



Les Dames d'Escoffier  
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# In the Sweet Spot: Dolester Miles

*This James Beard–nominated pastry chef is the gold standard for elevating the art of dessert one recipe at a time.*

By *Christiana Roussel*

Sitting down to chat with Pastry Chef Dolester Miles at 2:00 in the afternoon, you quickly realize that this is her usual quitting time. You can tell she is tired and perhaps more than a little ready to get home and relax but then again, she did get to work at 5:30 this morning. However, the mere mention of what it means to be nominated for a James Beard Award in a field that is clearly her passion brings a light to her eyes. She clasps her hands together, drawing them to her face, almost hiding behind them in an effort to contain her excitement. Lucky for us she landed here and not in Silicon Valley.

Bypassing a degree in computer science, Miles instead opted to try her hand in the restaurant world, starting with Chef Frank Stitt as garde manger when he opened the doors to Highlands Bar & Grill in 1982. When he settled on opening Bottega, it was decided that there



*After garnering her third consecutive James Beard Award nomination for outstanding pastry chef, Dolester Miles of Highlands Bar & Grill and Bottega, talks about her career in food. Photo by Cary Norton.*

was more room to work in that space and all desserts would be made there. Dol and her cousin Verba Ford who was also working at Highlands at that time, asked for the chance to take over the program. Having been in that role ever since, Dol daily creates that famous

coconut cake, that rich chocolate tart, that heady lemon meringue tart, and all the other seasonal delights that make diners at Bottega, Highlands Bar & Grill, and Chez Fon Fon swoon. One thing is for sure: Dolester Miles has found her sweet spot.



All photos by Cary Norton.

So, you're a James Beard Foundation Award finalist in the Outstanding Pastry Chef category for the third year in a row (winners to be announced May 7th). Of course, all of Birmingham is cheering you on since regular Highlands Bar & Grill and Bottega diners have always known your confections are the best. Given that you have been making many of the same desserts for decades, why do you think the foundation is just now seeing fit to nominate you?

I have been asking myself that same question! I really don't know!

Maybe they saw the Southern Foodways Alliance film about you! (<https://www.southernfoodways.org/film/dol/>)

That was really so nice...

Competitions are notoriously fickle. But tell us what would it mean to finally win the award? It would be an awesome unbelievable achievement, but then again,

I already feel like that just being nominated! Last year, the person who won had a name similar to mine. When I first heard it, I almost had a heart attack.

Is there ever a dessert you always wanted to put on the menu but did not get to?

Not really. But there have been things we've made that just didn't sell well.

We can't imagine a Dolester creation not selling out!

You just never know how something will sell. Sometimes a dessert has a name that people don't like so we rename it and it sells. Other times, we try and sell something here at Bottega and will only sell one or two it but if we offer the same dessert down at Highlands, we'll sell 30. Strawberry cobbler is one example. We only sold a few here so we changed it to a strawberry crostada, which sold better. We sent the cobblers to Highlands and sold almost 40.

That makes us curious. So you make everything here at Bottega and then transfer the Highlands desserts every day? That must require an armored truck!

It is a short drive, just down the hill, not a big deal. (Note: she did not tell me what time the desserts leave Bottega for Highlands—that must be a trade secret.)

Over the years, you've had a few co-workers leave the Bottega kitchen and go on to do other things—Geri-Martha O'Hara (a new member nominee) and Dame Brittany Garrigus are just a couple names that come to mind. How have you mentored them?

Well, it helps when you know they already have a passion for what they are doing. Geri-Martha would come in every day, talking about wanting to make ice cream. When the (Big Spoon Creamery) opportunity finally presented itself, I told her to go for it!

The other advice I give is to tell people to read through the whole recipe before they start something. There is nothing worse than getting a couple steps in and reading that something has to chill for eight hours.

Another thing I do is have all my ingredients measured out before I begin. That way, I am less likely to get to the end and forget about adding something. Everything is out and ready to go.

We hear you like to watch Food Network shows in your downtime. Do you think you'd ever like to have your own show? What if there is ever an Iron Chef: Pastry Chef edition?

Oh, no. I could never do that. I would be way too nervous to be on TV. I would like to watch it



though. Then again, you know, you can't just throw together desserts like you can the savory things. That might not work.

When you're looking for inspiration, whose recipes do you go back to again and again? Martha Stewart and Ina Garten. Their recipes always work.

Chef Stitt has so many folks who've worked with him for decades. Why do you think that is?

He is very calm and easy to work with and knowledgeable. I really feel like he is a brother to me. When he comes back from being out of town, he is so excited to

share with us where he's been and what he ate and drank. There is just something about him and Pardis; I just love them.

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