

Cafe Annie coming back to life on Post Oak



James Beard Award-winning chef Robert Del Grande's restaurant, RDG + Bar Annie, had its roots as Cafe Annie, and soon it will return to that old name and original menu items.

By Greg Morago

Chef Robert Del Grande's shift from French to Southwestern cuisine was gradual. A slow simmer.

In the early '80s, Americans - and Houstonians, for that matter - associated French food with dining sophistication, Del Grande said. Houston was swimming in imported turbot, Dover sole and haricots verts.

But after hours, when Del Grande sat down to eat with the rest of the staff at Cafe Annie, no one ate French. Instead, they ate like locals, devouring tacos and enchiladas made from fresh

ingredients grown or cultivated nearby. Those foods and flavors made their way onto the menu at Cafe Annie. And Del Grande and a handful of Texas chefs, including Dean Fearing and Stephan Pyles of Dallas, found themselves at the forefront of a culinary movement that created a national sensation and made them superstars.

In Houston, under Del Grande's direction, Cafe Annie evolved into a temple of Southwestern cuisine that helped put the city on the culinary map. Even after the iconic restaurant was revamped in 2009 as the luxe RDG & Bar Annie on Post Oak, the owners, staff and

longtime customers still referred to it as Cafe Annie.

And now the past is prologue. On Wednesday, Cafe Annie will be reborn.

The RDG & Bar Annie signage will be changed, as will the menu and the website. And with that move, the Schiller Del Grande Restaurant Group steps into the future even as it embraces the past and a name synonymous with a golden era in Houston dining.

"History is the kind of thing that always happens, but you never really know it's happening until you look back," Del Grande mused.

Cafe Annie's history is worth

repeating.

Enterprising spirit

Lonnie and Candice Schiller opened the restaurant, then at 5860 Westheimer, in 1980, when French cuisine was all the rage. Months later, Del Grande, a young biochemist with a Ph.D. from the University of California at Riverside, moved to Houston to be with his girlfriend (now wife), Mimi, whose sister happened to be Candice Schiller. With no culinary training but an abundance of intense, analytical interest in cooking, Del Grande found himself in the Cafe Annie kitchen. Six months later, he was the chef.

“To everyone else, it was a job,” Del Grande said. “I thought it was an adventure.”

That enterprising spirit sent Cafe Annie in a new direction, away from classic French and the fussy “nouvelle cuisine” into a new territory that recognized indigenous foods and local flavors long before the farm-to-table movement took hold.

Del Grande became Houston’s first celebrity chef and, in 1992, took home the city’s first James Beard Award for Best Chef Southwest. That distinction was his alone until Chris Shepherd won in 2014 for his work at Underbelly.

“Cafe Annie was the holy grail,” said Shepherd, who got his culinary education at the Art Institute of Houston in 1995 and 1996. “He was the best of the best. As a cook we all wanted to work at Cafe Annie, Brennan’s, Tony’s and Mark’s.”

Del Grande harnessed the power of hyperlocal cuisine.

“Robert did food of this city and of this region and still does,” Shep-



Robert Del Grande and his wife Mimi Del Grande are the owners of the restaurant, RDG + Bar Annie. Del Grande, Houston’s first celebrity chef, is overseeing the revival of Cafe Annie as part of the restaurant’s 35-year anniversary.

herd said. “He started to open our eyes about what regional cuisine is.”

The Schiller Del Grande Restaurant Group went on to launch some memorable restaurants, including Taco Milagro, Cafe Express and The Grove, and also weathered some spectacular setbacks - the failed Ava Kitchen & Whiskey Bar and Alto Pizzeria. But none of their efforts shined brighter than Cafe Annie.

“Even in Dallas people still talk about Cafe Annie like it’s still there,” said chef Dean Fearing, of Fearing’s in Dallas.

Rabbit enchiladas

In the early ‘80s, the dollar was strong against the franc, and French food and wine were plen-

tiful and inexpensive in the United States.

“We were drinking Meursault like it was water, it was so cheap,” said Del Grande, now 61.

The chef began to ponder one of the tenets of nouvelle cuisine: using only the best ingredients on hand. While imported French products were plentiful, they weren’t local and certainly didn’t speak to indigenous foodways.

“We were cooking it,” Del Grande said of French food, “but we weren’t eating it.”

By “we” he meant his workers who, when they sat down to staff meals, fixed tacos and enchiladas instead of skate wing with brown butter. It dawned on Del Grande that cooking the best ingredients on hand meant using local foods.

One of the first dishes he pushed in a new direction was the tres-French rabbit in mustard sauce. He remembers tak-

ing parts of the rabbit not used for that classic dish and braising them with ancho and guajillo chile. The meat fell off the bone and he used it to make rabbit enchiladas. Both dishes employed rigorous technique, but only one talked Texas. The rabbit enchiladas ended up outselling lapin moutarde.

Del Grande grew emboldened.

“All of a sudden we started exploring more of the feeling of the Southwest and more of the feeling of Texas,” he said. New dishes, such as the tostada topped with Gulf crabmeat, started appearing on the menu. And then came experimentation with smoking meats and inventing haute barbecue sauces. That was followed by Thai curries.

Suddenly, kaffir lime, lemongrass and hoja santa leaves found their way into the kitchen. It was a profoundly new direction for Cafe Annie.

“This was something cool,” Del Grande said. “It wasn’t an imitation of something else. We felt like it was really ours, like we owned it. And that was at the heart of it. This was something we did ourselves, and it reflected Texas. Was it going to change the world? We weren’t thinking like that. We were living fast.”

By the late ‘80s, when Southwestern cuisine was flying high, Cafe Annie was the epicenter of the Houston dining scene, attracting socialites, politicians, philanthropists, megachefs and celebrities. Among them, former Gov. Mark White, Becca Cason Thrash, power duo John O’Quinn and Rob Wilson III, pre-fall-from-grace Kenneth Lay, Harold Farb, Wolfgang Puck, Lyle Lovett and Oscar Wyatt (who one night offered Mimi Del Grande \$50,000 in cash to “make the restaurant more quiet”). They dined on the dishes that made Del Grande famous: rabbit enchiladas, crabmeat tostadas, black bean terrine and coffee-rubbed beef tenderloin (perhaps Del Grande’s most widely copied creation) - all unforgettable plates that will be brought back to the resurrected Cafe Annie menu.



Rabbit enchilada at Cafe Annie.

That old feeling

Cafe Annie moved to Post Oak Boulevard in 1989. Throughout the ‘90s the restaurant continued to refine its definition of Texas cooking. In 2009 the building that housed the second Cafe Annie was torn down to make way for the development of BLVD Place and the construction of RDG & Bar Annie, at 1800 Post Oak. Cafe Annie needed a reboot, Del Grande said, because the new space was so physically different from the first two restaurants.

“There was no way we could get the old feeling into this new building,” he said.

Yet it’s that old feeling that the new Cafe Annie hopes to recapture.

“Cafe Annie was huge,” said

Patricia Sharpe, Texas Monthly executive editor and a food critic who has canvassed the state’s restaurant scene for 40 years. “It can really be compared to Underbelly just in terms of what it meant to the community, how it excited people were to eat there, and how it led a revolution. ... The thing that made it stand out is that it embraced Mexican ideas almost before anyone else.”

Sharpe said she never warmed to the RDG name. “It sounded like a corporation; it could have been a pharmaceutical company,” she said. “I still thought of it as Cafe Annie.”