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Post & Beam's well-seasoned restaurateur, Brad Johnson



Brad Johnson is a restaurateur and the owner of Post & Beam in Baldwin Hills. (Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times)

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Foodies tend to move like flocks of birds, swarming a chic eatery, and then — swoop — off to the next. One of their newer perches in Los Angeles is in a part of town that hasn't had much of the food spotlight. Post & Beam opened on New Year's Eve in Baldwin Hills, an area with as many economic ups and downs as the hills and canyons that give the neighborhood its name. Restaurateur Brad Johnson has cut the ribbon on some flashy restaurants in his native New York and in Los Angeles; now his foray into L.A.'s best-known black middle-class neighborhood gives him food for thought.

What's with the name? Fork & Plate I might expect, but Post & Beam?

"Post and beam" is one of the oldest forms of architecture, and was revived in mid-century. There's a lot of that around here — Ladera Heights, View Park, Inglewood. I love that period and the whole idea of form following function and simplicity. I'm a child of the '50s. I still have my dad's Eames chair.

Your dad was in the restaurant business too.

This was cause for amusement whenever I had to fill out an application with my parents' name and occupation. My dad's name was Howard Johnson, and I'd put, "Howard Johnson, restaurateur," and people would be, *the* Howard Johnson? And I'd say, yeah, *the* Howard Johnson but maybe not *that* Howard Johnson.

He purchased a restaurant in Manhattan in 1972, the Cellar, from a gentleman who thought the clientele had become too black. It was at 95th and Columbus. It was typical bistro food — chef salad, shrimp scampi, French onion soup, very hip in the '70s. My dad had a lot of charisma and had really good taste; he was the first African American clothing salesman for Paul Stuart. The restaurant became a real landmark for the African American community. That's where I grew up and started as dishwasher, busser, bartender. He said, "You have to earn some money, son!"

I went to college and studied hotel and restaurant management. I had a basketball scholarship at U Mass, and they happened to have a really good program.

So, Amherst then. Are you an Emily Dickinson fan?

No — Robert Frost!

What kind of food did you eat growing up?

My mom is Italian, my dad African American. He died five years ago. They grew up in Hartford, Conn., and worked at the same department store in the early 1950s. They risked a lot to say hello, much less hold hands and go out on a date.

We ate a mix of my mom's food, which is lasagna, all those Italian staples, and the food she learned to cook from my dad's family from Georgia. Wonder Bread, iceberg lettuce, fried chicken, spaghetti — the basics. We were very much an American family of the '50s and '60s. My mom still cooks the lasagna she made when I was 10. She works our host desk Mondays and Tuesdays for lunch; kisses and hugs everyone who walks through the door.

When did you strike out on your own in the business?

[A restaurant called] Memphis, on the Upper West Side, with New Orleans-style food. We had no name out front because we ran out of money. Gael Greene, the New York magazine restaurant critic, mentioned in her review that limousines were double-parked down Columbus Avenue in front of this place with no sign, and we thought, great, let's stick to that! I decided to give L.A. a try, so I came here in '89.

How did you start here?

Debbie Allen and Norm Nixon were friends of mine. I played basketball against Norm when he was at Duquesne. Before I moved here, they said, "We'll help you find investors." Elie Samaha, the producer, and I became partners at a nightclub [on Sunset] called Roxbury in 1989.

Then I did Georgia, a Southern restaurant on Melrose, and Norm and Debbie were partners of mine. BLT Steak [in West Hollywood] opened about five or six years ago, at the old Le Dome location on Sunset. Before that was the restaurant on the top floor of [what was] the Transamerica building. I opened a bar at the Venetian Hotel [in Las Vegas], which is still in operation.

You're a restaurateur but not a chef yourself?

I cook a little at home — turkey burgers, really, really simple stuff. I'm not going to pretend.

Restaurants are very iffy propositions. Some restaurants go on for decades, like your father's. Others seem doomed from the moment they serve the first meal.

It's all over the place. When I was younger, my interest in any particular venue just didn't stick. I was more interested in moving on and doing new things. As I've gotten older — I've gotten married in the last few years — I'm more interested in seeing if I can establish longevity.

And now Baldwin Hills? Why and how?

About three years ago, when Ken Lombard [*Magic Johnson's former business partner*] approached me, he said, I know this is not on your radar, but I want you to come take a drive around the area. I'd been here before, but honestly, I'd never looked to this area for business.

[There were plans] to renovate the mall. This space had been a Golden Bird fried chicken place. I thought, why not? There's a lot of people — it's the second-largest black middle-class neighborhood in the country — and I thought we should really consider it.

The area just down the street on Santa Rosalia had been known as the jungle, originally because of the beautiful foliage, but in the '80s and '90s it became gang-infested. It wasn't the natural place you'd think, oh yeah, let's put a restaurant here. But I'm so happy we did. The community has completely embraced us. I get thank yous for opening this restaurant, and that never happens.

But it's pretty far outside of the foodie comfort zone.

Yes: South of the 10? *Where?* I thought the best chance of success, and to get the [food] community to pay attention, was [hiring] someone known in culinary circles. Govind Armstrong became our executive chef and partner. Baldwin Hills really wasn't on his map at all!

Have the foodies discovered Post & Beam?

People who had no idea where Baldwin Hills is [now] say, hey, it's not that far from Hancock Park, from Culver City.[They] leave a couple of hours early for the airport and have dinner here. The other night Nancy Silverton was coming back from LAX and stopped in and had dinner.

That's because she couldn't get a reservation at her own restaurant, Osteria Mozza.

We should have that problem!

Define the food at Post & Beam.

We have yet to find the perfect one-liner. It's California seasonal for sure. We have a wood-burning pizza oven. We didn't want to do soul food — there's enough of that. And much as I love fried chicken and macaroni and cheese, you're not supposed to eat like that that often. So instead of fried chicken, we have pan-seared chicken, black-eyed peas with yams, collard greens — there's not a lot of salt, not a lot of butter.

Do you feel a special responsibility about healthy food leadership here?

That certainly wasn't part of our thought process in creating the food and the concept. You don't want to stand up on a soapbox and preach to people. At the same time, our portions aren't falling off the plate. We don't try to make you feel so full you feel guilty.

Without overstating it, I think restaurants are important for society. People [need] a place that allows you to see your friends, run into each other.

Is healthy eating an individual's responsibility or society's?

A little bit of both. Old habits are hard to break. It's possibly the responsibility of the entrepreneur or politician to make things available because in this community, the choices for healthier eating can be limited. Our produce we get from the South Central farmers market and the farmers market down the street, or grow it in our own garden outside so we can offer people good, healthy eating options.

Was it hard to figure out the price point for the menu?

It really was a consideration: to do food on a par with every other hot food location, but we don't want to charge prices that people will feel, this is not the value I'm looking for. Certainly with the pizzas, being able to price those at \$10, \$11, \$12, that's very family friendly.

Were you able to hire some locals?

Since we've established ourselves, we've gotten a lot more interest from the local community, but initially — I don't know if it was skepticism, or whatever the reason — when we ran our ads, we didn't get a lot of locals.

Your website makes a point of "reservations not required."

The intention was to keep it casual. You start reserving tables and the place is completely booked and locals feel like they can't get in -- we just wanted it accessible to everybody and hoped "reservations not required" would send that signal.

Do you have a favorite restaurant-themed movie?

That Julia Roberts movie comes to mind, "Mystic Pizza." I have a real soft spot for New England, for one, and just the family restaurant, the critic coming in and loving your product and you send somebody to college!

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This interview was edited and excerpted from a taped transcript. An archive of Morrison's interviews can be found at latimes.com/pattasks.