

# Thyme Well Spent

Jesse Housman shows staying power in a business of changing flavors.

BY SHAWN HOLIDAY

**J**esse Housman remembers Fifth Avenue South before the full storefronts and crowds of patrons.

As one of the first new restaurateurs to buy into the redevelopment of downtown Naples, Housman wanted to create a true neighborhood bistro where regulars could get a late snack at their favorite table and watch the bustle of the evening. In 1995, he and partner Billy Holcomb opened Bistro 821 with innovative food, good service and entertainment.

“The food scene really hadn’t exploded. I think Naples was really in need of a bistro, a neighborhood restaurant,” he says. “You’re here to serve people. You want to be the hero when you can. Not everyone is on a schedule.”

Neither was Housman when he started his restaurant career as a dishwasher in his hometown of Boston. After eight years of sweating in the kitchen, he formalized his skills at Boston University’s Culinary Arts Program, rubbing elbows with the likes of world-renowned chefs Julia Child and Jacques Pépin. With school beginning at 7 a.m. and work starting at 4 p.m., he proved he had the stamina to run a kitchen. He worked seasonally on Cape Cod, and a friend brought him to Naples during the winter to work at Windstar Country Club.

In 1995, he and Holcomb took the plunge into the nascent Naples market with a dedicated crew, some of whom are still with him. His ability to recognize strengths and weaknesses in people has helped him maintain a stable workforce in a tight labor market. One of Housman’s first hires is now his sous chef.

He takes care of his customers too, doing the prep work himself because his classic French training mandates that meals be made from scratch



NANCY DENIKE

## SIDE DISH

**My soup secret:**

For sweet potato soup, I put a little vanilla bean in it.

**Main ingredient for success:**

Consistency is next to godliness in this business.

**What’s in my fridge at home:**

I like to make my own sushi.

**My worst food indulgence:**

Chocolate, all kinds. I don’t keep chocolate in the house because I’ll eat it all.

**Best hurricane food:**

Big ol’ cans of Beefaroni.

and with no preservatives.

His business partner, Holcomb, takes over in the afternoon so Housman can be with his daughter Ramana. After losing his wife, Fredrika, in a car accident in 2001, the chefs’ community pulled together to arrange fundraisers and to cover Housman’s duties. He and Holcomb had just signed papers to buy back Bistro 821, and within a few months Housman was back on the line. He is grateful to have built his career with such a competitive but tight-knit group.

“Basically, people use the skills they have,” Housman says. “I was dedicated. I was always ready to go. It’s more intelligent energy now. I’m wiser with my time.” **NZ**