

# EPISODE 044

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## GAGE & TOLLNER

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Hamish Smyth, Order

AND

St. John Frizell, at Gage & Tollner

### INTRODUCTION

Welcome to The Follow-up, a weekly podcast that goes in depth into projects recently reviewed on Brand New featuring conversations with the designers, and sometimes their clients, uncovering the context, background and design decisions behind the work.

### ARMIN VIT

Hi, this is Armin Vit and welcome to episode 44 of The Follow-up.

This week we are following up on Gage & Tollner, an oyster and chop house restaurant in downtown Brooklyn, NY, that was originally founded in 1879. It operated for over a century and after passing through several owners, the restaurant closed its doors in 2004. In 2014, chef Sohui Kim and restauranteurs Ben Schneider and St. John Frizell partnered to start a crowdfunding campaign to revive the restaurant, raising \$484,091 and in 2016 they began work on it. Set to re-open in 2020, its grand re-opening was shut down literally days before as New York dining shut down for the pandemic. The restaurant stayed active through takeout orders and late last year was able to finally, properly reopen.

The project, designed by New York, NY-based Order, was posted on Brand New on October 7, 2021. You can pull it up on your browser at [bit.ly/bnpodcast044](https://bit.ly/bnpodcast044) that is B I T dot L Y slash bnpodcast044, all in lowercase.

This week we are joined by Hamish Smyth, Co-founder of Standards and Partner at Order; and St. John Frizell, Partner at Gage & Tollner.

In this conversation we learn about the origin of Gage & Tollner. Not just as the restaurant that started in 1879 but as its revival and how an unexpected visit to its landmark Brooklyn location ,while searching for a space to start a cocktail bar, inspired the founders to instead focus on bringing this iconic restaurant back to life. From there St. John and Hamish take us down the historical rabbit hole they gleefully went into for both the identity and the menu thanks to a treasure trove of Gage & Tollner ephemera found at the Brooklyn Historical Society. And, if like us, you enjoy far too many details about typography, stick around for Hamish's master class in how to revive and pay homage to a font designed and patented in the late 1800s.

Now let's listen in as Bryony follows up with Hamish and St. John.

**BRYONY** In the kitchen we often look back into what has been in order to inform new dishes and recipes. In the same way, there are times when it is appropriate for designers to look back and load their toolbox with what has been, in order to create a brand that takes us forward, while honoring its foundation. Today, we will be getting the backstory, on the future story, of Gage & Tollner. Hamish, St. John, welcome to The Follow-Up.

**ST. JOHN FRIZELL** Thanks for having us. This is very exciting.

**HAMISH SMYTH** Thanks for having us Bryony. Good to be here again.

**BRYONY** All right, well, let's jump right in. St. John, could you take me back to that moment when you and your partners starting talking about re-establishing Gage & Tollner. From the why behind the idea, to the why then, and why you?

**ST. JOHN** The story begins in downtown Brooklyn, where my partner Ben Schneider and I were looking around for a space to open a small cocktail bar that would become the Sunken Harbor Club, which we can get to in a second. We looked at some spaces that we were not very excited about, and the realtor, perhaps out of desperation

said “I’ve got one more thing I can show you, it’s not really what you’re looking for, but it’s interesting.” She led us through downtown Brooklyn and I realized that we were walking across Fulton Street towards the facade of Gage & Tollner—one of the most famous restaurants in Brooklyn history. And I looked at Ben and I said, “is she taking us into Gage & Tollner right now?” We had heard the legends of this restaurant. And I had peaked my head in a few times when it was a clothing store, just to see what was left of the magnificent interior that the restaurant was famous for. But had no idea that the space was available, or that the landlords were looking for someone to reestablish it as a restaurant. Sure enough, she got the keys and we walked in the door. And I saw Gage & Tollner really for the time, vacant and empty, with all its interior magnificence in place. Dusty and in need of a little TLC, but still intact. From that point on, I think we just became obsessed with resurrecting this restaurant.

**BRYONY** Serendipity, you know? When somebody absolutely changes the course of what you had planned. In this case a real estate agent. I think it would be helpful for our listeners to get a better sense of what that historical relevance that you’re speaking of this restaurant in the history of Brooklyn means for the industry,

**ST. JOHN** Right. It opened in 1879. It closed in 2004. So it was open for 125 years. The interior space was landmarked in the 1970s. It was very well known for this really ornate Victorian interior. The main focus point of the room is these gas and electric chandeliers. There are 13 of them that run down the center of the room, it’s a really unique design. It was known for the longevity of the servers that worked there, who wore these beautiful black, formal uniforms and wore on their sleeves insignia that designated how long they had worked there. A bar marking a year, a star five years, and an eagle 25 years. And there were some people that worked there that wore two eagles on their sleeves. To me, it was just such a grand and beautiful space. I’ve always said that New Yorkers, because we live in small houses that don’t really match the magnitude of the events in our lives, have to go out to

restaurants to celebrate them because there, in a bigger space around a lot of people, that kind of matches the feeling that you have when you're celebrating something like a 50th wedding anniversary. Gage & Tollner definitely fits the bill there. It's been restored by my partner, Ben, you know, restored to its previous magnificence and ready to greet a whole new, generation of Brooklyn.

**BRYONY** Fascinating story, I think they can probably write two or three monographs just on the culture of the restaurant itself and that history. Hamish, at what point, and kind of under what circumstances did Order get involved with the future branding of Gage & Tollner?

**HAMISH** Order became involved, I think it was halfway through 2019. So this is all pre-COVID, which we can get into... is kind of a big part of the story.

**BRYONY** Yeah, we will.

**HAMISH** Yeah. St. John, did you wanna get into the crowdfunding part of it?

**BRYONY** That precedes?

**ST. JOHN** Yeah, sure. Yeah, it did. It preceded meeting with Hamish, I think. We had trouble getting the people that we needed on board. I should say the money that we did on board to start this massive project. We figured it would cost about 2 million dollars, and we were right about that. We did the thing that you typically do, which is you call the wealthiest people, you know, where you get introductions to them and you ask them to bankroll the whole thing. Well, that didn't work. We had to pivot and build some excitement about this project that would attract the money that we needed. So we decided to start this crowdfunding campaign. Now this is regulation, crowdfunding. It's making a real investment in hopes of getting a real financial reward, as opposed to something like Kickstarter, where you get a tote bag or, you know, something like that.

The story of us launching the campaign was covered in the New York Times, which really helped to kick things off. But I have to say that the

first thing that I did when I was looking for advice on crowdfunding is buy Alex Daly's book, *The Crowdsourceress*, which ended up being—and I met with Alex as well—ended up being my Bible in this whole process, and really helped me structure the fundraising. The things that I learned in that book directly led to the press coverage, which did so much to increase the public profile of the project. And did end up, you know, attracting the investment that we needed.

**HAMISH** Yeah. The twist is that Alex is my partner. That's how I found out about the project, was through her. And she said, oh, we're working with these amazing restaurateurs, and giving advice, and this awesome project. I was like, oh, that's so cool. I love this kind of restaurant. It's like my favorite restaurant. And I was like, well, you know, if they never need help, you know, with branding, like throw a name out there. And I think she did. St. John and I were both, you know, we hadn't met, but we both happened to be working with a business consultant named Holly Howard in New York. And she, I believe put our name forward when St. John was looking for a branding studio. I can't nail down all the timing, but yeah, it was sort of this couple of very kind of lucky, I guess, ways of being introduced. We sent the RFP, they had been looking, I think for a little bit of time, and we put together a proposal, went to the restaurant and met with the team, and sort of got the tour. I, I was really, really excited about the space and the team, and put together this proposal as you do. And we're lucky enough to be told that we got the job.

**ST. JOHN** And I was familiar with Hamish's work from the reissue of the New York City Transit Authority graphics manual. When they sent the proposal in, I was really excited because here is a person that had the same ideas that I had about history, which is like, I constantly turn to history for inspiration. Almost like a handicap of mine. I can't really think of anything new without finding it in an old book first, you know? So, this sort of appreciation for history just matched very well with what we were doing at Gage & Tollner.

**HAMISH** I think we mentioned even in our proposal that we are not the go-to restaurant branding studio in New York, or anything like that. If there even is one, but restaurant design is not our bread and butter. Sorry, I did not mean that as a pun, but it's not our go-to thing. We've worked on a few bars and restaurants, but we were upfront about that. And we said, but... that's not what we do, but... we really are into history. That's part of our process, and you guys are just oozing history. And so it would be really fun to work on it. And I think we were upfront and honest in our proposal, and I think it struck a chord with the team.

**ST. JOHN** Yeah, certainly

**BRYONY** I'm starting to see that this whole project is kind of like a domino effect of people knowing the right person, mentioning the things at the right time, kind of thing. And so it'll be interesting to see how it continues to evolve throughout our conversation. Now, in terms of the branding foundation, what was the first line of thinking with your team Hamish? And what kind of guidance did you get other than, let's look at the history?

**HAMISH** The first thing... it was obvious to us that doing some sort of revival was going to be at least an option that we had to explore, right? You would be kind of crazy not to do that. And I kind of knew in the back of my head that doing a revival was probably the right way to go, but I'd also remembered saying to St. John upfront that I think, you know, a revival was probably on the cards here, but I said, we should also look at what does Gage & Tollner look like if it's completely new, you know? Rebranded for the 21st century. So upfront, I'd sort of committed to showing multiple directions. I think from St. John and the team, there was no direction from them other than this promise that they have this amazing archive. There really wasn't any kind of, we'd love to see this kind of thing from the team. They really let us do what we wanted, which was great. You know, sometimes you want a little bit of direction, but in this case we didn't need it. We had all of this sort of historical context to work from.

**ST. JOHN** I can speak to that context a little bit. Yeah. We basically took a huge Google drive folder, and just dropped it on Hamish's lap and said, here you go. <laughter. It was the result of research on my part. First of all, I was shocked when we first started to think about reopening the restaurant, I instantly went to find the Gage & Tollner book, because a restaurant that has been open for 125 years, surely someone has written a cookbook or some kind of historical text about it. That book didn't exist. It may still exist someday, but nowadays restaurants will write a cookbook in year two. I mean, this place was open forever, and there was very little out there. It was mentioned in a few cookbooks. I think they reached a peak in about 1956 or so when they were celebrating their 75th anniversary. And they were in a lot of press then and cookbooks would compile recipes from restaurants around the country. And they were in a lot of those, but I kept waiting to hit gold digging through the library.

And then finally, I don't know why I didn't go here first, but I went to the Brooklyn Historical Society, which is a beautiful landmark building in its own right. And it turns out that they had just been donated 13 boxes of ephemera from the Dewey family who ran the restaurant from 1919 to about 1989. So for about 70 years. The matriarch of the family, Trudy Dewey had just passed away and her children were donating all the collection of Gage & Tollner stuff that they had to the [Brooklyn] Historical Society. I was the first person to go through the boxes, and it's just a treasure trove of stuff going back to, I think the earliest piece of ephemera they had was from 1909... Hamish, that oyster box cover? It would be like a to-go box, like a cardboard box and it had the Gage & Tollner logo on it. And then from there on, from 1919 on, we have photographs of the staff, every press clipping, even down to like seating chart for private dinners. I mean, it was like so much information! And we got to see the evolution of the logo over time, and how they treated it—just an absolute treasure trove of stuff.

**HAMISH** It was a treasure trove and it was kind of overwhelming. It was kind of endless. And it was very well organized into categories like menus,

catalogs, advertisements, interior photos, somebody—I'm guessing Cindy went through and did that for us. But even still, it was just really overwhelming us to the volume of stuff there was. And then also from a design point of view, there wasn't a clearly, one identity that they had. They had changed it a lot over the years. And the sort of one that we revived, which is set in Art Gothic, which we can get into. That was on that original oyster box from, I believe pre-1909. That was sort of what we said was okay, if you go right back, this is the earliest original printed logo that we have. But if you look at some of the photos they have, the original gold lettering on the facade was this completely different looking thing. Very Victorian, it had sort of a curly "N", I think that went up into almost like a spiral. It had these triangle decorative elements. It was very Arts and Crafts, Victorian, uh, you know, I'm mixing up stuff here, but it was really wacky. It was kind of cool, but we only sort of saw that in a couple of occasions. I actually think they tried to bring it back at one point, like in the 70s or 80s. That original window logo didn't show up too much it looked like, after it was put on that window. So we sort of considered the 1909 oyster boxes, sort of the source material for the Art Gothic direction that we went down. The archive boxes were just, you know, a fantastic thing to work from. And as St. John said earlier, our history with republishing manuals, and other design systems or collections, has really influenced our work and just getting a project that allows you to do that was just... rubbing our hands together with so much to work with.

I'm also very, you know, similar to St. John, I love when I have historic things to work from. Coming up with something new from that, is where I find design to be really interesting. Taking the past, filtering out what was working and what wasn't, and bringing it all together. Yeah. It was kind of a messy past they had, they had a lot of identities over the years and a lot of, I think, freelance people working on it, plus just, I think people at the restaurant probably working out of things and literally, you know, typewriter-ing out flyers or things like that. And some of it was really good, some of it was really bad. And there was a complete mix of styles and everything. So, you know, it was one



of those things where there wasn't this amazing, beautifully designed identity that we could revive from 1909. We really had to go back and sort of cherry-pick what we wanted to take from it.

**BRYONY** That's the beauty of the project, right? If it was too easy, it would've been boring. In a span of 125 years, you are going to find a lot of different identities and approaches.

**HAMISH** Yeah, you're right. It would be amazing and weird if it was sort of buttoned up completely.

**BRYONY** I kinda wonder St. John what would've happened if you had actually gone to the Brooklyn Historical Society on day one, and they had nothing.

**ST. JOHN** Honestly, I've thought about this. I really don't know. I mean, some other things have come out since walking in that room, like we found an attic that we didn't know existed where we found some more ephemera. But I mean, the research from that room in the Brooklyn Historical Society really formed a foundation of everything. I mean, the food analog to what Hamish is talking about... the restaurant, even in its early days, had a nostalgic quality to it, to the dinners that went there. When you read a review of Gage & Tollner in 1920, they're talking about how going to Gage & Tollner is like stepping back in time. Honestly, because the restaurant was pretty much unchanged from 18, well, 1892 is when they relocated to the location where they are now. Isn't that wild to think about that even in the 19-teens going to Gage & Tollner was a nostalgic experience where you could experience the gay 90s again. And the menu was pretty much unchanged, believe it or not from 1919 to about 1988, when Edna Lewis was hired and the restaurant changed ownership. For all that time, they made only minor changes to the venues.

In the 1970s when you went, there was this multi-page menu with hundreds of items, including things like egg salad sandwiches and omelet, for some reason, and four types of Welsh rabbit. They were proudly serving food that was popular a hundred years earlier, even,

you know, as late as the 1970s. And again, it gives us a lot to work with. So using the menu, we picked a few of the more popular items that keep kind of showing up in magazine articles and stuff like the hash brown potatoes in cream. Now, when you find a recipe for this in a magazine, it's basically potatoes, mashed with, they used like a coffee can to mash up some oiled potatoes, and then heated them up on a sizzle plate with cream, salt, and pepper, and nothing else. <Laughter> That was the dish. We would ask ourselves, okay, now this dish was extremely popular, we wanna honor that on the menu. What does it look like in 2020? And now the technique is more complicated, but the result is still kind of thrilling for a hash brown potato, you know? I think the processes we were using were really similar.

**HAMISH** I'd love to add that I also have a slight obsession with the 18-hundreds, and especially New York history, like many people, but it is like a time machine when you go in there. I mean, it was even before renovation due to its landmarked interior. One of my favorite books is Time and Again by Jack Finney, in which the character Simon, I think everyone calls him Si in the book, goes back in time to, I believe the 1880s or 90s in New York. The book was written in the 70s, and so they call it the 90s. So I love that idea that people, you know, even in the 70s were calling the 1890s, the 90s. To have this restaurant set back then, and used to imagine the people in there was kind of amazing.

**BRYONY** So as you jumped in, you're sifting through the boxes for all of the design elements, and St. John you're sifting through the boxes for all of the food and recipe related items. Hamish, earlier you mentioned that it was necessary to look into two routes of the design: the historical-based one, and a reinvention. Did you actually go ahead and present these two options? Or was it tabled right from the very beginning through conversations that just the revival was necessary?

**HAMISH** We did actually go through and present two options. It was very much one of those design presentations where I was like, please do not select direction two. Um, we, <laughter> which was the second one.

We actually put the one we wanted first, which is, you know, what does everyone do? They put the favorite one last? So I was trying to play mind tricks. No. It's not true. The research in the beginning of the presentation just made sense to go right into the historic revival. And then we said, well, you could also revive it. The second one, wasn't making it look like a modern restaurant. It was still very much a historical looking thing. And I went back and looked at the presentation today, and we had borrowed a typeface that we'd found on an old menu and brought that to the forefront for the wordmark. So it was still, I guess, a historically-based direction, but it sort of didn't take that logo that had been used quite a lot. The first direction we presented was the Gothic one. That was really what we wanted.

**BRYONY** And St. John when you looked at these two routes at the very beginning, what was your first reaction?

**ST. JOHN** Well, I have to say, first of all, that, when I got the presentation, we were stunned. I mean, we had never seen anything like this. You know, not having worked with a design firm like Order before, I was caught a little bit off guard by the complexity of the presentation, how much of the process was shown, being able to see the process was just so fascinating to me. The presentation was... how many slides was it Hamish?

**HAMISH** 210.

**ST. JOHN** Right!

**HAMISH** That's not a big one. <Laughter>.

**BRYONY** That's just two routes. Yeah. That's not too extreme, but still... <Laughter>.

**ST. JOHN** Anyway, we were blown away and honestly Hamish, I don't even remember the second design that you presented because the first one was just a home run for us. It was honoring the past, and yet it was so clean and modern at the same time. It also, in a sort of roundabout

way, evoked through this mid-century heyday of the restaurant, which is also something that we wanted to consciously honor. Just on all fronts, it just seemed like it was absolutely the right fit for what we were doing.

**BRYONY** So we need to geek out a little bit. Hamish, all things typography here for a minute or 10. There's obviously all the historical context that is your launching pad, but I'm really interested in the process—from reworking Art Gothic, and then pairing it with DeVinne Standard and Proto Grotesk. What was that process for you and the rest of your team?

**HAMISH** Yeah, for sure. Let's get into it. So really, where we began in identifying Art Gothic as sort of the route to go down, was... actually Gage & Tollner had Instagrammed a slide with four or five of the restaurants' logos that had been used, you know, over the years. I think at the top was the Art Gothic one. And then beneath it was some later ones that they'd used. One in the same typeface that Stranger Things is in, is included from their 80s logo, which is just so out of context, like who did that, but that was in there. And then one had a gas lantern next to it. Somebody tried to do a sort of revival, I guess, late on, probably when it was too late, they had put that on their Instagram. And they said, which branding do you like the best? And somebody, or most people had said, gotta use that first one, you know, the top one, the top one, which was Art Gothic. And so we put that in our presentation as a buildup to make our case. And that's sort of how we present a lot of our work is, present some things, almost like a legal team might do if the legal team was like a bunch of idiots who like drew letters and stuff. But, you know, we tried to cherry pick a few things. We kind of nailed that down, like, okay, that's right, we're gonna go down. Then we went into all of the archival material we had, and sort of tried to identify when and where Art Gothic was used. And we found even within that, they had used multiple variations of the typeface over the years. We immediately had this problem where we said, okay, we wanna use Art Gothic, but there's like seven or eight variations. Even the restaurants used.

Then we went online and looked at what Art Gothic typefaces were available. There are many, a lot of them aren't very good, they're sort of like free fonts and stuff like that. One or two of them were well drawn, professionally released typefaces. But Art Gothic was a Victorian-era typeface and the originals were probably woodcut or metalcut, and sort of long gone and not really digitized early on, I think. Digitized renditions that we had took a lot of liberty, I think, in how they drew it. So, what we did was we were able to find the patent for the first Art Gothic typeface from the US Patent office. We put that in our presentation as well. There was patented on May 5th, 1887. That fit into the timeline of the restaurant. You know, they opened before that, but they had moved to the new space by then. And probably a few years after that started using Art Gothic on their packaging and things like that. Things from a timeline point of view worked out, you know, having gotten that typeface patents are cool because display, obviously the typeface. We were then able to match that with the digital versions available, and the closest match was from HH Foundry and it was digitized 2007 from the Hamilton Woodtype number 2-3-2 for the type people out there, you can look it up. And it has a really funky set of characters, but it really closely matched that original patent. And it matched the original box pretty well too. That's sort of how we nailed that down. However, once we sort of typed out the words Gage & Tollner in that typeface, it was good, but it wasn't quite right. And we sort of adjusted what we could, put that into our presentation, but I told St. John, I said, you know, if you go with this direction, we'll make it better.

And by that, I mean, bring in a professional type designer. We did that. And we had Jesse Reagan from XYZ Type come in and sort of redraw each letter form, really from scratch. And he looked at different ampersands, and different ways of doing things, but we sort of settled on what we ended up with. To the eye, it looks very close to the original. It's a unique take on Art Gothic. Everyone's done because no one had the original stuff. I think so it's fair game. In terms of pairing up the other typefaces, we were sort of borrowing from a lot

of materials. DeVinne came about because the original menus were using... I mean, there were low res scans and stuff, it was hard to identify the actual typeface, but it was definitely a modern, as they say, serif typeface. Type people will know what I mean by that, very thin contrasted serif typeface, with fairly high x-height.

And so we went out trying to find something that we liked, that suited what we were going for, and we landed on DeVinne. And so, there was some reference that we had; was from the same type foundry as something else we were using. Sorry, I can't remember the exact reference, but it tied in nicely, felt like the original menu. That was how we land on that. And then finally, in the spirit of borrowing from many sources, Proto Grotesk came about because in the restaurant, St. John correct me if I'm wrong, a lot of the walls are paneled in this thing called lincrusta. It's a Victorian-era wall covering that was used very commonly back then. You could select from multiple pressings, I guess you would call it. And there were these amazing patterns. And so Gage & Tollner has a bunch of these still in there.

And I believe it's one of the most well preserved examples of this still around. There's not much left. We went and found the early catalogs for lincrusta, and we're gonna try and base some design directions on that. We ended up choosing Proto because lincrusta catalogs, they were using a sans serif typeface that was centered, and had a very Proto Grotesk look about it. And then I found some Gage & Tollner postcards that had, if not the same typeface, something very, very similar used along the bottom. That was enough for us to say, okay, let's sort of pair it up with a really cool looking, or interesting looking sans serif, and Proto kind of has this early ssans serif look to it, I felt. kind of love the "R", the alternate "R" that they have where it flattens out at the bottom. That's what we used as the secondaries. And there was a little bit more thought put into it than what I just said, but that was kind of where we ended up at.

**BRYONY** You definitely delivered on the goods on the geekery here. You went deep enough to satisfy that craving. Appreciate it.

**HAMISH** <Laughter> Good. I think I actually got a little out of breath there, so...

**BRYONY** So, St. John as all of this happening and Hamish and his team are obsessing over each little detail, every letter, the ampersand, all of these things. How involved are you, on the day-to-day of all of these nuances? And at the same time, how much is his work influencing what you're doing within the walls of the restaurant?

**ST. JOHN** I remember Hamish and I having a lot of the back and forth conversations. I mean, for me, it was just thrilling because here was a person that was obsessing over these old menus as much as I was. Typically, it's hard to generate that kind of enthusiasm in someone if it's not already there. I remember Hamish and I talking a lot about that stuff, talking about the ampersand too, which was something I was hung up on, on the old menu. I'm not a graphic design person, but there was something about that ampersand that was just driving me nuts. And I asked Hamish to address that, I remember. You know, at the same time we were doing things like selecting the cocktail menu. We went back to the old menus. Cocktails are a really important part of any restaurant business now, and kind of my specialty. And we decided to do something pretty brave there, which was to go with a menu of cocktails that all appeared on the original menu. These were cocktails that would not be out of place on a menu from 1955. There's a lot of things on our menu that weren't popular in 1955, and hadn't been for 60 years, like a Sherry cobbler. Definitely a drink from the 1880s, 1890s, that had its heyday and then it just was fossilized there on the menu for the next 75 years. And then, you know, talking about how to present that to customers was something that we went back and forth on a lot.

**HAMISH** You know, I was also just thrilled to have a client in the beginning, who was as excited as we were. St. John said that we were, it's just great to have a client who's receptive to history, and was excited about what

we were doing from a graphic point of view. And I guess, you know, looking back, we were probably egging each other on and going harder and harder, and finding more references, and tweaking the ampersand to death, but it was enjoyable. 'Cause we were both having fun.

**BRYONY** Before we get into better understanding timeline and what not. I do wanna cover one more part of the design and the branding, which is the photography. You took a very unusual route, especially in this day and age of Instagram and everything being digital. Can you walk us through the reasoning and then the production of the photography?

**HAMISH** Well, we should also talk about COVID 'cause it comes up in this story but... we had scheduled, as you do, when you'd nearly finished a project, we'd hired a photographer to come in and shoot all of the menus and things like that at the restaurant. And I think she was gonna come in the day before the soft launch happened. I mean, St. John would tell this story better, but the restaurant had a series, I think three or four friends and family, soft launch nights, right before COVID hit. I think the restaurant was supposed to open on like a Tuesday and New York City closed down on the Monday. We had to cancel our original photo shoot, and kind of put it on pause just as the restaurant had to as well. St. John, you should probably cover that in a minute, but to answer the question about photography after sitting around waiting for the reopening to happen, I shouldn't say sitting around 'cuz you know, the restaurant guys were working their tails off, but we were onto other projects, and we sort of came back to this once the restaurant reopened and sort of, was looking at the photography that had been produced by others. And it was great, but it didn't, it all digital and it didn't, I felt capture the feeling that you have in there. You know, it's hard to put that into words, but it is this magical historic feeling place. The lighting is very unique. It's a long narrow space, sort of naturally lit from one source at the front. But by the back it's all artificially lit, and there's a lot of mirrors and things bounce around. There's this gold ceiling. So the lighting's a little odd.



I was just not impressed. Well, everything that come out was just too sharp. It was just too kind of perfect and digital. And so I'm a cliché designer; have long been into film photography, of course. I think when you graduate from design school, they give you a film camera and say, there you go, good luck. My dad had a dark room growing up, so I was always around film photography and his dad had a dark room as well. So I sort of said, why don't we just go there one night, have dinner early, sit in the front table where it's naturally lit, and just take a bunch of film and shoot a few rolls off, and just see what happens. That's basically what we did. And there was a couple of months ago. We had dinner at 5:15, the Order team came in, Jesse Reed, my business partner is also a really good photographer. So he had his camera. We had a digital backup, which we relied on for a couple of shots, but 99% of them turned out, luckily on film. Thankfully everything turned out, but I was sort of relieved to see that my thinking was right, that film would capture the space better than digital. And you know, a lot of them are kind of grainy, and hard to see. That's kind of the feeling you get in there. Especially after some of those martinis.

**BRYONY** Everything gets a little darker and a little grainier?

**HAMISH** Exactly. It's hard to shoot your work like that on film. So we actually don't have the classic kits. The menu laid out on a flat surface sort of thing. We just have those in-situ shots standing in for those studio things that a studio might usually shoot.

**BRYONY** Yeah. That makes sense. And those might still come down the pipeline. So we've made some references into COVID and the timeline of everything. And I know from this conversation that you were about to open, COVID changed that, but you did go straight into takeout, and eventually seated dining. Can you walk us a little bit through the overall timing from crossing that street and realizing where you were headed with the realtor, to today?

**ST. JOHN** Sure. Crossing the street with the realtor happened April, 2017. So it was a three-year-long process. The original opening date for the restaurant was scheduled to be March 15th, 2020, which it turns out was <laughter> not, not the most suspicious date to open a big new restaurant in New York. The renovation took a year and a half. And the year and a half leading up to it was the crowdfunding, developing the idea, meeting with my partners, Ben Schneider and Sohui Kim, and creating the menu, creating the concept, and then a lot of a year and a half of just knocking on doors and hearing "no". For me, went out on the street, tried to raise this money. At the end of the day, we ended up with 300+ crowdfunding investors, and then 40 equity partners. Some restaurateurs would consider this to be too many, but at least there's not one person with an enormous influence which really allows us, the three partners, to really govern how the business operates—which is working out great.

Second week in March, 2020, we had, I think, three different parties for these investors because we couldn't fit them all in one room. We had a maitre d' of the restaurant who was sort of the public face of the restaurant from the 70s through the 90s, a man named Wade Siler, who is very old now he's in his eighties, but he had a great baritone voice and would sing in the restaurant sometimes. So we found him living on Lafayette Street in Fort Green, and became friends and got him to come in and sing in the dining room for those parties, which was amazing. There was a great feeling, there was a lot of excitement. And then I remember... I was just caught in the moment at the time, not really watching the news. And I remember going across the street to the Walgreens on Fulton Street because I noticed that one of the bar sinks didn't have hand soap and buying the last two bottles of hand soap on the Walgreens shelf, and thinking to myself, oh, this is really something, this is actually happening. That was probably on March 13th. Yeah. We were supposed to open on a Sunday night, March 15th. And our last sort pre-opening event was on Friday the 13th. And then on Saturday morning, my partners and I just looked at each other and said, you know, we can't do this.

**BRYONY** Yeah. This is not gonna happen.

**ST. JOHN** Went from a staff of 60 to a staff of zero, overnight. It was a wild experience. We didn't know—like everybody—we didn't know if this was gonna be a couple weeks, a few days, or how long it was gonna... thus begun our year in the wilderness. Yeah. We came back into the building really as a team in early 2021, and went back to Hamish and asked for his help designing our to-go packaging, and started to sell these meal kits where you get a steak and sides, and prepare it at home. As well as Sunken Harbour Club cocktails that you could mix at home, and food items from that concept as well. And that all led to our April 15th, 2021 reopening. Which has been going exceedingly well.

**BRYONY** Now that you have reopened and you've got a few months under your wing, can you share some of the feedback that you have received from your own employees, your customers, your crowdfunders, everybody involved?

**ST. JOHN** It's been a wild experience. You know, obviously we expected the restaurant to be successful. It's exceeded our expectations. I wanna talk about Hamish's photographs for a second. It was the first time that we had done a photoshoot since we had reopened, just all been such a blur. You know, the pre-opening shots that we took, obviously don't capture the feeling of the space because we didn't even know what the feeling of the space was gonna be at that point. Hamish's stuff when I saw it, it instantly brought to mind the photographs that people have been showing me from their events, these anniversaries, their little league wins championship. And they came to Gage & Tollner with the whole team for dinner. People have been digging through their photo albums and they'll come to dinner with the photographs just to show us that they were there in the 1970s, and this is what it looked like. The photographs that Hamish did instantly brought those to mind, and continuing this historical thread. And I instantly turned to our PR person who does our social media, and I said, can we do this for all of our posts now? Because this is the vibe that we want people to experience. The feedback been great. When I'm on the floor

at night, walking through the room, people will pull me over to the table and tell me when they were there last—this happens literally every night that I'm in the restaurant. There are people for whom Gage & Tollner has been an important part of their life in the past, and they expect that it will be again. This is the highest form of success, just a complete culmination of all the work that we have done. This is the feeling that we wanted. We wanted the people that are coming back to the restaurant after 30 years, to feel like nothing has changed. When they notice a change they're positive about it, and grateful for it. And that's just the greatest success that we could possibly have.

**BRYONY** So I don't think there are that many restaurants anywhere in the world that can toot their own horn and say, they've been through two pandemics.

**ST. JOHN** <Laughter> It's true. It's true. In the letter that I sent out to our supporters, right after we shut down, I made note of that the restaurant has survived a pandemic in the past. It survived prohibition. It survived two World Wars. This is gonna be no different.

**BRYONY** It's been through the trenches.

**ST. JOHN** It has.

**BRYONY** And so have you... as a investor, as this is your baby... You know, all of these things when starting a new business, you've been through the trenches in more ways than one. I'm hoping to find out, COVID and all, what has been the most satisfying part for you?

**ST. JOHN** I mean, honestly, working on the visual identity, the brand identity, has been incredibly satisfying to me in a way I did not expect. I expected it was just a work for hire, and then it gets done, and then you use it. But it's been such a conversation with Hamish. It's really been a highlight of the process, but I'll say still for me, the best part about it is seeing the look on the faces of people who have been there, been to Gage & Tollner before coming back in, some of them get teary when they walk

through the door, I mean, this happens like literally every night. And they're happy when they leave.

**BRYONY** That's very important.

**ST. JOHN** Totally important. That has been the greatest experience. Just meeting all the people for whom Gage & Tollner really holds a special place in their heart. People's relationship with this restaurant gets very deep, and very personal. Very, I'm not sure why that is. Not every restaurant achieves this, but Gage & Tollner did over its lifetime and to be able to continue that tradition, it's a great honor for the three of us to even be involved with this project. It's a part of New York City history, we are now the guardians of it.

**BRYONY** Well, I think you touched upon it at the very beginning when you said people used to go there for milestones. So when you go back 30 years later, you're experiencing that milestone of going on your graduation with your dad who's no longer there; there's an emotional attachment to people, beyond just the space. And when you can combine a space and an experience, with people and feelings, then it really becomes a whole other thing. And I think that's what you're experiencing, just that culmination of bringing all of these elements together.

**ST. JOHN** Yeah.

**BRYONY** At a time also, when we're all a little bit extra feely, extra tender, extra everything.

**ST. JOHN** Yeah. Like, hit the nail in the head. So many people tell me that this is the first meal that they're eating inside a restaurant since early 2020. And again, I hear that every night as well, people have been saving their risk budget for this event, you know, at the restaurant, which is also very humbling. And you're right, Gage & Tollner is a complicated place because it does encompass all of this human experience; can really feel that in the room, this energy, it's positive, it's like a life force. It goes back literally hundreds of years at this point.

**BRYONY** Hamish, for you. You went in excited, looking at the historical components, and the fact that it was something that you don't normally do, restaurants, they are not your bread and butter.

**HAMISH** Correct. Yeah.

**BRYONY** But you know, it's always fun to do a little bit of the things that we don't do on the daily basis. What has been the most rewarding part of this project?

**HAMISH** From a personal point of view I think the most rewarding was, I mean, I think you have to be careful when you're doing a historic revival, especially a place like this. If you go too far, you can kind of, I don't have a word for it, but like Disneyland the crap out of it, so to speak. So you have to kind of temper a little bit, how far you go. I'm just happy that we were able to pull that off. From a larger perspective when COVID hit, I felt so bad for the team and I'd seen how hard they were working, and training, and building up to this mid-March opening. And, you know, I saw COVID coming from a long way. St. John was just so heads down in it. I was getting very worried for the restaurant. And then when they had to announce the closing, it was just kind of devastating.

But for them to be able to sort of persevere through it and get through with the takeout. And I saw how hard they worked on that. It was just amazing to be able to go in there that first time, and kind of have a meal and St. John is right, there is a jovial atmosphere in there. I think I've had dinner there three times. It's actually really hard to get a reservation. <Laughter> You have to book like a month out, midnight sort of thing already, it's like that. But I believe there are bar seats available every night. So show up. To go there at dinner, it's an experience. It does have this different feeling about it than really any other restaurant that I've been to. Sort of hard to describe, but I think it's all baked into that space.

**BRYONY** As you're looking ahead, I think we can all find ourselves in a point where we're starting to lift our heads and stop looking behind us in

this burden that we've been carrying. And while cautiously, we're all taking steps out and forward. What of what lies ahead, is the most exciting for each of you?

**ST. JOHN** Well, for me, it's the opening of the Sunken Harbor Club upstairs. It's a thrill for me. Sunken Harbor Club began as a weekly popup at my restaurant in Red Hook, Brooklyn called Fort Defiance. It was sort of this tropical night that we would do there, where we experimented with different cocktail styles, and then to see the evolution to where it is now... the bar that we originally were planning to open in downtown Brooklyn, that led to all of this is finally going to have a brick and mortar home upstairs. And I just, you know, couldn't be more delighted that the drinks that are on the menu, the development that we're doing now, is so thrilling, we're getting to create something totally new again. That's what's got me fired up right now.

**BRYONY** And you can share that same energy from downstairs, and commute very quickly—

**ST. JOHN** Right.

**BRYONY** All night long. Hamish, how about for you?

**HAMISH** I mean, in terms of this project, it's the same answer. It's continuing this collaboration that we've kind of been having and the Sunken Harbor materials, I went back and looked recently... and I looked at the logo that we had. I emailed St. John, like, you know, I think this is too perfect. We need to mess it up a bit, rough it up, send it out to sea. And he was like, I love that. You know, let's do it. I haven't done it yet, 'cuz we're all busy, but we're gonna do that, we're gonna design the menus. We're talking later today. That's gonna be really fun. We made a board game for the Sunken Harbor Club, all these, like—

**ST. JOHN** I was gonna say... <laughter>

**HAMISH** Yeah, St. John was like, I wanna do bandanas, but I want them to have a board game on there. Like, can you come up with something?

I'd heard of this old pirates game, and I had to Google "old pirate game" or something, but we found it and the game is played with these like custom dye that you roll, and they have anchors and stuff on them. Anchor and crown I think gets called.

**ST. JOHN** Yeah.

**HAMISH** Anyway, it's just like—.

**ST. JOHN** Yeah, Crown and Anchor.

**HAMISH** And the board game fits on like a square, so we put that on the bandana.

**ST. JOHN** I mean, this is the thing I can send this random email to Hamish where I'm like, I want a board game on a bandana. <Laughter> And I think he sent me the Crown and Anchor idea, like 20 minutes later. And I was like, solved. Yeah.

**HAMISH** I sketched out. I was like, how about this? There's this game from like the pirate era, like from the 1600s. And he's like, perfect. Let's print it. So, <laughter> It's been stuff like that, which is just fun to do as a designer. It's fun to have a client who's enthusiastic about nerdy stuff like that, as much as we are.

**BRYONY** Fantastic. I definitely think we're gonna have to have a part two to this recording.

**HAMISH** Sunken Harbor. Yeah.

**BRYONY** Once everything is out there.

**HAMISH** Maybe on location with some Tiki drinks...

**BRYONY** That would be lovely.

**ST. JOHN** There you go.

**BRYONY** It is fascinating, getting into all of the nitty gritty and seeing what you're most excited right now is this other project, which is the one that started Gage & Tollner in a way. But you went around, and took a



very big detour that was then put through the ringer through the pandemic, and then you are back to where you started. But now you have two locations, and two different adventures to connect with, with customers. It's really interesting. And I appreciate that time that you have taken to share all of the details, the geekery, and the fun parts, and the not so fun parts with me today.

**ST. JOHN** My pleasure.

**HAMISH** You're very welcome. Thank you.

**ARMIN** This podcast, The Follow-up, was started at the beginning of the pandemic and because of that many of the projects we've covered in the 40-plus episodes have had a COVID-related story but this one packs a particularly wrenching punch. After three years of work to get the restaurant open and a handful of soft openings, all of New York shut down literally days before the grand opening. Luckily, the partners' and staff resilience to stay open through the pandemic by offering delivery and takeout options, paid off more than a year later with the grand re-opening and attention this effort deserved for both the restaurant and the wonderful identity by Order that benefited from today's guests' shared obsession for the history and legacy of what had come before them.

Today, thanks for listening. Until next time, we'll be here, we hope you'll be there.