

| *by* ANDREW KNOWLTON |

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*

photographs by EVA KOLENKO

*perhaps known in your neck of the woods as Houston's, Honor Bar, R+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 for the Thai steak and noodle salad, how they were the place I'd taken prom dates in high school, and how I thought they had one of the best cheeseburgers on the planet. I assured him that I wouldn't necessarily need to talk to George Biel, Brian's father and the founder of the privately held group, who I knew from sources didn't like to talk to the media. I even included in my appeal that *Bon Appétit's* parent company,

Condé Nast, is also a family-run business that values its privacy.

I'm not sure if I have my mom or my employer to thank, but my e-mail worked. "You know—let's put something together!" Brian responded. And like that, it was on. I was finally going to find out the story behind their famous spinach and artichoke dip.

At this point, you might be wondering why a guy who has spent his career fetishizing eccentric and fiercely independent restaurants would want to write a story—with zero irony—about a restaurant chain. My annual Hot 10 list of the best new restaurants in America is a who's-who of the odd, one-of-a-kind restaurants that food writers just can't wait to discover. In my world, there's no more pejorative word to describe a restaurant than *chain*. I guess that's why some people think I'm joking when I tell them that Hillstone Restaurant Group runs some of my favorite places to eat in the country.

That's certainly what my wife, Christina, thought as we passed over the Brooklyn Bridge in an Uber. We weren't going to some subway-tiled spot in Williamsburg for a 14-course vegetable tasting. We weren't going to a miniscule retro diner for whey-braised rabbit with beet powder, either. We were going to a restaurant on the corner of Third Avenue and 53rd Street. A restaurant with locations across the country. I told her she could order sushi and ribs and a fried chicken sandwich—all off the same menu. She asked if I was feeling okay.



• 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.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Kennebec potato french fries; Ryan Sohn, a manager at Hillstone, San Francisco; spinach and chicken Waldorf salad; Taylor Fultz, a server at Rutherford Grill; Hawaiian Rib-Eye Steak (recipe, p. 99); deviled eggs.





**EVERYONE LOVES
A FRENCH DIP**

Houston's, Lenox Road, Atlanta

• You know who loves a Houston's? My mother. You know who else? Your date, the client you're trying to impress, and your impossibly picky friend. How many spots can you say that about?

It had been ten years since I'd been back to the Houston's across from Lenox Square Mall in Atlanta. This was the place where Shaquille O'Neal, Dominique Wilkins, and many other sports stars came to eat when they were in town. It's also where my mom always wants to have lunch. When she and I walked in around noon on a Wednesday in late December, the tables were filled with shoppers and colleagues from nearby offices. Usually I'll scan a restaurant to make sure I'm getting the best available seat. At Houston's, I don't have to worry, since almost every table is a booth. The Biels know that booths offer the privacy and comfort that a freestanding table simply does not. Each table also gets its own (literal) spotlight, meaning that you can read the menu without pulling out your phone for help—something my mom was quick to point out.

I already knew Mom's order: Thai steak and noodle salad. But I had recently learned a few facts that I thought could sway her to branch out. Hillstone bakes all of the bread for its many sandwiches in-house. They grind a chuck and brisket blend with a generous 20–25 percent fat content for their burgers and cut Kennebec variety potatoes for their fries. She wasn't budging. So I explained that when I'd texted the famously tough-to-please David Chang of the Momofuku empire about his Hillstone thoughts, he

**They solved
the single
biggest
annoyance in
restaurants:
wobbly
tables.**

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 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.



**MY NAME IS CONSISTENCY.
I'LL BE YOUR WAITER**

Rutherford Grill, Rutherford, CA

• It was a Friday night, and three thoughts were going through my mind as I sat with coworkers from the *Bon Appétit* publishing side in a booth at the packed Rutherford Grill in Napa Valley: (1) I'm only a few miles from two of the most revered restaurants in America, the French Laundry and the Restaurant at Meadowood, both of which I've been wanting to revisit; (2) I'm about to devour a slightly sweet pineapple-soy-marinated Hawaiian rib eye at yet another Hillstone; and (3) I'm perfectly okay with that. Actually, I'm pretty excited. The French Laundry can wait.

By this point I was becoming a Hillstone aficionado. I knew that my waiter would introduce him- or herself by name. At Rutherford Grill, a gathering place for California's wine royalty, our server, Verjai, greeted us less than a minute after the host showed us to our table. I knew that the menu she handed me would be similar to every Hillstone property I'd been to. There would be that addictively creamy spinach and artichoke dip that I would inevitably order. There would be my mom's French dip (thanks, Chang). There would be those all-American burgers and fall-off-the-bone baby back ribs finished with a smoky-sweet sauce. There would be an open kitchen where a team of talented and dedicated noncelebrity chefs would turn out the food with uncompromised precision. Every Hillstone, I had learned, is mind-bogglingly consistent.

That's an important point. Because you know what every great chef strives for, more than the creation of a groundbreaking 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 Restaurant at Meadowood told me that he thinks Hillstone has a guy in the kitchen who knows what every person in America wants to eat. Michelin-starred chef Michael White, who knows how challenging it is to run multiple restaurants—he has 11 spots in and around New York—said, "We chefs take ourselves a bit too seriously. Where Hillstone succeeds is pinpointing what people want and giving it to them." Jon Shook and Vinny Dotolo, who run a growing portfolio of quirky restaurants in L.A. (including two of my favorites, Animal and Son of a Gun), are also devotees. They are the kind of dudes who you would think wouldn't give a flying flip about a chain restaurant, let alone take cues from it. But the famously laid-back chefs have been fans since they started going to a Houston's around the corner from their culinary school in Fort Lauderdale. "It's their ability to put out the same great product no matter what the location, again and again, that amazes me," Shook said. "They are really good at hiring, too," Dotolo joked: "They didn't hire me when I applied for a job there." Well, Vinny, that's because they hire hard and manage easy—and not the other way around.



**THREE IS THE
MAGIC NUMBER**

Hillstone, Park Avenue, NYC

• It was a long shot. I'd heard that Danny Meyer, restaurant hospitality guru, Shake Shack founder, and CEO of Union Square Hospitality Group, was, like me, a regular at Hillstone. I also knew that inviting him and his chief development officer, Richard Coraine, to lunch at the



The famous (and gooey) spinach and artichoke dip; Iron-Skillet Cornbread (recipe, p. 99); a customer keeps it classy by using the button napkin.

one on Park Avenue South the day before they were set to relocate Union Square Cafe after 30 years was bonkers. "Danny would love to join you," his assistant e-mailed back. *Damn, he must really love Hillstone*, I thought.

It turns out he does—so much so that he and Coraine didn't even look at their menus. "The usual?" Meyer asked Coraine. The usual meant an order of the yellowtail sashimi salad and Ding's Crispy Chicken Sandwich.

Coraine then did something even more surprising: He ordered a glass of orange juice. He pushed it toward me. "Taste it," he said. "Wow!" I exclaimed. This wasn't your average O.J.—it was ice-cold and squeezed to order. "That's the brilliance of Hillstone," Coraine said. "They don't cut corners."

Soon the topic shifted to the service. I was about to explain why it was so good when Meyer proved himself to be the consummate student as well as master. He already knew that if you were a server at a Hillstone, you would never be saddled with more than three tables. That's why at every Hillstone restaurant, the total number of tables is divisible by three. There are no food runners or bussers. It's a team effort, which means your server will take your order, but anyone on staff can help you out. The dismissive "Let me get your server" is something you'll never hear here. If the service at Hillstone is good enough for Danny Meyer, it's good enough for everyone.



**THESE TABLES
DON'T WOBBLE**

South Beverly Grill, Beverly Hills

• It was noon on a Monday at L.A.'s South Beverly Grill, another Hillstone property, 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 Biel in person if there's some secret formula behind Hillstone's powerful 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 kosher 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 eliminating the single biggest annoyance in the history of dining? Dammit, Brian, what is it? Spill Hillstone's secrets! "That's the secret, Andrew," he said matter-of-factly while eating a spinach and chicken Waldorf salad. "It's all that."



**THE MAN
BEHIND IT ALL**

R+D Kitchen, Santa Monica

• And then I got the e-mail I thought I'd never receive: "George would love to have dinner with you," Brian wrote. The next day, I met the 71-year-old founder at R+D Kitchen near his home in Santa Monica and not far from the company's headquarters in Beverly Hills. When George Biel walked in the door, it was like the pope had arrived for Christmas mass. After all, this is the person whom America and I have to thank for that molten, gooey spinach and artichoke dip. (Fun fact for Hillstonians: The dip was "created" by regulars at Houston's in Chicago. Customers started ordering the spinach and artichoke side with chips. Salsa and sour cream were added later, giving the combo the name "Chicago-Style Spinach and Artichoke Dip." Chicago, America thanks you.)

God bless
America!
The Hillstone
cheeseburger



Secret recipes revealed! For more famous Hillstone recipes, including the addictive Thai Steak and Noodle Salad, go to bonappetit.com/hillstone

ILLUSTRATIONS BY OSCAR BOLTON GREEN. FOR RESTAURANT INFORMATION, SEE SOURCEBOOK.

George still has a hand in every aspect of the restaurants—especially the menu. That night he wanted me to try a brussels 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 and then roast them and 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 restaurants 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 if it 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 booths. In one sat four hipsters with floppy felt hats who would have been equally at home at Roberta’s in Brooklyn. 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 splitting things like sushi, crispy oysters, French dips, and, of course, spinach and artichoke dip. By the looks of it, they were all having one helluva lunch. Ultimately, that’s the real secret of a Hillstone restaurant: It doesn’t matter if you are a globetrotting restaurant critic out with his mom or someone just looking for a really great burger and draft beer, they already know what you want.

Later that night, my wife and I exchanged texts:

“Where were you eating tonight?”

“Hillstone”

“I’m jealous”

“You are?”

“Yes, does that surprise you?”

“Not really.” ■

Hawaiian Rib-Eye Steak

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

STEAK

- 2 cups pineapple juice
- ½ cup soy sauce
- ½ cup sugar
- 5 Tbsp. apple cider vinegar
- 2 tsp. toasted sesame oil
- ½ cup chopped white onion
- 1 1" piece ginger, peeled, finely chopped
- 2 1"-thick bone-in rib-eye steaks (about 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° 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 ¼"-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

8 SERVINGS Ultrarich and almost custardy in the middle, this is the kind of appetizer you should serve before a dinner of celery sticks.

- 1¼ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup fine-grind cornmeal
- 1 Tbsp. baking powder
- 1½ tsp. kosher salt
- 4 large eggs
- 1½ cups canned creamed corn (from one 15-oz. can)
- 1 4.5-oz. can mild green chiles, drained, chopped
- 1½ oz. mild white cheddar, grated (about ½ cup)
- 1½ oz. Monterey Jack, grated (about ½ cup)
- ¾ cup unsalted butter (1½ sticks), room temperature
- ¾ 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 sizzle on contact and stay slightly mounded in the center). Bake cornbread until top is golden brown and springs back when gently pressed, 35–45 minutes. Let cool 10 minutes before serving.



IT'S **SPRING** ... FINALLY!

bon appétit

37
FRESH NEW
RECIPES

**HOW TO
SOURCE,
PREP &**

COOK PRO

**LIKE
A**

APRIL 2016

\$4.99US \$5.99FOR 04 >



OUR FAVORITE CHEFS SHARE THEIR
SECRETS, SHORTCUTS AND HACKS P.66