



**TOM VALENTI**

**THEN** Valenti first hit it big at Alison on Dominick, where he was named one of *Food & Wine* magazine's "Ten Best New Chefs" of 1989. When this picture was taken in 1994 he had just moved to Cascabel, at which he also won rave reviews.

**NOW** Valenti is co-owner and executive chef of Oust. His most recent cookbook, *You Don't Have to Be a Diabetic to Love This Cookbook*, proves he's still pushing the culinary envelope in new ways.

**BOBBY FLAY**

**THEN** Flay had made a name for himself with his successful restaurant Mesa Grill, and had just opened Bolo to great acclaim. He'd also received a James Beard Foundation Rising Star Chef of the Year award in 1993.

**NOW** In addition to overseeing his current six restaurants, Iron Chef Flay has maintained a dizzying pace of cookbook authorship (10 so far) and TV appearances, leaping into celebrity chef-dom on the Food Network's *Iron Chef* in 2000 and still going strong more than a decade later.

**ALAN HARDING**

**THEN** Harding was chef de cuisine at Tribeca's innovative vegetarian restaurant, Nosmo King. Within a few years of this photo, Harding left Manhattan for Brooklyn to open Patois, a French restaurant that helped establish that borough's then-down-at-heel Smith Street as a foodie mecca.

**NOW** The serial restaurateur has been involved in a slew of Brooklyn restaurants—all of them with better food than their low-key vibes suggest—and has recently branched out into food trucks as well.

**LAURENCE KRETCHMER**

**THEN** Business partner with Bobby Flay at both Mesa Grill and Bolo, Kretchmer was more than just a money man: He authored the *Mesa Grill Guide to Tequila* in 1998.

**NOW** Still a partner with Flay in his numerous restaurants, Kretchmer has also been influential in reinvigorating cocktail culture, through such ventures as New York's Bar Americain.

**ERIC BROMBERG**

**THEN** Chef and co-owner of the one Blue Ribbon restaurant. (Blue Ribbon, by the way, is English for *cordon bleu*.)

**NOW** In 1996 the brothers opened Blue Ribbon Sushi. Now Eric and his younger brother oversee a small empire of Blue Ribbon offshoots and products. In addition to food, both brothers love cycling. Last year they gave away brand-new bicycles (more than 160 of them!) to their employees who rode in a Multiple Sclerosis fund-raising cyclathon.

FOOD

# BLUE RIBBON'S DEEP, DELICIOUS ROOTS

THE FASCINATING HISTORY OF THE BROMBERG BROTHERS AND THEIR RAPIDLY EXPANDING COMFORT FOOD EMPIRE.

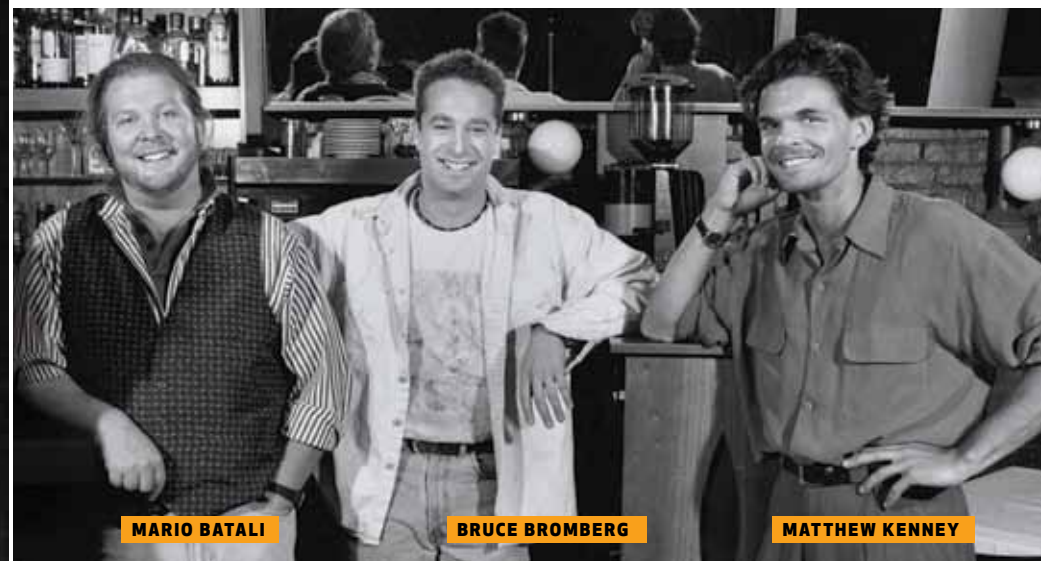
CHANCES ARE, IF you were a savvy chef or musician working late hours in New York in the early 1990s, you hustled on over to Blue Ribbon restaurant in SoHo to see what all the fuss was about. Chefs who are now practically household names, like Mario Batali, Daniel Boulud, and Tom Colicchio, were among the earliest pa-

trons. Nobu co-founder Drew Nieporent remembers talking Blue Ribbon up to a young Bobby Flay and influential food critic Gael Greene at *New York Magazine*. "It was a revelation," he says. Crowds, including Paul McCartney and Mick Jagger (once on the same night), flocked there to experience the Bromberg brothers' haute comfort food.

Lines formed at 7:30 p.m., 10:30 p.m., and then again at 12:30 a.m. to sample the fried chicken, pu pu platter, and beef marrow with oxtail marmalade.

No eatery in the city had ever commanded such a rabid cult following so quickly—or so consistently. To this day, seats are hard to come by. In recent years, the brothers have

Many of the chefs who hung out at Blue Ribbon in its early days were already hot, and have only gotten more so in the intervening years.



**MARIO BATALI**

**THEN** Super Mario had only one restaurant, Po, and no TV shows or cookbooks.

**NOW** Clog-wearing Batali is a ubiquitous TV star, restaurateur, and cookbook author.

**BRUCE BROMBERG**

**THEN** Chef and co-owner of the one Blue Ribbon restaurant.

**NOW** Bruce and his big brother recently found time for their first cookbook, *The Bromberg Bros. Blue Ribbon Cookbook*.

**MATTHEW KENNEY**

**THEN** Lauded by and awarded for his cooking at his restaurant, Matthew's.

**NOW** Raw-food evangelist and healthy-eating missionary, Kenney is still winning awards.

JAMES HAMILTON (2)



Blue Ribbon's famous fried chicken, above; the original location in New York's SoHo, above right; Eric and Bruce today, far right.

THEY KEPT THE KITCHEN OPEN ABSURDLY LATE. THE LAST SEATING WAS AT 4 A.M.

launched more than a dozen offshoots and added Blue Ribbon menus at Renaissance Hotels at 10 locations, with more to open this year.

So how did Blue Ribbon become Blue Ribbon? If you ask co-owners Eric and Bruce Bromberg about the roots of their success, they'll point to their Francophile foodie father (who, during their youth, whisked them off to great restaurants in New York and New Jersey, where they grew up), classical training in French cuisine (they both studied at Le Cordon Bleu), and their rebellion against stuffiness—stuffy kitchens, stuffy menus, stuffy prices,

and stuffy reservation policies.

Elder brother Eric despised the brutal culture he experienced in Parisian kitchens. "They were very intense, very domineering environments, not a lot of fun," he recalls. Things were no different at the legendary La Caravelle in New York, where he worked for a brief time. "There were no women in the kitchen or on the floor. Waiters fought with chefs. Chefs fought with the dishwashers."

A change of workplace—to Raoul's in 1986—radically transformed Eric's thinking and set the wheels moving inside his own head. "It was a French restaurant, but there was a lighthearted and

very positive team-oriented vibe. That was also the first place I worked where my peers or anyone my own age could afford to eat."

Blue Ribbon was born on November 3, 1992, to little fanfare. "We opened with not a penny in the bank," says Bruce. "And business didn't pick up for six months. Sometimes we wouldn't have enough for payroll. But we had such a loyal group of people. Everyone stuck it out."

Over time, the formula proved to be perfect. Burgers might not sound like an epiphany, but the Brombergs made their own buns, pickles, and relish, and ground

their own meat. They wooed locals by keeping a first-come, first-served policy (restricting reservations to parties of five or more) and making sure that certain popular (multi-ethnic) dishes stayed in rotation even if the rest of the menu changed, so people could count on getting them. Perhaps most important, they kept the kitchen open absurdly late—the last seating was at 4 a.m. every night—which lured late-night chefs, actors, and musicians.

"At the beginning, it felt like a club," says legendary Nuevo Latino chef Douglas Rodriguez. "You might run into David Burke at the bar or David Bouley. You felt like

a big shot." Daniel Boulud would bring his whole team, according to the Brombergs.

"It had everything you like to eat, all well executed," remembers Nieporent, who then owned nearby Montrachet and Tribeca Grill but had yet to open Nobu. "It was delicious and convivial. It took off, obviously."

During those first few seasons, the Brombergs made minor adjustments, but 95 percent of the menu remains to this day, as does the seating situation: 14 tables, 48 seats. By the end of 1993, the place was packed every night. Articles in and awards from *Gourmet*, *Food & Wine*, *New York Magazine*, and the

LEFT TO RIGHT: STEVE HILL; COURTESY BLUE RIBBON RESTAURANTS

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BOTTOM LEFT: JONATHAN PUSHNIK; TOP ROW: RENAISSANCE HOTELS; MATT ROURKE/AP; BOTTOM ROW: NEALE HAYES/CONTOURGETTY IMAGES; RENAISSANCE HOTELS; MICHAEL PISARRI

James Beard Foundation secured its reputation.

Trusting their rebellious instincts, the brothers, somewhat bafflingly, tackled sushi next—because they loved sushi and because Japanese cuisine, like French, had been impossibly inaccessible and expensive. Zagat awarded Blue Ribbon Sushi “best new restaurant” in 1995. Then the Brombergs made the pilgrimage to Brooklyn way before the outer borough was trendy, opening Blue Ribbon Brooklyn in 2001, and Blue Ribbon Sushi Brooklyn in 2003. In the past few years, they’ve published a cookbook, and moved into less predictable environments—a menu at a bowling alley in Brooklyn.

THANKS TO a deal with Renaissance Hotels, diners don’t have to travel to New York to sample Bromberg

dishes. The Blue Ribbon Classics Menu is now available at 9 locations in North America. Each hotel offers Blue Ribbon classics like Northern Fried Chicken Wings and BBQ Pork Sliders.

“A lot of people copied that concept” of late-night comfort food, notes chef Douglas Rodriguez, “but the food wasn’t as consistent.” Something to think about the next time you bite into a Blue Ribbon burger, no matter where you are or what time it is. —James Cury

**FIND BLUE RIBBON CLASSICS AT:**  
Renaissance Austin Hotel  
Renaissance Hollywood Hotel & Spa  
The Stanford Court Renaissance  
San Francisco Hotel  
Renaissance Arlington Capital View Hotel  
Renaissance Boston Waterfront Hotel  
Renaissance New Orleans Arts Hotel  
Renaissance Esmeralda Indian Wells  
Resort & Spa  
Renaissance Vancouver Harbourside Hotel  
Renaissance New York Times Square Hotel



## FOOD

# TOQUES OF THE TOWN

THESE CELEBRATED CHEFS are lighting up kitchens at Renaissance hotel restaurants from Chicago to London. Here’s what makes their food special and why they’re earning acclaim.



**A. JANINE FALVO** Falvo has cooked in restaurants across the country, but since last year, she’s been preparing modern American dishes at Briza at the Renaissance Atlanta Midtown Hotel. Her menu combines Southern staples (crab hush puppies, “Shrooms & Grits”) with modern touches (foie gras tater tots, anyone?). Competing on Bravo’s *Top Chef: Texas* showcased her talent to a wider audience. [brizarerestaurant.com](http://brizarerestaurant.com)

**C. MARCUS WAREING** After working with culinary star Gordon Ramsay, Wareing set out on his own in 2008, earning Michelin stars at a steady clip. Now he’s opened The Gilbert Scott, a brasserie at the St. Pancras Renaissance London Hotel, where he serves luxurious dishes made from locally sourced ingredients like Dorset crab and Cumbrian lamb in a variety of creative tasting menus. [thegilbertscott.co.uk](http://thegilbertscott.co.uk)

**B. JOSE GARCES** Garces, a proponent of Spanish, Mexican, and Cuban cuisine, has won a James Beard Foundation award and a coveted spot as one of Food Network’s new Iron Chefs. At Mercat a la Planxa in the Renaissance Blackstone Chicago Hotel, he serves modern Catalan cuisine featuring paella, tapas, grilled seafood, cured meat, flatbreads, and Spanish cheeses. [mercatchicago.com](http://mercatchicago.com)

**D. PAULA DASILVA** You might recognize DaSilva as the runner-up from FOX TV’s *Hell’s Kitchen*, and now she’s opened 1500 Degrees at Eden Roc Renaissance Miami Beach to great accolades. Food critic John Mariani was so impressed by her Brazilian-inflected farm-to-table menu that he put it on *Esquire’s* Best New Restaurants of 2011. [1500degreesmiami.com](http://1500degreesmiami.com) —James Cury



Wahoo ceviche from 1500 Degrees at the Eden Roc Renaissance Miami Beach.