My suburban Chicago upbringing was one of Campbell’s soup casseroles and Christmas dinners at the local Chinese restaurant. Like most Americans in the 1970s, my family’s culinary culture was more about convenience than gastronomy. There was little interest in cooking, except to fill our bellies. Our finest dinner was a sliced hotdog topped with mashed potatoes and shredded cheese and then broiled (to this day I have a weakness for Vienna sausages). Living in such an uninspired food environment kept me in the dark. I never knew what “real” food was and never questioned what I was served or expected anything better. Luckily, over the past forty years I have encountered many talented cooks, chefs, and others in the food industry who have offered me gastronomic experiences that have defined my career as a chef. Without them, I would still be that boy lost in the dark.

While growing up, I worked for a couple of restaurants as a busboy or dishwasher. I loved the work and loved earning money, but I learned little about food. On my days off, I’d help my grandpa pull weeds and mow the lawn. One afternoon he shared a vine-ripened tomato with me that he had grown alongside his house. It was the most delicious thing I had ever tasted. I thought, “People actually grow stuff, for real?” As far as I knew, vegetables were packed in cans in the valley of the Jolly Green Giant and could be obtained only in grocery stores. My introduction to fresh, homegrown food continued when I met my wife. Her family lived on a working farm in Wisconsin, where they grew and raised fresh produce, eggs, and livestock—you name it, they grew or raised it. I was awestruck by the farm and motivated to learn all I could about what it takes to bring fresh food to the table.

After I graduated with a degree in hospitality from the University of Wisconsin, my dad took me to Jazz Fest in New Orleans. What a crazy experience that was! I remember sitting with a cold beer and a big pile of crawfish, the seasoning and spices so much more exciting than the bland flavors of my Midwestern youth. Talk about heaven! A whole new world opened up to me. After only one short week I was anxious to discover what else I had been missing.

This led me to the culinary program at Kendall College. It was a perfect fit—I was a natural with a knife. For the first time in my life I took something seriously. At Kendall I met my first mentor, Chef Larry Smith. He taught his students the importance of balancing flavors and urged us to “steal with our eyes.” “Work in a good kitchen,” he said, “and surround yourself with successful people.” In other words, put yourself in an environment where you can learn from others. That remains some of the best advice I’ve ever received.

Not long after graduating, I was given the opportunity to move down South for an internship with Jamie Shannon, the executive chef at Commander’s Palace, who had paid his own dues under Emeril Lagasse. New Orleans—the smell, the warmth—was everything I had remembered. There’s just something about the South that makes me feel more alive. The kitchen at Commander’s Palace was top-notch and exactly the type of place Chef Larry had encouraged me to seek out. It was staffed with successful, talented people who made everything from scratch. I learned a lot in that kitchen—and it was there that I started to really understand food. But I was especially grateful to learn that if you find a job that you love, you’ll never “work” a day in your life.

From there, I began to move up the culinary ladder. I was asked to work at Palace Café, thus beginning my long career with restaurateur Dickie Brennan. When I became head of the kitchen, I brought along all the advice and lessons I had received throughout my training. Palace Café was a relatively new restaurant (then four years old), and its kitchen was ripe for definition. I was determined to turn the kitchen at Palace Café into the type of environment Chef Larry had opened my eyes to, including making the kitchen a teaching space. I wanted to share the knowledge my mentors had shared with me and help others awaken to the vast world of food I had first tasted with my grandfather’s homegrown tomato. And, even though my staff and I were the teachers, we found ourselves learning alongside our students, who came from all over the United States.
After Hurricane Katrina, when we weren’t as busy as we had once been, some of my chefs and I started researching old Creole recipes. One chef from Cajun Country showed us things he had grown up doing, like properly seasoning a cast-iron pot and making darn good boudin. We asked ourselves, “What else could we make from scratch?” and that got our creative wheels turning. We had always made our sauces and desserts from scratch, but now we were inspired to do more. We began smoking our own pork bellies for bacon, making our own pasta, and creating different types of sausages, like chaurice, chorizo, and andouille. I also encouraged my staff to delve into memories of their youth and try to duplicate or expand on the dishes they remembered.

It was at this time that we decided to include hotdogs in our repertoire. I wanted to create my own version of this classic American food. One year, during the week of July 4, our culinary team spent hours perfecting the “swirly” dog, a composite of white hots from Rochester, New York, and Vienna beef from Chicago, topped with homemade relish, pickles, mustard, and Creole ketchup. Together we elevated the status of the hotdog and made it “gourmet.” These dogs even made it to our specials menu. I loved making something that my guests had fun eating. For them, it was a childhood meal all grown up.

In 2007 I became the executive chef at both Palace Café and Bourbon House, a seafood and oyster bar also owned by Dickie Brennan. Bourbon House is a place where I’ve been able to experiment with the abundance of local products grown and caught in the area. And, because traditional New Orleans cooking provides endless possibilities for improvisation, I began adding my own twist to the old Creole recipes I had studied. I’ve made them contemporary and exciting yet still recognizable to those who appreciate good southern classics. For instance, New Orleanians love a “Peacemaker,” a.k.a a fried-oyster po’boy. At Palace Café Chef Ben Thibodeaux and I created an oyster loaf appetizer. Instead of French bread we used ciabatta, which we sliced thin and grilled. We topped the bread with fried oysters and drizzled it with a sherry-tasso cream sauce, then garnished it with arugula. Our Oyster Loaf had all the elements of the traditional po’boy; we simply reworked them.

At Bourbon House my cooking has come full circle. My connections and friendships with local farmers and fishermen remind me of the time I spent with my wife and her family in Wisconsin, where my culinary philosophy took root. I am able to continually stretch my boundaries as a cook, and I can both teach and learn from those in my kitchen. Best of all, every day I am given the chance to create a stronger food culture here in New Orleans.