
Her life is the stuff of legend.

Ruth Fertel grew up in Happy Jack, Louisiana, in Plaquemines Parish, the daughter of an insurance salesman and a kindergarten teacher. All her playmates were boys; she says it honed her competitive edge. She skipped second grade, graduated high school at 15 and from LSU with a degree in chemistry at 19.

After working for a bit, she married, had two boys, and found herself divorced. In 1965, she was earning \$4,800 a year as a lab tech for a research scientist at Tulane Medical School when she realized she'd need to make more money if she were to send her teenage boys to college. So she started scanning the want ads.

"I was so naïve," she recalled. "I didn't have any special interests besides hunting, fishing and reading, and it didn't sound like I could make much money out of any of them. I saw lots of ads for service stations, but that wasn't for me. Neither were the bars that were listed."

Ruth saw an ad for Chris Steak House. "I said to myself, 'Simple menu. I know I can do that.' I had eaten there. The food was really good and it had a great reputation. So I went to the restaurant and met with the owner. I asked him, 'How much do you want?' He said \$18,000 and I said I would buy it. I didn't have any money but I had my home."

Her banker and her lawyer and her best friend all advised against the purchase. But Ruth knew it was meant to be. "I asked Chris when he went into business for the first time and he told me February 5, 1927. I said, You've got to be kidding. That was the exact day I was born. What an omen. I knew I was going to make a success out of that business."

Indeed. On her first day, she sold 35 steaks for about \$5 each. In the first six months, she cleared more than double her previous salary. Now, Ruth's Chris Steak House is the largest upscale restaurant chain in the world, with more than 80 locations in 27 states and the District of Columbia, as well as Canada, Mexico, Asia and Puerto Rico. It sells 16,000 steaks a day and employs more than 4,500.

But it wasn't without a lot of hard work over a lot of years. Initially, Ruth had to learn how to cut meat. The five-foot-two, 110-pound woman picked up 30-pound short loins of beef, sawing the bone by hand to cut USDA Prime steaks. After each slab, she was exhausted, so she collapsed for half an hour on a mattress in the back room. Then she was up again to greet customers, help the three waitresses and do the books in the middle of the dining room – until it was time to cut more steaks. One of her first investments was an electric band saw.



The secret of her success – the best ingredients with the best service – was set from the beginning. “We went out of our way to please customers. We spoiled them. One of our regular Sunday customers was operated on for

his teeth and couldn’t bite into a steak. So I chopped his steak in the grinder, formed it into the same shape as before, and served it to him. He was thrilled.”

Less than four months after she bought Chris Steak House, Hurricane Betsy hit. The electricity went out and the steaks were going to spoil. So she cooked everything she had, called her brother who owned a restaurant in hard-hit Plaquemines Parish, met him at the police barricades that sealed off the disaster area, and handed over the food for distribution to disaster workers and those in need.

Many of the people she helped became long-term customers. And because the city was cut off from fish supplies, Catholic bishops waived the “fish on Friday” requirement, Ruth opened on Fridays for the first time, and it became one of the restaurant’s best days.

Chris Steak House was flourishing, so Ruth signed a new 10-year lease in 1975. Six months later, disaster struck in the form of a fire. “I remember

calling my friend at the bank in a state of shock, crying and telling him what happened,” said Ruth. He asked me “Do you still own that building down the street?” [She had bought it to rent for party space.] When I said yes, he said, ‘Look, I have a contractor with me right now. We’ll get you open in seven days.’ It was unbelievable. They did it.”

In moving down Broad Street from Ursulines to Orleans, the restaurant went from 60 to 160 seats. (It’s now 240.) But it needed a new name – fast – because Ruth’s agreement with Chris said she could only use that name as long as she was in the Ursulines location. So she just added her own name at the front, trading on the personal loyalty of her client base and creating a memorably unusual moniker. One restaurant critic has said that

it’s a sobriety test... anyone who can say Ruth’s Chris Steak House three times in a row can’t be drunk.

The first franchise opened in 1977 because one of her loyal customers, T.J. Moran, had moved to Baton Rouge and was coming back regularly for steaks. He wanted the Ruth’s Chris experience closer to home, so he persisted until Ruth agreed to a franchise.

Ruth, at his right hand, wishes “Ike” a happy birthday.



Ruth was Louisiana’s first woman registered horse trainer.





1100 N. Broad Street

of team service, one of the secrets of its success.

As her fame spread, Ruth continued to reach out often, “extending a helping hand that leaves no fingerprints,” in the words of one friend.

She is the recipient of numerous awards including the 2001 Ella Brennan Savoir Faire Award, the Restaurant Business High Performance Leadership Award, the DiRoNA Hall of Fame Award, Executive of the Year from *Restaurants and Institutions* Magazine, the Horatio Alger Award and the 1999 Lafcadio Hearn Award presented by the Chef John Folse Culinary Institute.

Her energy, enthusiasm and persistence are legendary. In 1997, the year she turned 70, she personally visited 42 of her restaurants to “smell out how they’re doing.” Likely as not, she wandered into a busy kitchen, saw the

staff needed help, and started peeling shrimp.



“*I’ve always admired Ruth’s ‘get up and go.’ I can just imagine the obstacles that Ruth came up against over the years — real obstacles — serious problems. Things that will keep you up all night — night after night. Once you attain a certain level of success people forget all that — most people never knew. Well, Ruth, I haven’t forgotten. And I always respected that you knew your business, that you knew your customer and that you treated your team, your people so well.*

It always inspired me to know that you were across town from me working your heart out. And I always knew you were smarter than me ‘cause you only had to perfect that one thing — that steak. Oh! If you only knew how many nights I felt stupid thinking about that. And oh what a steak it is!

Well old friend — you did it! You did it with an old-fashioned work ethic and dignity that this world could use a lot more of.

Ruth, I take off my hat to you!”

Ella Brennan
Owner, Commander’s Palace

“ I loved Ruth from the first time I met her, which was when she came on the ‘Angela’ show some years back...

Prior to the program, we talked, and I remember thinking, ‘This woman is nervous! How can this woman who has accomplished such phenomenal success from the ground up be nervous coming on a little local TV show?’ Two minutes into the show, it became evident ... what I had interpreted as nervousness was profound modesty.

So many things have made her successful...smarts, hard work, sheer guts, a real sense of people. But what has endeared her to so many is how genuinely humble she is.”

Angela Hill

Anchor, WWL-TV News

“ There are few heroines in American gastronomy — Julia Child and Alice Waters among them — but Ruth Fertel certainly belongs in that small group of people who serve as an inspiration both in and out of her profession.

Undaunted by the challenge of building a major steakhouse chain from scratch, committed always to quality and consistency,

and possessing a personality that can charm the gristle off a ribeye, Ruth has distinguished herself not just as a businesswoman but as a model for anyone who wants to succeed in a business built as much on people skills as on product.

You don’t enter the restaurant business unless you love people, and people have a sure sense of the sincerity of that love for them. She might have had a much easier time of it all had she done something less daunting, but what fun would that be? Ruth Fertel is an American original whose first aim has always been to please. And if she happened to make a fortune doing it, well, that’s just fine with everybody.”



“ I have learned everything about politics through my years of dining at Ruth’s Chris on Broad Street. Since I was young, I can remember going to your restaurant and seeing many of the political and community leaders across our city. There are so many of us in New Orleans who are grateful to you for providing us with a warm, welcoming place to gather and enjoy good company and an excellent meal. In New Orleans, Ruth’s Chris has become not only a place of business but also a way of life. Your hard work and dedication have been remarkable. Your vision that started with one restaurant in New Orleans has expanded to a nationwide business success. You should be proud of your achievements and contributions to New Orleans as well as the rest of the country.”

Mary Landrieu

U.S. Senator from Louisiana

John Mariani
Food Critic, Esquire



“*Back in the late Seventies, the old Ruth’s Chris Steak House on Broad Street was our clubhouse. I was introduced to the place by Michael Silvers who was much loved by the staff; and I had the good fortune to have that warmth transferred to me.*

I’d only been back in town a few days after several years on the road, and I’d never even heard of Ruth’s Chris.

I’m sure I would have remembered because, after all, one of the best things about the place was the name. Even when you figured it out, it still made no sense as a name for a restaurant, and I’ve felt some personal pleasure that it’s become such a successful chain under that banner.

I guess it must have been in a questionable neighborhood because it not only had a guard at the door, it had the tallest guard of all time. Fortunately, the criminals never figured out what a sweet guy he was and, as far as I know, that block was always safe.

Now, Ruth mainly sat at one of the front tables pretending to have important paperwork, but a lot of the time, she just wasn’t there. And she didn’t have to be because she had Janet and Myrtle. Myrtle was kind, Janet pretended she was tough, but never fooled me.

‘Look, Jimmy, if you want more anchovies, go on in the kitchen and get ‘em.’ And so I did, from that night on. I wasn’t comfortable rousing them for a little of this or that (though I really did enjoy using those buzzers in the booths) and often wound up getting something our table might need.

We also quickly came to an understanding of what the tip would be, and I can’t remember ever getting a check, just the charge statement in the mail each month, which I never questioned.

The food was about as good as food gets, the cocktails were always generous (yep, sometimes I mixed my own) and everybody always had a great time.

In the years since that location closed, replaced by, can it be? eighty others, I keep hearing that it was a hangout for politicians. It seems I should have remembered that, since I was writing a newspaper column at the time, and the fact that I didn’t is a measure of how much fun I must have been having.”

Jim Polster

Novelist/Producer

Special Wine Auction

Fine wines in impressive vintages have always accompanied a Ruth’s Chris dinner. In keeping with this tradition, we’re pleased tonight to offer an auction of fabulous three-to-six-liter California wines donated by the best vintners in America. You will find dozens of coveted bottles available for your enjoyment.

The silent auction will last from the cocktail party through dessert – until the beginning of the “live” auction of five outstanding bottles. On the auction tables you will find bidding sheets, tasting notes, and retail and reserve prices for the bottles.

Ruth always urges that you “come hungry.” We hope you have “come thirsty,” too. Check the list and see how rare and fine a wine experience we present. Then bid high – and bid often. You know it’s incomparable wine for a good cause. Proceeds will go to support the Ruth U. Fertel Culinary Arts Building.

“ One of the things that makes my mother so special is her very special presence. I mean not just how she holds herself but her presentness, how she is there, here, now, with you, not somewhere else, calculating where she wants to get, or what she wants from you, nor stuck in some past elsewhere working a grudge rather than experiencing the moment. She is present tense all the way. Here. Now.

This made her a great businesswoman and a great traveling companion, always there, riding the edge of the present moment, open to what comes. When she came back a couple years ago from a fancy cruise in the Mediterranean I asked her how the food was, expecting to hear raves. “Awful” she said but added: “one time we got off the boat somewhere in Greece and I had the best tomato salad of my life.” And there they were: the juicy tomatoes and the feta and olive oil and salt right there before you, and the light of the Greek islands flooding the moment. That is the essence of my mother, the lady from Happy Jack, LA. A tomato salad eaten not in the first-class dining salon but in some marketplace in some nameless Greek town. In my family we argue about the proper way to cut a Creole tomato. Everything — here, now — mattered. God is in the details. All of them.

Another way she is present not absent is that, whoever you are, she makes no effort to stand above you. Be you grand or not so grand, she assumes you are on equal footing with her and she with you. She doesn't pull rank. I can't tell you how many times as I traveled from steak house to steak house around the country, how many servers and kitchen workers approached me and said, ‘You know, I have to tell you: the first time I saw your mother at this restaurant's opening, she was peeling shrimp.’ They'd say: ‘There she was, the empress of steaks, and everyone is in the weeds and she saw the need to peel shrimp and she jumped right in.’ From that they knew they were in the right place. You could tell.

Somehow Mom transferred her gift of presence to the people who worked for her and the dishes she served and the tables she set and the restaurants she created around the country. This is part of the magic of Ruth's Chris. Maybe it's the sizzle that does it, but anyway in another sense this presence, this presentness, is the sizzle, the essence of the sizzle, the presence that sizzle helps create. In this world of cookie-cutter dining and Airline Highways everywhere, with Ruth's Chris you are somewhere when you get there. Even on North Broad St. at the very center of New Orleans' oh-so-elegant Mid-City. You don't need to be somewhere else. This is the place, this is where the magic is. Don't look over your shoulder because it's happening right here. Right now. Can you hear it, can you see it, can you smell it, can you taste it? Sizzle. Sizzle. Sizzzzzle.

With this tribute, the Fertel family seeks to foster the promising future of John Folse and the culinary arts of which he is a master. When my mother said 18 months ago that John Folse and his Culinary Institute were where she would like me to invest my time and energy to keep her name and her legacy alive, I wondered, ‘why there?’ But as I have gotten to know John and come to appreciate his professionalism, his sense of honor and good will, his generosity as a teacher and as a manager and as a man, I have come to believe that my mother's legacy could be in no finer, more trustworthy hands.

Above all, tonight, we celebrate a courageous woman and her legendary career. Thanks Mom. You're the greatest.”

Randy Fertel

President, The Fertel Family Foundation.



The Fertel Family Foundation

Through The Fertel Family Foundation, the legacy of Ruth Fertel and her family will continue to influence the city for generations.

“New Orleans has meant everything to my family,” says Randy Fertel, Ruth’s son. “My father’s family has been here since before the turn of the century, and my mother’s family about the same time. Our family has a vested interest in this city. Even though Ruth’s Chris is now an international success, it got its start here, and it has New Orleans woven throughout.”

Randy says he can’t imagine not giving back to the community. “I have a wonderful opportunity to support my passions,” he says. “I’m fortunate enough to be in a position to be generous to people who do good work in these areas. Philanthropy is such a part of me. I want to continue to give back.

“A major focus for my giving in the coming years is a building in my mother’s honor at the Chef John Folse Culinary Institute on the campus of Nicholls State University in Thibodaux. I hope to fulfill my mother’s dream to make the Chef John Folse Culinary Institute the third great culinary arts school in America.”

In addition to the culinary arts endeavor, The Fertel Family Foundation supports New Orleans-based initiatives in education and the arts, and issues arising from the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

For many years Randy, whose Ph.D. in literature is from Harvard, has taught a course on Vietnam War literature at Tulane. He believes that it’s important to continue to focus attention on this historical event, because of the profound effect it still has, years later, on those who fought the war and on the society that sent them and then all but forgot them. “It was a war that divided not only a nation, but individual families as well,” says Randy. “We need to heal those wounds so we can move on.”

From an educational standpoint, Randy firmly believes that many of the state’s economic woes are the result of a less-than-ideal educational system, and that the state does not provide enough support for our public schools. As such, much of his attention is focused here. His mother shares this commitment. The mission of the Ruth U. Fertel Foundation, which his mother founded and which he heads, is exclusively to support education among the less-advantaged.

*Excerpted from an annual
report published by
The Greater New Orleans Foundation.*

What they’re saying about Ruth’s Chris Steak House

Best restaurant in
the United States
Robb Report

One of the USA’s prime spots
USA Today

Steak Invasion Headquarters!
The steaks are top drawer!
Gael Greene,
New York Magazine

When it comes to dessert,
Ruth’s Chris wins the
steakhouse sweepstakes.
Ruth Reichl,
New York Times

Big, buttery, juicy steaks that
are ‘up there!’
Zagat Guide,
New York

Succulent cuts and an expert staff.
Arthur Schwartz,
New York Daily News

The savvy traveler knows this is a
safe steak haven, so it’s like a club
away from home
Chicago Tribune





Ruth's Plaquemines Parish Oyster Dressing

1 gallon oysters	3 large onions, minced	3 green peppers, minced
3 ribs celery, minced	handful garlic, minced	1 lb. smoked sausage, minced
1 lb. hot sausage	10-15 chicken bouillon cubes	about 3 stale loaves French bread
salt, black pepper, red pepper flakes	1 dozen eggs	1 lb. melted butter

Go through oysters one at a time so that no shells remain. Heat oysters and water until edges curl. Drain oysters—save water and add chicken bouillon cubes. Sauté sausages until rendered. Sauté onions, pepper, celery, garlic in with sausage until done. Add salt, pepper, red pepper flakes.

When done, turn fire off and add chopped (not too fine) oysters. Mix well

To oyster water, add bread. Be sure all bread is moist. Add 1 dozen eggs and 1 pound melted butter to bread mixture, Mix well. Mixture shouldn't be too watery. Add sausage and sauteed seasoning to bread mixture. Mix well.

Bake @ 350 degrees for 1 hour (foiled). Remove foil, brown for about 15 minutes.