

# FROM STATE TO SOUTHERN CHARM

CALS alumnus blooms as a celebrity and B&B owner

BY MEG HENDERSON

**LIKE THE FLOWERING VINES**, bulbs, and annuals that adorn the gardens of his recently renovated St. Francisville Inn, southern hospitality is deeply rooted in every venture that **Brandon Branch** has undertaken in his life.

The 2000 horticulture grad grew up on a Mississippi dairy farm but was encouraged by his family to attend college and find his own path. Originally a landscape architecture major, Branch credits Dr. Lester Estes for helping him discover that his passion for flowers, instilled early in life by his grandmother, could become a viable career.

“I loved plants more than drawing, and I loved being outside,” he stated. “And Dr. [James] DelPrince was instrumental in introducing me to people in the industry.”

After graduation, Branch interned in Aspen, Colorado, serving an elite clientele. He was preparing to move to Los Angeles when, one night, he was watching the movie “Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil,” set in Savannah, Georgia. The movie immediately sparked a fascination with the historic architecture and gardens of the city and a longing to return to the South. Branch packed his bags and made the move—not to LA, but to Savannah.

The move led to an opportunity to serve as creative director and personal assistant for Paula Deen, where Branch remained for 14 years. When he took the job, Deen was not yet a household name. But after being introduced by her niece, Branch immediately felt that this was a good fit.

“I knew she was going places, and I knew there was something there,” he said.

It was during these years that the seed of Branch’s dream to open a bed and breakfast was planted.

“[Paula and I] grew and developed together, and it really prepared me for the hospitality industry,” he reflected. “We traveled all of the time, and we were in some of the nicest hotels in the world, and that opened my eyes to the hospitality industry and what I wanted to create in St. Francisville.”

Branch took a small detour from his B&B dream when he received a knock on the door of his Savannah home. He was asked to appear on an episode of Bravo’s *Southern Charm: Savannah* and remained for the rest of Season 2, which aired in 2018. Branch credits Savannah with being the true star of the show, which is peppered with picturesque shots of the city.

“The show showcased her beauty and hospitality, how gorgeous and

magical the city is,” Brandon remarked.

In October 2018, Branch and his husband, Jim Johnston, purchased the St. Francisville Inn, a Victorian landmark just minutes north of Baton Rouge, Louisiana and close to family. Branch and Johnston, a realtor, had remodeled a number of historic homes in Savannah, so they came to this project with plenty of knowledge and experience.

“One of the greatest challenges of the project was living through all the renovations,” Branch recalled. “We lived at the property during the renovations.”

The completely redesigned inn, reopened in April 2019, offers a modern take on classic Southern style, both inside and out. The property appears to be a culmination of Branch’s life’s work. Savannah-inspired charm is evident in the interior design. And his passion for horticulture, started in his youth and cultivated in his undergraduate studies, is arguably the property’s crown jewel. According to Branch, the South is defined by hospitality.

“To be a guest in your home—that is very Southern,” he said. “It’s a huge compliment when someone says, ‘I feel like I’ve been a guest in your home.’ And there’s nothing like sipping a cocktail on the veranda.” 🐾



