

VANITY FAIR

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Restaurateur Brad Johnson on New York's 70s Foodie Scene and His Latest L.A. Venture, Willie Jane

by [Marissa Eisele](#)

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FOOD

COURTESY OF BRAD JOHNSON.

Brad Johnson.

A man of many pursuits, Brad Johnson has opened foodie hot spots and clubs on both coasts. You might credit the fact that he's dinner-club royalty, the kin of New York restaurateur Howard Johnson, who owned the star-studded Upper West Side restaurant the Cellar in the 70s. But Brad has made a name of his own, first opening the real-life Roxbury, on which the Will Ferrell–Chris Kattan comedy was based, and then moving on to producing fresh, Southern-influenced cuisine at Post & Beam. His latest venture is Willie Jane, a Southern-hospitality restaurant on Abbot Kinney Boulevard. VF Daily caught up with Johnson about washing dishes at his dad's restaurant and hiring Universal Pictures co-chairman Donna Langley way back when. Highlights from our chat:

Marissa Eisele: Your dad was in the restaurant business as well.

Brad Johnson: Yes, in New York City. He was there for a long time. He had a place on the Upper West Side that I kind of grew up in.

Was the restaurant business always a passion of yours?

Yes. I got exposed to it as a kid through my dad's place and got a good peek at what social life for adults looked like. It was a great time in New York, the 70s. Broadway was full of great plays and live performances. We did live music at his restaurant. I was a dishwasher, and I would get to peek out of the kitchen.

How old were you?

Fourteen or fifteen years old.

Seeing all the Broadway stars come through at that age must have been crazy.

Broadway stars, movie stars—it was phenomenal. The place was in a mixed neighborhood. It was predominately African American. Then, because it developed a reputation for music and food, it attracted people from Bianca Jagger to Muhammad Ali.

Do you think there is a difference between diners in New York and Los Angeles?

There certainly was then. New York was a bunch of bistros and pubs, and Caesar salad, chef salad, and shrimp scampi. The real foodie movement had not taken hold. Sushi wasn't something we talked about at all in the 80s.

The first place I did in L.A. was a nightclub called Roxbury. You know the movie *A Night at the Roxbury*? They named it after the nightclub. I did that club based on the belief that there wasn't the nightlife in Los Angeles that I had seen in New York. I came to Los Angeles and we were able to get this great building and do three concepts in one: a nightclub on the top, restaurant in the middle level, and a blues club on the first level.

Walking into Willie Jane, the place feels very homey—like there are a lot of good memories behind it. Did you have family traditions centered on food while growing up?

My dad was African American. He passed away about six years ago. My mom is Italian. Between those two cultures, food is definitely a place where we gather. My mom adopted a lot of my dad's family's recipes. His family is from Georgia. Old, good Southern recipes like fried chicken and collard greens. So it was a mix of Italian and Southern food.

At Post & Beam you grow your vegetables on-site. Is that farm-to-table technique going to happen at Willie Jane?

Absolutely. We haven't announced this formally—you are actually the first person we are telling—but we are planting a garden next door to here in the vacant lot.

It was my partner Govind [Armstrong]'s idea to do the garden at Post & Beam. We get great herbs and strawberries and tomatoes, and we get giant squash in the summer. The amount of interest that it generated was just phenomenal. We now do gardening classes and get 30 people on a Saturday morning together.

Tell me about the menu. What can we expect?

It's Southern food with low-country influences like South Carolina and New Orleans, the coastal towns. I grew up with very traditional Southern foods like ham hocks, and macaroni and cheese, and corn bread—all the stuff you know you shouldn't eat that often. Govind has a really unique way of giving you that experience, but not in a way that you feel like you've done the worst thing in the world for your cholesterol level or heart. He is great with vegetables and produce, and that is always going to be a part of what we're doing. There is this hickory-smoked steak, and the Dungeness-crab soup is phenomenal. The whole curried oxtail is ridiculous.

How do you keep your edge? What does the Post & Beam group do to keep people coming to their restaurants?

When we opened Roxbury, we didn't have any competition for maybe three years. You open up a club in Hollywood now, and how do you even keep up? I think it is about the basics. People expect a good experience food-wise. But it's also about good service. I think it's the fact that we acknowledge you, and you matter.

For most people, this business is not their career final stop, but it is a path to wherever they're going. I have been in the business for a long time. Roma Downey worked the coat-check room at [my former New York restaurant] Memphis, and [Universal Pictures co-chairman] Donna Langley was a host at Roxbury. I've seen the work ethic of people who succeed, and they do that at every job they have.