It’s never going to win a James Beard Award. Or try to wow you with its foam experiments or ingredients you’ve never heard of. But it is the best-run, most-loved, relentlessly respected restaurant in America. And, oh yeah, Danny Meyer, David Chang, and Shaq all agree. Welcome to Hillstone*

* perhaps known in your neck of the woods as Houston’s, Honor Bar, B-D-Kitchen, or 12 others
Thanks, but no thanks. That's essentially the response I got.

It's not often that a restaurant turns down a story in a national food magazine. As the deputy editor of Bon Appétit, I'm usually the one fielding calls from publicists requesting coverage for the cool new place from so-and-so who worked for a month at Noma in Copenhagen. Big-name chefs are featured in our pages monthly. So why was a chain restaurant telling me to get lost?

That's what happened when I first e-mailed the Hillstone Restaurant Group. They'd get back to me, they wrote. (Hey, that's my line!) When they did, it was only to say that they would discuss the possibility of my proposed story. I wrote back that I was their No. 1 fan. Nothing. Finally, Brian Biel, vice president of the group, responded a few days later: “We are not ready at this time to do a story... Thank you again for thinking of us.”

Wait, what?

I e-mailed Brian a final time, pleading my case. I told him how I had grown up in Atlanta going to Hillstone restaurants, how they were my mom’s favorite lunch spot in Williamsburg for a 14-course vegetable tasting. We weren’t going to some subway-tiled space at the bar, and ordered drinks. A bartender swooped in to replace my glass with a chilled one, her jaw dropped. Now, I quickly explained that Hillstone Restaurant Group runs some of my favorite places to eat in the country. Christina has worked at a lot of special-occasion dining spots in town—some that have won James Beard Awards for service—but she’d never seen that before. “Welcome to Hillstone,” I said, beaming like a proud father.

As we made our way to the U-shaped bar at Hillstone—packed with Friday-night dates and the Brooklyn Lager-sipping suits from the Citicorp building above us—I tried to convince Christina that Hillstone was the non-chain chain. I quickly explained that Hillstone Restaurant Group started in 1977 with the opening of Houston's in Nashville. Texas-born founder George Biel, the brains and passion behind the group, began his career as a server at Steak and Ale. “Why the name Houston’s?” she asked. George simply liked the ring of it, not to mention the city’s pioneering reputation at the time as home to NASA and big oil, I told her. When Houston’s debuted, I argued, it identified and then filled a void in the American dining scene. It wasn’t fast-food burgers, but it wasn’t fancy European-style dining, either. Whether Biel knew it or not, he was defining a uniquely American style of eating out that was unpretentious yet discerning. “And how many places do they have now?” she asked skeptically. “Forty-eight restaurants under 15 names in 15 states,” I said. That didn’t help my case. I made one last pitch by explaining that what Ralph Lauren is to American fashion—approachable, reliable, and nostalgic but forward-thinking—George Biel and the Hillstone Group are to American restaurants.

And then something happened that really got Christina’s attention. Before she had time to respond, she was holding a glass of Champagne and I was sipping my 50/50 gin martini. If this had been any other place in New York, we’d still be trying to get the bartender’s attention. In less than three minutes, we had confirmed our reservation with the smiling hosts, checked our coats, snagged some space at the bar, and ordered drinks. A small miracle that, I could tell, was making her a believer. When, halfway through my martini, a bartender swooped in to replace my glass with a chilled one, her jaw dropped. Now, Christina has worked at a lot of special-occasion dining spots in town—some featuring chefs with TV shows and others that have won James Beard Awards for service—but she’d never seen that before. “Welcome to Hillstone,” I said, beaming like a proud father.
responded immediately: "French dip. That's all anyone needs to know. It haunts me." Apparently my mom won't take my advice, but she will listen to David Chang. When my cheeseburger and her "famous" (as she now refers to it), French dip arrived, they were textbook perfect.

Both came cut in half, speared with toothpicks for stability. The French dip was layered with juicy paper-thin slices of house-roasted prime rib and accompanied by a bowl of beefy au jus. My burger was medium-rare and piled high with melted cheddar, shredded iceberg, tomato, and onion. When slathered with spicy mayo (yes, you should request a side of this), it's an unexpected entry into America's burger elite.

That's an important point. Because you know what every great chef strives for, more than the creation of a ground-breaking dish or Michelin stars? The kind of consistency you experience at every Hillstone. It's probably why your favorite restaurant is a neighborhood spot where you always know that you're going to get what you want. But I don't have one neighborhood spot; I have 48 Hillstones.

I was also realizing that I wasn't alone in my infatuation with the inner workings of the group. There are other card-carrying members of the Hillstone fan club among the food-nerd intelligentsia. Chef Christopher Kostow of the Restau- rant at Meadowood told me that he thinks Hillstone has a guy in the kitchen who knows what every person in Amer- ica wants to eat. Michelín-starred chef Michael White, who knows how chal- lenging it is to run multiple restaur- ants—he has it in spots and around New York—said, "We chefs take our- selves a bit too seriously. Where Hill- stone succeeds is pinpointing what people want and giving it to them." Jon Shook and Vinny Dotolo, who run a group of popular restaurants in L.A. (including two of my favorites, Animal and Son of a Gun), are also devo- tees. They are almost the same dudes who you would think wouldn't give a flying flip about a chain restaurant, let alone take cues from it. But the famously well-loved chefs have been fans since they started going to a Houston's around the corner from their culinary school in Fort Lau- derdale. "It's their ability to put out the same great product no matter what the waiter, of course. Is it the napkins with theenguin. It was noon on a Monday at L.A.'s South Beverly Grill, another Hillstone prop- erty, and there was already a wait. Coltrane was on the speakers. Well- heeled customers in everything from jeans to jumpsuits sipped iced tea and Diet Coke at the bar, while a few brazen souls eased into the workweek with a cocktail. As my waiter, Joe, introduced himself, all I could think about was the Osaka-style spicy tuna sushi. It's like a multilayer sushi sandwich, made with pressed rice, avocado, and raw tuna that's been sliced as well as chopped and mixed with spicy mayo. It's the kind of sushi that people who don't like sushi eat. I was starting to seriously question my foodie street cred. But you know what? I'm happy coming clean about my love of all things Hillstone. After years of keeping it a secret, I realized I don't have to apologize to anyone.

And now I finally had the chance to ask Brian Bien in person if there's some secret formula behind Hillstone's pow- erful allure—besides trying to avoid press, of course. Is it the napkins with buttonholes, just in case you need to affix one to your shirt like a spaghetti- eating character in Goodfellas? Is it the fact that every location has a single Mauviel copper pot that it uses to toss the just-fried fries with knob salt in? Or is it the fact that you'll never have to fix a wobbly table because they're all drilled into the floor, thereby eliminat- ing the single biggest annoyance in take- out history of dining? Dammit, Brian, is it? Spill Hillstone's secrets! "That's the secret, Andrew," he said matter-of-fact.

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George still has a hand in every aspect of the restaurants—especially the menu. That night he wanted me to try a bruse- sels sprouts dish he was thinking about adding. “Everyone is frying them these days and adding fish-sauce dressing,” he told me. “I want to keep them somewhat healthy. I want to simply blanch them and roast them on top with a lemon aioli and Parmesan.” His kitchen team wanted to fry them. In the end, George reigned. The brussels sprouts, as described, will hit the menu soon.

I called an audible and ordered the pan-fried sole. George was having his usual: a cheeseburger cut into quarters. He ate fast and talked faster. He explained the overall design of restau- rants and how every table should feel like it’s in the VIP section. “Seclusion not exclusion” is his design philosophy. Forty-two minutes into our meal, George asked if I’d care for dessert. Before I could answer, he let me know that he’s “not a dessert guy.” I had a million questions, but he already had half his burger boxed up. “Who came up with the spotlight lighting?” “How do you decide when to introduce a new menu item?” “So on and so on.” “Look,” he said. “The restaurant business isn’t rocket science. Because it if was, I would never have made it.” Easy for him to say.

On my drive back to the hotel, I replayed a scene I’d witnessed earlier in the day at South Beverly Grill (yes, I ate lunch and dinner at Hillstone properties). Across from my table were three stodgy felt hats who would have been equally at home at Roberta’s in Brook- lyn. In another, a threesome old enough to be my grandparents. Next to them were a pair of mothers and four very well-behaved kids. Each table was split properties). From my table there were three booths. In one sat four hipsters with flippy felt hats who would have been equally at home at Roberta’s in Brooklyn.

“I’m jealous” “Hillstone” “I’m jealous” “You are?” “Yes, does that surprise you?” “Not really.”

Hawaiian Rib-Eye Steak

SERVES 8 Now you can make one of Hillstone’s most popular dishes at home, a decision you will never regret.

STEAK
2 cups pineapple juice
¾ cup soy sauce
½ cup sugar
5 Tbsp. apple cider vinegar
2 tsp. toasted sesame oil
¼ cup chopped white onion
1 ½ piece ginger, peeled, finely chopped
2 1” thick bone-in rib-eye steaks
(abour 3 lb. total)

BUTTER AND ASSEMBLY
4 Tbsp. unsalted butter, room temperature
2 tsp. toasted sesame oil
Kosher salt

STEAK
Whisk pineapple juice, soy sauce, sugar, vinegar, and oil in a small bowl until sugar is dissolved. Add onion and ginger. Set aside. 2 Tbsp. marinade for butter. Transfer remaining marinade to a large resealable plastic bag. Add steaks and seal bag, pressing out excess air. Chill at least 1 day.

Remove steaks from marinade, pat dry, and let sit until room temperature, about 1 hour.

DO AHEAD: Steaks can be marinated 3 days ahead. Keep chilled.

BUTTER AND ASSEMBLY
Whisk butter and oil in a medium bowl to combine. Vigorously whisk in reserved marinade; season with salt. Transfer to the center of a sheet of parchment paper and roll up into a log. Chill until firm, at least 1 hour.

Build a two-zone fire in a charcoal grill for direct (medium-high coals) and indirect (medium-low coals) heat. Alternatively, heat a gas grill to high just before cooking, leaving one burner on low. Season steaks very lightly with salt (omit this step if marinating more than 24 hours). Grill over high heat, turning, until steaks are well browned and beginning to char around edges, about 4 minutes. Transfer to cooler part of grill and continue to cook until an instant-read thermometer inserted into thickest part of steaks registers 120°F for medium-rare. (Alternatively, cook in a grill pan over medium-high heat, turning steaks every couple of minutes.)

Transfer steaks to a wire rack. Slice butter into ½” thick rounds and divide between steaks; let rest at least 10 minutes before slicing.

DO AHEAD: Butter can be made 3 days ahead. Keep chilled.

Iron-Skillet Cornbread

SERVES 10 Ultrachart and almost custardy in the middle, this is the kind of appetizer you should serve before dinner of celery sticks.

1 ½ cups all-purpose flour
1 cup fine-ground cornmeal
1 Tbsp. baking powder
½ tsp. kosher salt
4 large eggs
1 ½ cups canned creamed corn (from one 15-oz. can)
1 4-oz. can mild green chilies, drained, chopped
1 ½ oz. mild white cheddar, grated (about ½ cup)
1 ½ oz. Monterey Jack, grated (about ¼ cup)
1 ½ cups unsalted butter (½ sticks), room temperature
1 cup sugar
Nonstick vegetable oil spray

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT: A 10” cast-iron skillet (measured from the rim)

Place rack in middle of oven. Set skillet on a rimmed baking sheet, place on rack, and preheat oven to 400°.

Whisk flour, cornmeal, baking powder, and salt in a small bowl to combine. Lightly beat eggs in a medium bowl to blend; whisk in creamed corn, chiles, cheddar, and Monterey Jack.

Mix butter and sugar in a large bowl with a wooden spoon just until butter absorbs sugar but butter is still in small pieces. Add egg mixture and mix until just combined. Mix in dry ingredients until barely incorporated. Remove skillet from oven and lightly coat with nonstick spray. Scrape in batter (it should settle on contact and stay slightly mounded in the center). Bake cornbread until golden brown and springs back when gently pressed, 35–45 minutes. Let cool 10 minutes before serving.
IT’S SPRING... FINALLY!

bon appétit

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