this contemporary food has a lot of acid, and what I like about French restaurants is that it is really about the wine too; it is food that you drink wine with. That makes it all the more pleasurable. ✕

**PICHOLINE FAVORITE  
PURVEYORS**

Jamison Lamb – 800 237 5262  
Vermont Quality – 802 747 5950  
Millbrook Venison – 845 677 8457  
Scottish Wild – 908 917 0976