

DURING A LONG CAREER WITH GENERAL ELECTRIC, including 21 years as CEO/President of various regions of General Electric Asia, Mark Norbom dreamed about the restaurant industry. He'd grown up wanting to cook. "I've always had cooking in my family," he says. His grandfather, a chef and restaurant owner in Europe, had cooked for the Grand Duke of Luxembourg. Norbom had cooked at a French restaurant for four years during school, and had cooked ever since at home.

"Food at his house was a precision cooking affair," recalls Tim Payne, Brunswick Senior Partner and Head of Asia, who over the years dined several times at Norbom's home. "At the time I put it down to the exacting standards of a GE boss, but I came to realize it was the deep love affair of a gastronome."

On retiring from GE, Norbom moved back to the New York area, and engaged a real estate broker to scout out locations in the city to start a restaurant with a chef he'd befriended in Florence, Italy. But before they could execute their plan, the celebrated chef had to take a new role. At just that moment, Norbom received a call from his real estate broker, proposing to introduce him to two possible partners, both superstars of high-end New York dining.

The chef was Chris Cipollone, who had first gained attention at an obscure hotel restaurant in east Midtown. A *New York Times* reviewer, happening upon that restaurant in 2011, had foreseen Cipollone becoming a star. "Imagine yourself telling friends how you used to eat the chef Chris Cipollone's food back when he was cooking in that grim hotel space in Midtown," the *Times* reviewer wrote.

Next, Cipollone served as Executive Chef of Piora, a West Village Italian restaurant where he won a Michelin star. A *Times* reviewer in 2013 wrote that his party of four diners wound up fighting over an appetizer of carrots. "Some of the carrots were roasted in ham fat until they collapsed into their own sweetness; some had a humming spiciness locked inside them; under them was tangy white yogurt and on top, a pink drift of powder."

Now it was 2018, and Cipollone had just returned from California, where he'd hoped to open a restaurant, only to find that he missed New York. A native of New York's Hudson River Valley, Cipollone had grown up cooking with local and seasonal ingredients. "I'm a New Yorker born and bred," he says.

Yearning to start anew, Cipollone ran into John Winterman, whose resume included front-of-house positions for notable chefs Charlie Trotter and Gary Danko, before he served as maître d'hôtel at New York's Daniel (by some lights the best restaurant in

A brasserie opens in Brooklyn, during the pandemic, and wins a Michelin star. Meet the Chef, General Manager and Investor behind Francie. By HUNTER HALLMAN

America). Now he was an owner and operator of the Michelin-star-winning Bâtard in Tribeca. The history between him and Cipollone went back aways.

"He ate at my old restaurant, I ate at his restaurant," says Cipollone. There was also a supply-chain connection: Winterman's wife owned a Korean importing company from which Cipollone ordered specialty goods for Piora.

As potential partners, Winterman and Cipollone began exploring sites in Manhattan—Commerce Street, Gramercy Park, Irving Place. Nothing was quite right. Then their real estate agent led them to an empty spot at the corner of Bedford and Broadway in Brooklyn's Williamsburg neighborhood.

Constructed as a bank by architect Frank J. Helmle in 1901, the neo-renaissance style building, with its limestone blocks and ornate granite columns, has a certain imposing grace. But for Winterman, the charm vanished one step inside. Long ago, a financial services company had taken over the former bank's first floor, lowering the ceiling, adding fluorescent lights and cutting floor space into cubicles. "It was god-awful, soul stealing," recalls Winterman.

Yet the raw space appealed to him, so he invited Cipollone to see it. "Chris stood in the middle of the space and said, 'This is our restaurant.'"

To see their dream inside an abandoned office

A PANDEMIC CULINARY TRIUMPH

took a bit of imagination, and to bring it to life would take a good bit of money. Winterman had friends who wanted to invest, but it was not nearly enough. What the two of them needed was an investor, but it had to be someone who shared their dream. Their real estate broker was also Norbom's.

"The broker said, 'I know these two guys who have their eye on a space, and they're looking for a partner and investor,'" recalls Norbom. "I met with Chris and John and the concept they had in mind was very close to the concept I had in mind—an upscale American brasserie with great food but not stuffy. My wife and I were invited over to John's home to meet their wives. Chris cooked for us all and this is when we all knew this was it."

They leased the space, planning to name their restaurant after the building's original tenant. "We originally wanted to call the restaurant Trust,



In suit and tie, Winterman stands behind Cipollone, in apron with arms crossed, and beside Norbom, in blue sport coat.

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF FRANCIE

because in 1902 this was the Nassau Trust Company," explains Norbom. They even ordered a host podium engraved with the word Trust. They filed for the name and were turned down by the New York financial authorities—Trust was a protected label.

Then Winterman suggested Francie—the name of the young protagonist in Betty Smith's novel "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn." That story, turned into a classic 1945 film, took place in the very Williamsburg neighborhood where the old bank building stood. Cipollone enlisted his brother-in-law, the artist Esao Andrews, to paint a mural for the entry lobby depicting Francie under the eponymous tree.

At the time they chose Francie, their connection to that story was purely geographical. But in the months ahead, the little girl who proved so hopeful and resilient amid stark circumstances became a genuine role model for the three.

FRANCIE WAS NAMED AFTER THE PROTAGONIST OF "A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN," AND LIKE THAT GIRL, THE BRASSERIE HAD TO WITHSTAND SETBACK AND DISAPPOINTMENT.

In May of 2019 they established a planned opening date of spring 2020. As the calendar turned to the new year, that timetable looked reasonable. Construction was well under way. The rent-free period of the buildout for the space was ending. The menu was written. Flatware and glassware and masonry for the bar were ordered.

In March came the COVID-19 pandemic. The City of New York shut down all indoor dining and, on the 27th of that month, all nonessential construction. "Seventy-four days of nothing going on in the space we had signed away our lives to," recalls Cipollone. "It was like walking through the forest at night: You could only see what was right in front of you." Nonetheless, Cipollone was in the space every day, fine-tuning his kitchen and his menu.

The city allowed nonessential construction to resume in June 2020, "but now, every office and

permitting structure in the city is way behind,” recalls Cipollone. “The health department, the fire department, gas, materials. And the pandemic decimated the city as far as talented labor to work with us.”

With their budget blown, the three got creative about furnishing the space. “I invited the guys up to my house in Connecticut, and we plundered art from various rooms to decorate the hallway and the private dining room,” says Norbom. “Actually, I see it more down here than I ever saw it at home.”

The city allowed restaurants to open with safety measures in place in December 2020, but it was a short-lived victory. Francie has no outdoor space, so plastic sheeting hung between tables spaced six feet apart. Bar seating was not allowed. Norbom recalls a night when they had only 12 guests and five of them were his daughter and her friends, whom he was treating. The restaurant was open for seven meals before the city again shut down indoor dining.

But those seven meals had proven something. “We had this core of great employees who had come to us because of John’s and Chris’s connections,” recalls Norbom. “Now, after a week and a half of being open—and now shut again—we gave them the Braveheart speech. We said, ‘We’ve proven that we have the chef, we have the location, we have the people, we have the kitchen that can do this right. I’m not sure when we’re going to reopen, but we will be here, and we want you all to come back.’”

Norbom himself had never felt more determined. “Not that I didn’t really focus on my job at GE, and put my all into it, but this is personal—a personal investment, a personal commitment, and something I really wanted to do,” he says.

When indoor dining was allowed to resume before Valentine’s Day, every original staff member but one came back. Still, it wasn’t smooth sailing. “A lot of restaurants geared up to get open for Valentine’s Day weekend like it was some sort of generous boon from the state. We weren’t really prepared for that. The kitchen had to get back in and have a week of prep,” says Winterman. Moreover, “business was dead,” adds Cipollone. “That was the most terrifying part. We’re allowed to open, but nobody wants to eat out.”

“The light switch,” he says, “was the Michelin star.”

In the few weeks Francie had been open for business before March 2021, Michelin diners had secretly visited at least five times. Cipollone got a call at the end of March to be interviewed by renowned chef Daniel Boulud, believing it was about challenges for the restaurant industry at large during the pandemic.

During the course of the interview, the Michelin-organizers called Chef Boulud, who put the call on

speaker for Chris to hear. It was Michelin, and they told Chris he had earned a star.

At that moment, as usual, all three founders were busy in the restaurant. “Mark was polishing silverware in the coat check,” quips Winterman. It had been that way night after night, month after month. “We, all three of us, were all in.”

To await the official awarding of the star, the three partners had to keep the secret for over a month. The day before the public announcement, the three owners told their staff, thinking it was unlikely to drastically change anything.

“Then the phones started ringing, the book started filling up,” Cipollone describes. “I had four line cooks, one sous chef and pastry chef, one prep guy, and one dishwasher. That was all we had, and it was crazy. Knock on wood, it’s a blessing, but it was just nuts trying to deal with that.”

Six months later came an extraordinarily favorable review. *New York Times* critic Pete Wells wrote that he had dined at Francie the day of his first COVID-19 vaccine dose in March 2021. “When you’ve been wandering and lost, in the woods or in the wilds of your apartment, Francie is there to welcome you



Above, a mural by Esao Andrews depicting the fictional Francie and eponymous tree, on display just inside Francie.

Right, dry-aged crown of duck is the most popular entree. Below, through a window the evening sun glowed red against neighboring brick buildings, in brilliant contrast to Francie’s earthy tones.



back,” Wells wrote. In an article subtitled, “This Italian-accented restaurant in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, makes a convincing, comforting argument for the pleasures of an indoor meal,” Wells raved about clams, the duck and a Cipollone-made jam.

One afternoon in December of 2021, the three owners told their story to the *Brunswick Review*, their forged-in-the-trenches camaraderie palpable. The pandemic seemed all but over. The plexiglass they’d once installed was gone, as was the QR code for accessing the menu on one’s phone. The weeks ahead were booked. Reservations were hard to get.

Days later, Omicron arrived, and Francie had to close again, this time for the week of Christmas.

Francie is now open for dinner service Tuesday through Saturday, and it operates at near capacity. Enter the glossy black doors and you encounter the mural: the little girl Francie holding a giant cornucopia of fresh ingredients. The host podium still fittingly bears the name Trust. The interior is warm and inviting, featuring low light, exposed brick and an open kitchen.

One Saturday in late May, Winterman and Norbom, wearing T-shirts beneath sport coats, stood near the host podium, greeting and seating the first patrons of the evening. As the dining room filled with guests and servers bearing drinks and dishes from the kitchen, Cipollone, Winterman and Norbom embodied the term active partner. Winterman and Norbom tended the dining room, serving and entertaining guests, while through a large window into the kitchen, Cipollone could be seen darting from stove to stove to counter, conferring with staff and scrutinizing orders. Outside, the evening sun glowed red against neighboring brick buildings, a brilliant contrast to Francie’s earthy tones and soft light.

The staff that evening seemed abundant, the service relaxed, knowledgeable and precise, and clearly accustomed to guest astonishment. One diner in a black dress marveled over one dish and bowl after another, praising not only caviar, prawns and pasta but the sleek dinnerware in which it all was served. Design is no less a priority in the kitchen, from which whipped lardo arrives in the shape of a pig.

The two premier entrees—dry-aged crown of duck and prime cote de boeuf—arrive sizzling in pans, to be admired and photographed, before returning to the kitchen to undergo a knife. Those two entrees, listed as “for two,” reflect an ethos of sharing that infuses the dining room, where presentations from the kitchen routinely elicit oohs and ahs from nearby tables, especially when Winterman rolls past with his curated cheese cart. This informal

pageantry inspires conversation between tables. A seven-year-old diner in a dress festooned with hot dogs takes to the dance music piped into the bathrooms. “Let’s dance!” she tells her mother.

“Egalitarian” is a word the three Francie partners emphasize. “We wanted to build a restaurant that’s for the city, for the people,” says Cipollone. “Those basic things that were taken away from us were given back in full force, and that was because we stuck to our guns. We never changed what we set out to do.”

Norbom agrees. “When people come in, they tell us that they’re sort of transported a little bit. And that’s really what we were targeting . . . People come here to escape what they’ve gone through. And we can provide that kind of atmosphere.”

As general manager, Winterman strives to perfect every element of the Francie experience, including the soundtrack. “The first couple of weeks we had this sort of Frenchy, jazzy, throaty thing going on where it was nice, but it wasn’t really giving us the energy we needed. Then we just switched to The Pretenders and Blondie and Talking Heads, and it clicked. There’s a group of our clientele that really seems to like that style of music, which transcends generations in a way. Because with streaming services, Blondie transcends generations just like The Rolling Stones do, just like The Talking Heads.

“A lot of restaurants in the past decade in New York have kind of leaned into very loud music, while we tend to be hypersensitive about the level of the music,” says Winterman. “When we first start seating people we don’t want to blow them out of the water, but we also don’t want it to be quiet when they walk in. As the conversation grows, we’ll balance the music level with the conversation. As the energy level rises, we might turn the music up a little bit because we realize, ‘OK, everybody’s in Francie party mode.’” As an aside, he adds, “we’ve got the drummer of The Spin Doctors coming back tonight so I made sure we put a Spin Doctors song on for him.”

Says Cipollone: “Usually you go to a more high-end place and it’s very calm, and you can’t have fun with it. But here you get amazing music along with high-end food and first-class but not stuffy service. We want people to have fun with it. We want people to enjoy themselves, let loose if they want to.”

The chef reflects for a second. “This is where the pandemic is a positive thing for us,” Cipollone says. “People are so ready to come back to restaurants. What we’re hearing from our clientele is, ‘I can’t believe you built this during the pandemic. And I can’t believe I’m dining here. And oh my god, I haven’t had food like this in forever!’” ♦

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