

# Bryan Caswell's long, rocky road to reopening Reef

**Greg Morago**

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Reef chef Bryan Caswell works in the open kitchen of the recently reopened Reef.

Photo: Yi-Chin Lee, Staff / Staff photographer

The reopening of Bryan Caswell's Reef could be described as a triumphant return to the dining scene by one of Houston's most celebrated chefs after his restaurant was damaged from Hurricane Harvey. If only it were that simple.

Why it took so long for Reef to get back in business is a question that doesn't have an easy answer, Caswell said. "A man with a good sense of humor would have called it a comedy of errors," he said.

acclaim to Houston shattered in the aftermath of Harvey when water entered the midtown restaurant through the roof.

Although Caswell's long absence from the dining arena was broken by a brief and rocky stint at downtown's Le Meridien hotel, among his setbacks while Reef languished, he was counting the days until he could get back into his own kitchen.

For one who was an early champion of Gulf bycatch and a poster boy for the golden new age of Houston dining, the wait was agonizing, he said.

Now the restaurant at 2600 Travis has been open for more than a month, first serving lunch out of its adjacent 3rd Bar lounge. The dining room — a handsome reimagining of the original, light-filled space with its minimal but chic design — is now open for lunch and dinner. Reef is back in play.

And there's a sense of immediacy in the Reef kitchen these days. The oysters, both from Galveston Bay as well as Canada and New York's Long Island Sound, are iced and ready. A new menu boasts creative dishes such as snapper carpaccio with grilled watermelon; grilled octopus with house-made chorizo and sour orange relish; and soft-shell blue crab tempura with a raw slaw of butternut squash dressed in "Viet-Tex" flavors. One of Caswell's new signatures — a dish called Crab Fat & Dough, inspired by a fishing trip off Andros Island in the Bahamas — is already a social-media star.

One could say the "old Bryan" is back. For Reef fans, it's that direct. For those in the Houston restaurant community who have followed the chef's career, it's more complicated.

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## Early days

Caswell's story is one of a Houston boy who made good. His road to chefdom was circuitous, but once he got into the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y. (he's a 1999 graduate), there was no stopping him.

He landed an internship at a Michelin-rated restaurant in Barcelona, Spain, followed by apprenticeships with New York greats: Charlie Palmer at Aureole, Alfred Portale at Gotham Bar and Grill, Wayne Nish at March. And then a long association with superchef Jean-Georges Vongerichten who, after grooming Caswell at his flagship restaurant in New York, sent him to open Jean-Georges outposts in Bangkok, Hong Kong and the Bahamas.

met bank manager and hospitality veteran Bill Floyd. After a few years at bank, they left to open their own restaurant focused on Gulf Coast catch flavored with Houston's multicultural sensibilities.

Reef was a hit from the start, resonating with foodies canvassing Houston's newly hip restaurant scene. National attention came quickly. Bon Appetit named Reef Best Seafood Restaurant in 2009, the same year that Food & Wine included Caswell in the class of America's Best New Chefs. The next year Caswell was a featured contestant on Season 3 of Food Network's "The Next Iron Chef." In 2010, Caswell was nominated as Best Chef Southwest for the James Beard Awards, considered the Oscars of the food world. He repeated a nomination again in 2011.

The Caswell-Floyd partnership eventually yielded additional fruit: Little Bigs, El Real Tex-Mex Café and Jackson Street BBQ.

The duo also was set to co-star in one of 2017's big openings: two side-by-side restaurants owned by Astros owner Jim Crane in the 500 Crawford apartment building across the street from Minute Maid Park. But before the restaurants opened, Caswell was out of the picture: He parted ways with Crane and Floyd by mutual agreement. Then Floyd opened the high-profile Potente and Osso & Kristalla in early 2017, where he remains partner/general manager.

Only months later, Hurricane Harvey struck. The next month, Caswell made the decision to close Little Bigs.

## **Bumpy road**

Caswell had married his second wife, Jennifer Caswell, in 2014 in his parents' backyard, serenading her with "I Want to Know What Love Is." The Caswells lived in the historical Avondale neighborhood, in a two-story house, one of the oldest in the city. Their blended family included four children, three dogs and four chickens. Together they operated Bryan Caswell Concepts as well as the nonprofit Southern Salt Foundation.

While still working to get Reef back open, Bryan and Jennifer were hired to open a ground-floor restaurant and rooftop bar at the new Le Meridien Houston hotel in downtown.

Oxbow 7, hailed for its "elevated bayou cuisine," was a coup for the Caswells and an opportunity for the chef to redefine his brand of Gulf Coast cuisine while Reef was one the mend. But their relationship with Le Meridien soured almost immediately, and they were released from their contract in January 2018, not even four months after the project opened. At the time, Le Meridien

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The new year also brought the dissolution of Caswell's partnership with Floyd. Floyd was still a partner at Reef when Harvey hit, but by that time, he had largely moved on to other projects that did not involve the Caswells.

In the split, Floyd took Jackson Street BBQ. He is no longer associated with Reef or El Real in Montrose, he said, but he maintains an interest in the El Real outpost in Terminal B at George Bush International Airport and 3rd Bar Eating House in the same terminal. Floyd also partners in Monarch Hospitality Group.

**REVIEW:** [See what critic Alison Cook thought of the old Reef, only on HoustonChronicle.com](#)

"We were very successful partners for 10 years. We wouldn't have been able to do the things we did without Bill," Caswell said of his partnership. "He's the hardest-working man I've seen in my life. He's one of the last hard-core restaurant professionals around."

A week after his partnership with Floyd dissolved, another blow came, Caswell said. On July 6, lightning struck the Caswell home in Montrose during a storm. There were no injuries, but the home caught fire and was badly damaged. It is still being repaired.

"That, more than the hurricane, was debilitating," Caswell said. "The fire burned through the roof."

Before Reef officially reopened, Bryan and Jennifer Caswell split. They are now divorcing, he said.

Jennifer Caswell, who worked on the business end of Reef in marketing and public relations, said she was terminated from Reef operations more than a month ago. "Bryan fired me. It's that simple," she said.

When asked on what grounds, she said, "I don't know, he never told me."

She called her husband "a brilliant chef" and added that she, for the most part, is proud of her association with Reef.

"I was up there working my butt off every single day," she said. "I was proud of most of it. There were some things I wish I could have done different. I wish my voice was heard more. I was not heard a lot of the time."

**Passion for the Gulf**

The Gulf waters off the Surfside Marina in Freeport where his family keeps a boat is the spot Caswell has been fishing all his life. Snapper, cobia, dorado, tripletail amberjack – they're the fish Caswell has hooked since he was a boy and the fish he's featured on his menu as a chef.

“When I get in a boat, it's the only place in the world where I'm not worried about everything else going on in my life,” he said. “My history of fishing drives my passion for what I'm doing.”

At 46, Caswell is back working in the open kitchen at the restaurant that has brought him culinary acclaim.

“There's nothing that's the same on the menu from Reef. Everything's different,” he said. “These are the things that have been in my head and wanted to come out of me for years.”

Not only has he created a new menu, he's added a dining concept within Reef called Weedline, a chef's table of 12 seats facing the open kitchen. He'll soon offer an omakase-like service of six to 10 dishes prepared from market-fresh fish and seafood by Caswell and his three sous chefs.

Weedline takes its name from a zone of water with significant weed growth where fish congregate.

“It's a pop-up for fish – a full ecosystem,” he said of fishing the weedline. “Everything is feeding under this weedline.”

Caswell's eyes light up when he talks about fishing, the Gulf, the Weedline and its endless seafood possibilities. He has filled the restaurant's walls with framed maps of the Gulf and Galveston waterways and with artwork inspired by the Coastal Conservation Association.

In the restaurant's private dining room, now dubbed “the boardroom,” he shows off the table that will seat eight for elegant dinners secluded behind the restaurant's glass-fronted wine room. The table was the working desk his father, Michael Caswell, a successful wildcatter and petroleum engineer, used for work in the Caswell home. He describes it as the desk where family decisions were made.

“It's where I went to beg him to let me go to culinary school,” Caswell said.

Although Caswell has weathered ups and downs since Reef closed, it feels good to start anew, he said.

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