



Empire

STATE OF MIND

By Mimi Faucett Trahan // Portrait by Candace Moore

When I talk to Benjamin Berg, he's standing outside of the barely opened Annie Café & Bar (formerly Café Annie), where he and chef Robert Del Grande will be tasting prospective menu items. As Berg Hospitality Group's owner, Berg has surely gotten used to this process over the past year, during which time he has opened B.B. Lemon Washington, B.B. Lemon Montrose, B.B. Italia Kitchen & Bar and B.B. Pizza To Go—that's five if you count "The Annie," and that's in addition to his first venture, B&B Butchers & Restaurant (and its subsequent Fort Worth location). If it's an empire he's building, he's certainly the emperor, and we, his loyal subjects, will keep coming back for more.

So you're from New York. When did you move here?

In the summer of 2011, right when Houston was going through, like, 40 straight days of 100 degrees. I thought, 'What the hell did I do?'

As a former New Yorker myself, I get an 'old New York' vibe from your concepts, especially B.B. Lemon.

That's 100% intentional. Here, I feel there's a lack of the neighborhood kind of places that you can find in New York, where you just feel comfortable going and it's not a big ordeal.

I think of you as a preservationist, of buildings and restaurants.

It's really expensive to fake it, and to fake it well. When I decided to open my own restaurant, I had a hard time imagining myself going to a strip mall every day, even the nice ones. Finding old spaces adds a ton of character and ambiance that's hard to create. Plus, I get a lot of respect. With Carmelo's and

B.B. Italia, for instance, people had their prom dinner or an engagement dinner there. We can change and reimagine them, but we have to keep those memories alive.

Okay, let's talk about Annie.

I was always a little fearful of a second-floor restaurant. It's risky. But as time went on, and I spent time with Robert, I got more excited. We clicked. We're doing a lot of new menu items, in his style—great presentations, a little more seafood, a great lunch menu. The interiors are going to be kick-ass.

Anything else?

We are opening a completely different concept underneath Annie called Turner's. It's going to be awesome. Like a Lemon on steroids, a Polo Bar type of place.

What do you love most about the Houston restaurant scene?

Restaurants are the entertainment here. We have an extra responsibility to guests. We have to hit it at every point: bar, experience, dining—it's everything. Because we *are* their Saturday night most of the time. They are 'no bullshit.' You can't fake them.

Whenever I'm at one of your concepts, you're always chatting with the patrons.

I can't sit down and eat in my own restaurants. I've gone to weddings of guests I've met here. I met my initial investors in B&B when I was managing the Smith & Wollensky. This business can really beat you down, but you get a high off of the people in your restaurant. And they say thank you. A New Yorker would never say thank you! No way. ■