



Les Dames d'Escoffier
INTERNATIONAL



Birmingham

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Founded in 2013

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Spring 2021

President's Note

Dear Dames,

It's been a year since the pandemic and quarantine began, and our chapter has remained resilient. We've found ways to stay active, and we continue to successfully raise funds to empower women in our industries of food, beverage, and hospitality.

Our annual fundraiser, Champagne and Fried Chicken, brought in over \$60,000, and we had a profit increase over last year, which, in turn, increased our funds for scholarships and our entrepreneur grant giving. Thanks to our astute treasurer, we are almost ready to establish an endowment fund that will bring more corporate attention and dollars to our fundraising efforts and ensure that we are able to continue our giving for years to come.

Jennifer thinks we'll have that endowment fully established by this time next year. That's huge for an organization that is less than a decade old!

Partnering with Pepper Place Market during the month of September with the Dames Take-over-themed Saturdays has given us an opportunity to bond (with each other and with our community) safely outside and bring

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Fundraiser: Sweet Treats Baked by Birmingham's Best



By Susan Swagler

Valentines and Galentines, alike, got a sweet treat (several, in fact) when the Birmingham chapter of Les Dames d'Escoffier International partnered with the Market at Pepper Place to produce festive boxes of sugary goodness.

Dozens of Dames volunteered to produce, market, assemble, and sell our Sweet Treats Boxes. We sold a

total of 76 boxes, and the proceeds will go into our grant and scholarships fund.

This fundraising effort was chaired by Dame Carey Thomasson in collaboration with Dame Leigh Sloss-Corra. The confections included pink, sprinkled, and chocolate treats as well as spicy and slightly savory sweets like

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gingerbreads and shortbreads. Chapter President Kathy G. Mezrano says, “Our Valentine’s Sweet Treats Box project gives our Dames not only a way to stay connected during these Covid times, but also an opportunity to raise awareness in the community of our organization by sharing the baking talents of both professionals and home cooks.”

Dame Barbara Gaines Kenyon, who has experience with boxed goodies via her Happy City Boxes, designed a beautiful box and put together an enticing image that Dames shared on social media ahead of time—directing buyers to the online order form at the Market at Pepper Place. The boxes of mixed treats cost \$25 plus tax and were

available for contactless curbside pickup during the Market’s regular Saturday drive-through on February 13.

The Market is the same convenient location for our wildly successful Champagne and Fried Chicken picnic, which we held last fall and anticipate having again in fall of 2021. Kathy G. says, “We’re fortunate to have a key member, Leigh Sloss-Corra, executive director of the popular Market at Pepper Place, provide our Birmingham Dames a platform to showcase our organization.”

Each Sweet Treats Box—tied with pink ribbons and adorned with glittery red hearts—contained a colorful assortment of cookies, bars, brownies, and all sorts of chocolate treats prepared by some of the top female bakers and pastry

chefs in Birmingham, all members of our Birmingham chapter. Even some Dames who consider themselves home cooks pitched in with baked goods and box assembly and curbside delivery.

Several masked Dames gathered at The Winter Market the day before the event to assemble the boxes; they included Idie Hastings (OvenBird and Hot and Hot Fish Club), Rosemary Dallam, Susan Gilpin, Susan Swagler, Donna Cornelius, Kate Nicholson, Pat Terry, Erin Isbell, Gia McCollister, Kathy G. Mezrano, Leigh Sloss-Corra, Martha Johnston, Ashley McMakin, Carey Thomasson, and Barbara Kenyon. Leigh Sloss-Corra, Cheryl Slocum, and Jasmine Smith handled curbside delivery at the Market the next day.



At left (back row): Leigh Sloss-Corra, Martha Johnston, Rosemary Dallam, Pat Terry, Erin Isbell, Carey Thomasson, Ashley McMakin, and Barbara Kenyon (front row): Kathy G. Mezrano, Susan Swagler, Gia McCollister, and Kate Nicholson Below: An assortment of delicious baked goods, prepared by a number of Dames, filled the boxes, which were designed by Dame Barbara Gaines Kenyon.

The boxes included chocolate pound cake pops from April McClung (Emily’s Heirloom Pound Cakes), chocolate crinkle cookies from Pat Terry (The Wellness Kitchen, LLC), double chocolate cookies from Rebecca Williamson (Holmsted Fines), jam bars from Anna Theoktisto (Meredith Food Studios), hearts of Ka’ik from Kathy G. Mezrano (Kathy G. & Co.), triple ginger molasses crisps from Susan Swagler (savor.blog), brownies from Andrea Snyder (Urban Cookhouse and Farm Bowl + Juice Co.), triple chocolate thumbprint cookies from Brooke Bell (*Bake from Scratch* magazine), white chocolate brownies from Martha Johnston, sugar cookie hearts with royal icing from Cheryl Slocum (*Oprah* magazine), brown butter blondies from Jasmine Smith (Meredith Food Studios), chocolate chip cookies from Telia Johnson (Telia Johnson Cakes), Ashley Mac’s brownies from Ashley McMakin, heart-shaped sugar cookies from Gia McCollister (Gia’s Cakes), rosemary



shortbreads from Kristen Hall (Bandit Patisserie and The Essential), Jan Gautro’s white chocolate delights, brown sugar shortbread with chocolate and Heath bar sprinkles from Carey Thomasson, French sables from Leigh Sloss-Corra (the Market at Pepper Place), brownies from

Sherron Goldstein (Fresh Fields Cooking), and frosted cake balls with sprinkles, and red velvet cake bites from Linda Croley (Bare Naked Noodles).

A huge thank you to everyone who made this quick-turn-around fundraiser a sweet success!

A Giving Heart: The Creation of the Becky Satterfield Scholarship

By Susan Swagler

Dame Becky Satterfield has taken our philanthropic efforts to a new level with her commitment to annually fund our first named scholarship.

But then Becky has been instrumental in the success of the Birmingham LDEI chapter since *before* day one. She was one of a handful of women who gathered early on—before we even established a chapter—to dream and plan for what we could one day become.

Keeping her focus on our future, she's establishing the Becky Satterfield Scholarship, which will—for years to come—directly benefit outstanding women who are pursuing culinary-related careers.

Becky is the owner of Satterfield's Restaurant and El ZunZún. As one of the founding members of our chapter, she served from 2013-2015 as our Vice President of Membership and then the following two years as our chapter's President. Over the years, she has consistently contributed to our fundraising efforts with both donations of food and monetary gifts, answering every call when asked.

She established the Becky Satterfield Scholarship with a recent donation of \$1,000, and she plans to add this amount or more annually at Christmas; she's also planning to direct gift giving from her friends to this scholarship. If someone wants to give a gift in her name, she says, they might as well give to this



Dame Becky Satterfield is establishing the Birmingham chapter's first named scholarship to help support women for years to come.

named scholarship.

Becky lives a life of philanthropy; she and her husband, Tommy, donate to numerous organizations each year. When they were reviewing their annual giving last year, she saw that a few organizations on their list were no longer in existence. That money, she realized, could go to something really close to her heart.

"We've grown very well," Becky says of the Birmingham chapter. "We're continuing to grow and we're going to keep growing, and so I just thought: This is from my heart. I've given so much time to (our chapter), and it's in my heart, so I told Tommy, 'This is what I'm going to do.'

"I give to those I believe in," she adds. "I thought, 'I really need to get LDEI rolled into my giving.'" Becky says she is especially pleased with our chapter's increased volunteerism. "It's very exciting. It makes me so happy.

"LDEI is a big part of my life, as you know," Becky says, "and it will be until I'm not on the planet anymore. I've turned 66 ... and I start looking at everything a little differently, thinking about where is my time well spent? My grandchildren, my restaurants, Les Dames and other charities."

It's all part of an effort to live a meaningful life, she says. "I try to

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An Update from the Scholarship Committee

By Anne Cain

Thanks to all the Dames who signed up to serve on the scholarship committee. This is such an important part of our mission and the reason we work so hard to raise money!

In January, scholarship announcement notices were sent to program directors at all of our state universities and the junior colleges in our area. The program directors and faculty members will share the information with their students in culinary arts, hospitality, and nutrition.

We will be awarding \$3,000 scholarships to 4-year college students and \$1,500 scholarships to junior/community college students. Additionally, we will award our new Satterfield scholarship,

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make sure I have a lot of duty in my life and with my time and that I fulfill my commitments. It's about living a purposeful life, making things count."

From the very first days of our chapter, Becky has helped lead us in the right direction, grow with purpose and make a difference in our communities. As our chapter works toward

funded by Dame Becky Satterfield (see page 4).

In addition, we will also be selecting a recipient for our \$5,000 Entrepreneur grant. Our giving this year will total \$20,000, and we aim to reach women in all areas of our state.

The committee will meet in late March to review the applications and select the winners. At this time, due to Covid-19, we are not planning to have a scholarship presentation ceremony, but we will share the list of winners with all of our members as well as recognize them on our social media platforms.

If you have questions or concerns, please contact Dames Anne Cain, Kate Nicholson, or Erin Isbell.

establishing an endowment to securely fund our future giving, this Becky Satterfield Scholarship offers another way to continue to positively impact the lives of the women who will be the next leaders in food in our state.

"I just want to inspire members and others to be a part of nurturing something good," Becky says. "I'm so happy to share what I can with our chapter."

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attention and money to our organization by selling a variety of our delicious homemade food items. We'll look forward to doing that again this fall.

We've remained active in the community by volunteering with the Community Food Bank of Central Alabama. Our time spent packing food boxes for distribution to food-insecure families in our area is time well spent. It offers us an opportunity to do vital good work for others and gather together safely with each other. We plan to continue this worthwhile effort throughout the year.

We launched a new event in February with our Sweet Treats Valentines Boxes filled with homemade desserts of all kinds. This event was eagerly embraced by our Dames and was successful in raising another \$1,700 for our scholarship and grant giving. The enthusiasm was so high, there is talk of another Sweet Treats offering for Easter or Mother's Day!

In the midst of unprecedented struggles with our individual restaurants, bars, catering, and food businesses, I'm humbled and incredibly encouraged that our chapter has remained so active and so determined to further our common cause to help other women in our industries.

Just imagine what we can do when we are not in the midst of a global pandemic!

I look forward to the day when we can raise our glasses together again and celebrate, face-to-face, this amazing group of women ... Les Dames D'Escoffier Birmingham!

With love and gratitude,
Kathy G Mezrano

LDEI Bham's Entrepreneur Grant was a "Lifesaver" for BLUEROOT in 2020

By Leigh Sloss-Corra

For most people in the food industry in Birmingham, early 2020 seems like a lifetime ago. The economy in Birmingham was sizzling, and new restaurants were popping up on every block.

Native Californian and recent Alabama transplant Jennifer Ryan was working hard on her first healthy food, fast-casual restaurant concept, BLUEROOT. She was refining her menu and building her brand, had hired a James Beard award-winning chef and other key staff, and was about to sign a lease on a space that would become BLUEROOT's permanent home in the heart of downtown at Pepper Place. She had just applied for the LDEI Entrepreneur Grant when Covid-19 hit.

As Ryan scrambled, like every other food professional in town, to stay afloat, keep the staff she'd worked so hard to recruit, and survive, news of the LDEI grant award arrived. "The grant was an amazing gift, a lifesaver. It was a bridge to somewhere," she said. "The grant allowed me to pay my staff when we were closed in the spring. We wouldn't have survived without this crew, and a year later they're still with me. The grant helped save the company."

She continued, "When everything shut down because of Covid, I needed a place to sell our goods because our previous outlets—local businesses, farmers' markets, and catering—were no longer options. We found a tiny space—literally a closet that opened onto the sidewalk in Mountain Brook Village—and with the financial cushion provided by



BLUEROOT's BBQ Salad. Photo credit: Jamie Vespa

the Entrepreneur Grant, were able to transform it into a pandemic-friendly walk-up window. And it worked! Our customer base grew, word spread, and now, a year after Covid hit, our flagship location in Pepper Place is under construction, and we're planning to open mid-year."

The new fast-casual, healthy foods BLUEROOT will spotlight ingredients sourced locally in the city. The design will be crisp and modern. Diners can order an array of healthy options quickly and efficiently from the counter, then takeaway their goods, or dine inside or out.

The menu will feature customizable salads and grain bowls, as well as soups, superfood snacks, dressings, and special breakfast items on Saturdays when the Market at Pepper Place is operating. "We offer clean, convenient food that fuels

you, and, by supporting local producers, fuels the community too," she said.

Ryan reiterated how transformative the LDEI grant had been to her business. "But," she added, "Les Dames have been helpful to me in many other ways."

She was accepted into LDEI Birmingham's Mentorship program, which launched in 2019. "The mentorship I've received from Dames has been very impactful to me professionally and personally. One Dame checks in on me regularly, just to see how I'm doing. I'm having lunch with another Dame today to discuss opportunities to collaborate. All the members have been so helpful, from answering practical questions to sharing their philosophies. The mentees in the program have been terrific, too—it's become a mini-network of brain

power within the organization." She continued, "Starting and running a business can be lonely. Entrepreneurs have to wear a brave, smiling face for the public and for their teams every day, regardless of their fears, worries, or questions. But with these women, there is a space to be open, honest, and vulnerable about the challenges we're facing. I am so grateful for what this group has done for me."

What else has Ryan gained through this experience? "I've learned valuable lessons about business in general and Birmingham in particular," she continued, "like, yes—have the big, bold, long view, but first, get it right at the local level. The entrepreneur climate in this city is unique. It's ripe for growth and offers small business the resources and support that don't exist in every city. That infrastructure allowed us to bridge a gap in what we saw as an underserved market, a 'healthy food desert,' if you will. With BLUEROOT, we're excited to make healthy food more accessible."

She mused, "Despite such a severe year, right now I'm feeling less stress (from Covid) and more appreciation. The Dames been so helpful. I have incredibly talented people working for and with me. Our flagship location in Pepper Place will be open soon, and I'm 30 weeks pregnant! It's not lost on me that we're operating in one of the toughest times imaginable for our industry and for the country broadly...but as I look back on what we've built, look forward to what is possible, and look around me at the groundswell of support, I know we're going to make it."

We hope she makes it, too! Until Ryan's Pepper Place restaurant opens, BLUEROOT salads, dressings, soups, meals, and superfood



BLUEROOT, with locally sourced, clean ingredients, fuels customers and the local economy. Below left: Plain Jane Oats Below right: Millet Bars Very bottom: Prosciutto Toast All food photos taken by: Jamie Vespa



snacks can be picked up at BLUEROOT's Outpost in Mountain Brook, and pre-ordered online through the Market at Pepper Place's CURBSIDE shop for Saturday pick-up. BLUEROOT is also available to cater office meals, parties, and private events.

Find her complete menu and more at <https://www.bluerootco.com>.

Meet Our New Members!

Our chapter gained 12 new members in August 2020. Here, get to know the remaining eight of these extraordinary women a little better. The first four were featured in the Winter 2020 newsletter.

Rita Bernhardt

Birthplace: Portland, OR
Education: Western Culinary Institute, Diploma of Culinary Arts
Current position: Executive chef and partner of Luca restaurant, my newest project. Luca will be a full-service Southern restaurant with an Italian scope. I'm super excited to team up with the Pihakis Restaurant Group, and we are slated to open in May. We will have a dedicated house-made pasta and pizza program alongside small plates and salads made with local ingredients. Italian food is my comfort food, and I am excited to go back to cooking what I love.
The beginning: My first actual job in a restaurant was a server



BEFORE culinary school at a restaurant called The Spaghetti Factory, and I was TERRIBLE. It didn't take long for me to desire to be in the kitchen. I dropped out of college to pursue a culinary career on a whim, and I've never looked back.

Food and beverage insights: I love working with my hands and keeping busy creating. There is something magical about creating something that people love and eat. It creates a personal relationship with the guest.
Success is: I don't believe in the "if you pick a job you love it won't feel

like work" adage. Sometimes work really is just work and that's okay. However, I find success in trying to put my best self into the restaurant every day—for my team and the guests. I feel successful when I look back and see how far I've come and when I look ahead at my future goals. Never stay stagnant, always keep learning, and never be scared of new opportunities.

My last meal: My grandma's spaghetti, her homemade bread and butter, and the Mexican chocolate cake with homemade ice cream she made for me every birthday.

One week, no obligations, and \$5,000: I would go to Italy and eat all the food and drink all the wine!

Aimee Domingue-Castro

Birthplace: New Orleans, LA
Education: BA in Psychology, Loyola University New Orleans; Masters of Education, University of Alabama at Birmingham
Current position: Front of the house manager at Sol Y Luna Tapas and Tequila, Spanish teacher at i3 Academy
The beginning: I worked in restaurants starting when I was a teenager in Southern, Cajun Louisiana. I continued to work in restaurants through college and graduate school, learning the ropes from



some of the best chefs and restaurateurs. I did it all in the "front of the house": server, bartender, host, assistant man-

ager, manager. I worked in all types of restaurants, but I always loved the guest more of a real dining experience. Now I work with my husband, Jorge, at our family restaurant Sol Y Luna. It first opened in 1998 by my late brother-in-law, Guillermo. We closed it in 2013 and just reopened it in February 2020!
Food and beverage insights: I love the fact that we have been able to

reopen and reinvent our restaurant, Sol Y Luna.

Success is: Success is a restaurant that my employees and guests alike enjoy coming to day after day because it's just *that* enjoyable.

My last meal: Sushi!

One week, no obligations, and \$5,000: I would fly to the south of France, drink wine, eat cheese, sit on the beach, and meander through the streets.

Fun fact: I love to travel and enjoy bringing the world to the younger generation. I especially love introducing them to new and unique foods. My favorite trip was the trip I led for my middle school students to Paris, Barcelona, and Madrid.

Kristal Bryant

Birthplace: Birmingham, AL
Education: Virginia College Culinary, Birmingham.
Current position: Owner of K & J's Elegant Pastries, LLC
The beginning: I started my business as an at-home cake business in 2007. For 5 years I created custom, scratch-made cakes for my family, friends, and eventually customers. In 2013, I opened my first brick and mortar on Kent Dairy Road in Alabaster, AL



Food and beverage insights: My pastry business has opened up many opportunities for

me through more exposure to the public and potential new customers. It allows me to establish relationships with industry giants that I can learn from.

Success is: Success to me is achieving all the goals that

I have set out for myself.
My last meal: Pancakes! They are my favorite food to eat!
One week, no obligations, and \$5,000: I would go to any beach with my family and just relax. Life as a business owner is always extremely busy, so I cherish spending time with my husband and two girls.
Fun fact: Celebrity Baker Duff Goldman once called me the Ace of Milkshakes!!

Laura Newman

Birthplace: New York City
Education: Connecticut College, BA, Latin American studies and Hispanic studies; NYC's Institute of Culinary Education, hospitality management

Current position: Bar manager and owner, Queen's Park; bar manager and owner, Neon Moon. When there's not a global pandemic happening, I also travel the country teaching enthusiasts and bartenders about booze as a consultant for Diageo.

The beginning: I got my start in the industry via my first job out of college with Tanteo Tequila, an independent tequila producer that's still cranking out jalapeño-infused booze. I started off as their office manager and executive assistant, but quickly learned that my passion lay in managing and working the office bar, developing cocktails, and producing events. I quickly realized that this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, and I end-



ed up leaving Tanteo amicably after about a year in order to go back to school full time to get a degree in hospitality

management at NYC's Institute of Culinary Education. After wrapping that up, a random Craigslist ad connected me to Derossi Global, which owns about 20 bars and restaurants in Manhattan and Brooklyn. I started bartending and managing for them and never looked back.

Food and beverage insights: I love owning bars because managing and cultivating a top-notch team is something that I'm still learning but is incredibly gratifying. I adore the creativity of coming up with cocktails for our bar programs, and getting to travel (when it's not Covid) is a fun way to keep up with all my industry friends around the country.

Success is: For me, success is

owning and managing bars that are profitable and don't require more than 20 hours a week of my time combined. I was there before last March and am rapidly approaching that place again, thank goodness! It also looks like being able to focus on my family—my husband, our dogs, and we're starting to talk about kids—while getting to do my traveling and consulting on a time-frame that works for me.

My last meal: I don't even need to think about this: the wagyu steak from Wildair in NYC's Lower East Side and any bottle of wine from their menu.

One week, no obligations, and \$5,000: I would buy a ticket to San Sebastian for me and my husband, and we would eat all the food. I grew up speaking English and Spanish and took a year off in the middle of college to go live in Barcelona, so visiting Spain is like going back home for me.

Fun fact: My husband and I own four pugs! I am obsessed with their squishy little faces.

LaCrista Hutchinson

Birthplace: Alexander City, AL

Education: Bachelor of Arts, University of Alabama

Current position: Regional manager with US Foods.

The beginning: I started in sales, as a territory manager at US Foods 14 years ago. After selling for 7 years, I transitioned to district sales manager for the Birmingham market.

Food and beverage insights: I love the people and the energy of the industry. Foodies are creative, passionate, and resilient! Bringing people together around food truly aligns with personal bonding, and it creates unforgettable experiences.

Success is: From my perspective, the definition of success has been influenced over time by the examples and insights of some pretty incredible



people, both personally and professionally. Both my parents were small-business operators: my father in the

funeral business, and my mother a daycare. Early on, they instilled in both my brother and me the correlation of attitude as related to success.

In my current role as RSM, naturally success is centered around achieving metrics, an important piece of defining it. However, more important is building a brand that's inclusive of developing team members who show up well, and display integrity, transparency, and the passion to partner with restaurant operators to remove barriers and achieve their goals.

My last meal: For starters, marinated crab claws alongside a half

dozen Blue Point oysters on the half shell. As a main entrée, pan seared sea bass topped with a lemon caper beurre blanc, accompanied by seasonal root vegetables and greens. And, of course, a glass of bubbly.

One week, no obligations, and \$5,000: In consideration of the Covid-19 pandemic, my time and resources would be invested in the Birmingham communities. While we may be able to shelter safely in our home—with sufficient food, water, and toiletries—many have not been afforded the same. Even in the era of social distancing, we can still connect with our neighbors and offer support to those in need. The funding would be donated to the Community Food Bank of Central Alabama, where I'd continue service volunteering. It's a tangible experience where one feels the impact of their contribution.

Fun fact: I have a degree in mortuary science / funeral service education.

Lauren Gavin

Birthplace: Birmingham, AL

Current position: I am operating my own business catering wedding cakes. I also do some contracted labor at Big Spoon Creamery to help with large catering orders.

The beginning: I was inspired by my grandmother who baked professionally for 30 years including at The Club and Klingler's European Cafe. I learned a lot of what I know from her. I started in an entry-level baking position in 2012. The rest is history!

Food and beverage insights: I love working with other people. My strengths are training and connecting with people around the food industry. I also love to help others troubleshoot their processes in their own businesses, and that's



why I am so excited to be on the mentorship committee. Baking and catering bring me so much joy. Starting

my wedding cake business has been a long and rewarding experience for me.

Success is: Success looks like balance! I always feel most successful when I can manage my work, family and self care well. Learning is also very important to success! I think we should always be innovative and stay hungry for more. Being the smartest person in the room will not get you anywhere, so always surround yourself with interesting and encouraging people!

My last meal: I have a strong,

spiritual connection with chicken wings. My last meal would consist of a smorgasbord of different types of chicken wings, pickled and fermented vegetables, and fried potatoes.

One week, no obligations, and \$5,000: Costa Rica would be the perfect place to experience everything I enjoy! It has the ocean, mountains, rainforest, and amazing culture and food. I would wake up without a set plan and see where the day takes me.

Fun fact: I am a quilter and a crocheter. Interestingly enough, my grandmother is also a quilter and a crocheter. I love making gifts for my family and friends. I love learning new trades and feminine handicrafts in hopes of being a real pioneer woman like my grandmother.

Rachael Roberts

Birthplace: Baton Rouge, LA

Education: University of Alabama, B.S. cultural arts and environmental studies

Current position: Co-owner, The Atomic Bar & Lounge

The beginning: I have always been involved in service-oriented careers, whether it be in restaurants, bars, music venues, cafes, etc. I used to play live music in bars and restaurants in college and was really drawn to the community that comes from gathering in public spaces with old friends, loved ones, and strangers. The joy and wholeness I feel when I get to help create memories for other people is really a gift for me, too. I remained in the industry after I graduated and worked in hospitality until I opened The Atomic with my partner, Feizal.

Food and beverage insights: I enjoy



the full spectrum of responsibility (and I am daunted by it, too!). I own a bar, but for me it's more than a bar. It's a home

for a lot of people, guests, and employees. I enjoy taking care of them, seeing them live their lives, listening to their stories, their struggles, offering them a drink, a joke, or advice. And that's the fun part, of course. There are all of the less glamorous responsibilities, the administrative duties that are a necessary part of owning any business, and I have grown from those, too. At the end of the day, our success is ours and our failure is, too. I'm both honored and humbled by that all the time.

Success is: Success to me has become about balance. I have always tried to help create a space that's a

positive environment for everyone who steps foot through the door. That is certainly a challenge, as you can't please everyone. But, I want everyone to feel welcome. The bar was built to look like a home, and we aim to make it feel like one.

One week, no obligations, and \$5,000: Before the pandemic, I would have said an excursion to South America or Greece! But, this pandemic has changed my mentality a bit. Living and working downtown, I see a lot more people in need, who are food insecure, who can't pay their bills, who have lost safe housing. I'm lucky, and my needs aren't so dire right now. I think I would take that week to spend some time with my less fortunate neighbors, buy them groceries, pay their bills, make their lives more tenable. But, when we reach the end of the pandemic, I would love that trip to South America in search of the world's best arepas!

Stacey Craig

Birthplace: Birmingham, AL

Education: Vanderbilt University, BA Economics; University of Alabama, MBA

Current position: Business manager at The Bright Star Restaurant

The beginning: I began working at The Bright Star as a hostess/cashier when I was 15 years old.

Food and beverage insights: I love working in a family business



where your employees and regular guests feel like family. I love learning about new trends in restaurants

menus, marketing and finance. **Success is:** Peace of mind, a sense of gratitude in making a contribution to my family and staff so as to unlock their self esteem so they reach their full potential.

My last meal: Snapper Greek Style, Greek Country Salad, and Baklava Cheesecake

One week, no obligations, and \$5,000: I would visit a spa out West for relaxation and meditation. **Fun fact:** I am the fourth generation working at The Bright Star, and we have no plans to slow down after 113 years.

Behind the Scenes: Getting the Scoop on Dame Geri-Martha O'Hara

by Donna Cornelius

If there's such a thing as a lucky day, April 12 would be Geri-Martha O'Hara's.

She and her now-husband Ryan got engaged on that date in 2013 and married exactly a year later. On their first wedding anniversary, they launched their craft ice cream business, Big Spoon Creamery. On their second, Big Spoon's food truck hit the road. Their first brick-and-mortar store opened on their third anniversary.

Geri-Martha and Ryan saved the biggest event of all for their fourth anniversary: Their son, Carter, who will be 3 years old this year, was born.

But it wasn't luck that's made Geri-Martha one of the Birmingham food scene's most successful young women. That's due to hard work, staunch supporters, creative thinking, a dedication to doing things the right way, and the perfect partner—her husband.

Of course, being a great cook doesn't hurt either.

Geri-Martha graduated from Vestavia Hills High School and then went to the University of Alabama, where she majored in entrepreneurship and business management. "I wanted to be an entrepreneur," she said.

After college, Geri-Martha honed her pastry skills in Birmingham at restaurants like Olexa's, Daniel George, and for George Sarris at the Fish Market Southside. She also interned at Jean-Georges in New York. She said at that time, Southern food was very much in vogue thanks



to Frank and Pardis Stitt's success in Birmingham, and Jean-Georges' pastry chef, Johnny Iuzzini, asked her to come up with a strawberry-rhubarb cobbler.

"I did the cobbler with a biscuit topping, and Johnny had Jean-Georges Vongerichten himself come in and taste it," Geri-Martha said.

She also did a brief stage at Le Bernardin, Eric Ripert's highly regarded seafood restaurant, and said the famous chef "couldn't have been nicer."

Back at home in Birmingham,

Geri-Martha got a call from Frank Stitt asking her to come in for an interview. She went to work at Bottega but made pastries for all of the Stitt restaurants under the guidance of James Beard Foundation Award-winner Dolester Miles. At Bottega, she met Ryan, who started with the Stitts as a line cook and eventually became sous chef at Chez Fonfon. "Pardis helped Ryan propose," Geri-Martha said. "Ryan got her to lead me upstairs to the mezzanine at Bottega. I was wearing my chef's coat, a baseball cap and no makeup. Pardis pulled me off to the side to

keep me there, which made me a little nervous—I thought I'd done something wrong. But she had set up flowers and candles, and he proposed to me there."

What no one knew was that the Bottega mezzanine already was a special place for Geri-Martha.

"My church has 21 days of prayer and fasting every January," she said. "I had been praying that I'd find the right person. I'd go upstairs to the mezzanine and pray for my future husband."

"After Ryan proposed, I asked him why he did it there. He said he just felt led to do it. I felt like it was God saying, 'This is your confirmation that he's the right one.'"

Big Spoon was born because the O'Haras were looking for a business opportunity.

"We wanted to have a family and provide well for it," Geri-Martha said. "We both had a heart for ice cream. We knew these types of businesses were very big in California and New York."

She talked with Frank Stitt about the idea, and he thought it was a good one.

"We started in our driveway on the July Fourth weekend," Geri-Martha said. "We promoted the pop-up on our personal social media accounts. The first day, we had a line down our driveway and made \$1,000, which was a lot of money to us. A friend had given us an old-school deep freezer, and we scooped the very first scoop out of it."

The couple continued to work for the Stitts while getting their fledgling business off the ground. Geri-Martha left first, and Ryan stayed on until the couple felt Big Spoon was healthy and viable.

"We had a cart specially made in Portland, Oregon, and launched it at Pepper Place in April 2015,"

Geri-Martha said. "Pepper Place was a great launching pad."

Besides the Stitts, her former employer George Sarris was an early supporter, helping out with kitchen space since the O'Haras didn't have a production facility at that time.

"He gave us six months rent-free," Geri-Martha said. "He said I had worked hard for him, and that when he first arrived from Greece, people had helped him. He asked only that we try to help others in the future."

One innovative idea wasn't extremely profitable money-wise but proved to be a great public relations tool.

"We started the Ice Cream Club while we were still working at our full-time jobs," Geri-Martha said. "It was a subscription and delivery service to help get us through the winter months. It started with 13 members and grew to 200. Members paid \$16 a month. It was more about building relationships than making money, and it worked—we still have lots of those customers today."

The couple put in lots of extra hours during Big Spoon's early days, delivering Ice Cream Club orders on Sundays and making sure their cart was in prominent places.

"People would say, 'Oh, we see your carts all over town,' and we had just the one cart," Geri-Martha said, laughing.

Opening a storefront had always been the couple's goal, and they achieved that dream in 2017 with the opening of Big Spoon Creamery's Avondale store in the MAKE-bhm building. Two years later, they opened a second store in Homewood's Edgewood neighborhood.

In December 2020, five flavors of Big Spoon ice cream debuted in pint-sized cartons at Birmingham Piggly Wiggly stores.

Geri-Martha said most of the

flavors on the menu "come from my years in pastry and are flavors I grew to love." While vanilla, chocolate, cookies and cream, a sorbet, and a vegan option always are offered, other choices change with the seasons. Big Spoon's delicious strawberry ice cream, for example, is made only during strawberry season.

"We love being able to support our local farmers," Geri-Martha said. She said one of Big Spoon's most unexpected hits was Beach Bonfire. "It has smoked coconut, vegan fudge—it's super popular," she said. "People don't even realize it's non-dairy."

Her own favorite is honeysuckle-blackberry.

"Carter loves everything, but maybe especially cookies and cream," she said.

Geri-Martha said the hardest part of her job is balancing work and family.

"I love my job, but I want to be at home, too," she said. "That's an ongoing dilemma. But by the time Carter was born, we had been able to expand our team, create leaders, and watch them rise up."

She's proud of the bond she and Ryan share with team members.

"We mainly have college students working for us and are passionate about giving them a positive environment to work in," she said.

"We want to be a positive part of their lives. If we see that someone's good at social media or customer service, we ask them to help with that. Frank and Pardis taught us a lot about this—about being a team player. They taught us by their actions."

Like others in the food business, the O'Haras faced some unprecedented obstacles due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

continued on page 15, see O'Hara

Fresh “Corona Values” for Spring

By Alexis Douglas,
certified sommelier

Spring brings new life, hope, and renewal, and, man, does that ring true in 2021! Let’s continue to celebrate 2020 being in the rear view forever, while still remaining cautious and safest-at-home. It’s time for cocktails and fresh wines that won’t break the bank. I’m always on the hunt for value wines, so here are a few I’ve discovered while vigilantly venturing out but enjoying most of my celebrating close to home. All selections for this article available at Hop City.

Maison Trel Filis Crème de Cassis, Burgundy, France \$31.99

I don’t often (ok, ever) explore or write about fruit wines, but this authentic Crème de Cassis (black-currant liqueur from Burgundy) is a special treat! Best enjoyed as the star of a classic Kir Royale: pour Cremant de Bourgogne (or true Champagne, if you must) into a



flute ¾ way full. Add about ½ oz of Crème de Cassis, a lemon twist, and voila! Refrigerate the remaining bottle after opening; it will keep for approximately 3 months, or for as long as it lasts! This liqueur works well mixed with quality bubbly, as an addition to a mojito or margarita, splashed into your coq au vin, or over vanilla ice cream!

Amalie Robert “Dijon Clones” Chardonnay \$21.99 and 2011 Pinot Noir \$19.99, Willamette Valley, Oregon

These are “reserve-level wines without the reserve-level price.” This small, innovative winery produces estate-grown single-vineyard wines. The Chardonnay is unctuous and complex, and could easily pass for a \$40-\$50 price tag. Pinot Noir is one of the toughest wines to find at a great value since the grape is so finicky, and such a treat to have an older vintage available: 2011 is current in the market! Super complex with rose, tea leaf, cherry,

baking spices and a velvety, elegant texture...try with a simply roasted chicken or simply on its own.

Niepoort Drink Me “Nat Cool” Baga Red, Bairrada, Portugal \$19.99

Expressive, fresh, and versatile with a variety of dishes from BBQ to charcuterie. Offers plenty of strawberry, plum, spice, and attitude. Best served a little “cool”...and it doesn’t hurt that this light, fun, easy red comes in a 1.0L bottle! Naturally made, with no sulfites added.

Cult Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa, California \$17.99

The “second label” of the fabulous and historic Napa grape-grower and producer Salvestrin, this is a Cabernet that will transition us through the chilly nights ahead and into warmer spring days! Classic in style, with telltale black fruit, fine structured tannin, and hints of coffee and nutmeg. Screams to be paired with mushrooms, meat and sharp cheeses.



Anne Amie Muller-Thurgau, Yamhill-Carlton, Oregon \$16.99

Springy freshness in a bottle! Muller Thurgau is grape grown mostly in Germany, and it can produce quite boring whites. However, when made by small, high-quality wineries, the result can be an incredibly complex, versatile white. Medium-bodied, dry and minerally, with pretty floral notes and refreshing lime, grapefruit and yellow apple, this wine is the solution for hard-to-pair dishes like ceviche, paella, tuna poke and even rich savory tarts.

O’Hara, continued from page 13

“Pardis called on March 13 last year and told me they’d made the decision to shut down their restaurants for two weeks,” Geri-Martha said. “We decided to shut down as well. We thought it would be a short-term thing, but Pardis warned us that it might be longer.”

The O’Haras had to switch gears for a while.

“Ryan rebuilt our website so we could take home delivery orders,” Geri-Martha said. “We put our production team to work on producing pints. We had 24-hour delivery. Ryan didn’t take a day off for a month. I stayed home with Carter. But we were so happy because Birmingham really got behind us.”

The Big Spoon shops later provided curbside pickup as well as delivery, and the stores reopened last May for outside dining.

“We’re in a good place now,” Geri-Martha said.

In fact, the O’Haras are about to

kick off another food venture with their good friends Jim and Amy Watkins, founders of Steel City Pops. It’s a donut concept called Sons Donuts, named as a sweet nod to Carter and to the Watkinses’ four boys.

“We’ll have mini donuts hot-fried to order,” Geri-Martha said. “You’ll pick your dipping sugar and your dipping sauce. There will be a coffee program and milk bar, too.”

She said Sons Donuts is set to open in March next to Big Spoon in Avondale. Store hours will be 7 a.m.-9 p.m. on weekdays and 7 a.m.-10 p.m. on weekends.

Geri-Martha said she loves being a member of LDEI’s Birmingham chapter, going back to the days when she worked for the Stitts.

“I’d see Pardis hosting Les Dames events, and being a member was always on my wish list,” she said. “It can be hard to make friends when you’re an entrepreneur, and I’ve made so many friends through this group.”

Upcoming Virtual Conferences

A silver lining during this Covid time has been easier access to professional education opportunities for women. Virtual workshops and conferences make travel unnecessary and fees to participate more affordable. Here are a few events coming up that member Dames might want to consider:

- InTents: Farmers Market Pros Conference, March 15-18, 2021. This top-notch women-led conference, normally held in San Diego, is virtual this year, so participants can pick and choose events easily. Presenters are the best in the biz and topics are geared for small

business owners, restaurants and food trucks, writers, marketers and more. <https://www.farmersmarketpros.com/conference>

- Co.Starters, presented by CREATE BIRMINGHAM, 11-week small-business development/improvement program, with sessions coming up April 12-June 28, and September 13-November 22. A number of Birmingham Dames have participated and recommend this program to help hone a business concept and take it to the next level. Find more info at <https://createbirmingham.org/programs/co-starters/>.

From the Farm: Spring Planting on the Farm and in Your Home Garden

by Margaret Ann Snow

In mid-March, after a long winter, crops remaining in the ground will begin to send up tall, flowering stalks that, shortly after, are covered in blooms of bright yellow, white, purple, and pink. They invite the beneficial insects and mark the changing of the seasons.

On our farm, we will pick these edible flowers along with cultivated ones, such as bachelor buttons, calendula, and nasturtium, to sprinkle on salads, pasta, pizza, or just about any dish where we want to add a bit of celebratory spring. (I especially enjoy them on top of fresh bread with butter, thinly sliced radishes and a pinch of salt.) For the first time last year, I gathered up a pile of edible petals and then rolled a log of goat cheese in them—the effect was stunning! It became the centerpiece of a platter with strawberries, baby carrots, radishes, and other accoutrements.

These are perfect to plant in the home garden, too, because you typically only need a small handful, plus they add color and beauty to your garden. On our farm, we plant bachelor buttons and calendula in late fall (covering them on the coldest nights) as well as the early spring, for an extended harvest. Nasturtiums are planted in early spring.

Our Favorite Berries

When ripe, red fruit begins to line the edges of our strawberry beds, I know that spring has fully arrived! There are several varieties, but Chandler and Camerosa are



If the strawberries don't get eaten, the Snows likes to turn them into a rustic crostata, a pavlova, or roast them with balsamic vinegar for salads.

the two most popular in our state. Chandler strawberries are smaller and sweeter and, unfortunately, also more prone to disease. Camerosa, when picked ripe, are plenty delicious and significantly larger, which most buyers seem to prefer.

At farmers' markets you can buy them by the pint, quart, or gallon bucket. (Pre-Covid, most farmers would allow you to sample them; hopefully, we will get back to that delicious tradition soon.)

If our children do not eat them all right away, we enjoy turning our strawberries into a rustic crostata, a pavlova, or roasting them with balsamic vinegar and adding them to salads. If you have really ripe—almost overripe berries—the Strawberry Vodka from *Bottega Favorita* is a must! We make it every year and have always been so glad that we did.

Unique to Spring

Asparagus is another crop that is best and freshest in the springtime. There are not many farmers I know of in our area who have chosen to take on this long-term, high-maintenance crop, but I have found it regularly at the farmers' market in Tuscaloosa and occasionally in Birmingham. This is a great vegetable to grow yourself—if you have the space and long-term commitment. Asparagus crowns are planted in a trench about three inches deep in the fall and left unharvested the following spring. Don't worry, it produces for twenty years! You'll just have to be patient that first one.

Spring onions, snap and English peas, and fava beans are also unique to spring. I macerate the onions for salads with thinly sliced radishes, fava beans or peas, and lots of fresh



herbs. They are lovely caramelized, too. The tops of these onions can be used as you would the green tops of scallions and are available all spring. Fava beans and peas, however, both have a short season; so, if you see them be sure to buy some!

Looking Ahead to Summer

As we enjoy the bounty of spring, the work of planting summer crops begins. Our typical last frost date is early to mid-April, what we like to call "plant everything day." This is the time to plant most summer crops such as beans, squash, cucumbers, peppers, eggplant, basil, and everyone's summer favorite: tomatoes.

If you start your tomatoes from seed, you'll have many more options, but you'll have to do it early as they need to grow for two months before reaching transplant size. Southern Exposure Seed Exchange offers a good

selection of varieties that are suited for the South. Heirlooms can be finicky; hybrids are typically more productive and disease resistant, but flavor is compromised.

Here are some of our—and our customers'—favorites:

Hybrid

- New Girl — smaller, early, productive, good flavor
- Big Beef — larger, consistent producer

Heirloom

- Cherokee Purple — great on flavor and production
- German Johnson or Brandywine — these win our tasting most years; both produce large fruit, but not very many
- Persimmon — yellow, large, delicious; also, a tasting favorite
- Green Zebra — small, yellow-and-green striped, citrusy flavor, good production but can be afflicted by disease

You should be able to find heirloom tomato plants at Leaf and Petal stores and at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens Spring Plant Sale in mid-April. If you are not able to find what you want, give me a call or send me an email, and I will be happy to arrange to have one from our greenhouse available for you to pick at the farmers' market.

For a consistent harvest of cucumbers and squash, succession plant them once every month or month and a half through August. Beans will be a one-time planting in the spring, but you can plant them again in the late summer for an early-fall harvest.

Come May, when spring days warm up and begin to fade into summer, plant heat-loving crops such as okra, sweet potatoes, butternut and other winter squashes.

Happy Spring!

Hands-On Outreach at the Community Food Bank

by Susan Swagler

Partnering with the Community Food Bank of Central Alabama is rewarding on a number of levels. We're giving our time to a respected local non-profit whose mission we believe in wholeheartedly. Volunteering offers us an opportunity to safely gather together and work as a team toward a shared, worthwhile goal.

Also, we're really good at it!

Members of the Birmingham chapter have turned out twice recently to pack boxes at the Food Bank, and the timing is right. Dame Rebecca Williamson, who has stepped up to coordinate our Food Bank volunteer efforts, says, "There is quite a bit of need right now."

During this time of Covid-19, many of the Food Bank's regular volunteers are staying away, but we've found that with proper distancing; plenty of hand sanitizer; and masks, of course, we can work our volunteer shifts without much worry.

Our first visit was to pack holiday boxes right before Thanksgiving. In just two hours, with the help of a few other people from the community (one of whom we invited into our group photo), we packed 435 boxes with 8,265 pounds of food. That food created 12,398 meals for people who were facing food insecurity during the holiday season. Dames who participated on this visit included: Joy Smith, Rosemary Dallam, Rosalyn Bloomston, Gia McCollister, Kate Nicholson, Carey Thomasson, Kathy G. Mezrano, Rebecca Williamson, and Susan Swagler.

On our second visit in mid-December, we packed even bigger boxes: 257 of them with a total of 8,609 pounds of food that will



Birmingham Dames have been volunteering at the Community Food Bank of Central Alabama, packing boxes for individuals facing food insecurity.

provide 12,914 meals to people in our community. Dames who came that day included Sonthe Burge, Rosalyn Bloomston, Kathy G. Mezrano, Jasmine Smith, Melany Robinson, Rosemary Dallam, LaCrista Hutchinson, and Susan Swagler.

Rebecca has determined that Mondays and Wednesdays are the

best days for us to volunteer, and she will be forwarding reminders for morning and afternoon shifts—from 9 to 11:30 a.m. and from 1 to 3 p.m.—when help is needed. She also includes links to easy online sign-up sheets—unique to our organization—and encourages us to bring our families, too.

Let's Toast

Cristina Almanza received the 2021 Diversity Leader of the Year Award presented by the Minority Business Awards program. The awards celebrate diversity and honor achievement. Cristina is the business development coordinator for Buffalo Rock.



2019 LDEI Entrepreneur Grant Winner **Tanisha Sims-Summers**, founder and CEO of Naughty But Nice Kettle Corn Co., has been named 2021 Entrepreneur of the Year by the Minority Business Awards Program.

Jennifer Yarbrough (below), owner of Crestline Bagel Co., has announced that the downtown store was reopened in early January. Also, Jennifer just launched a brand-new app for ordering pickup, curbside, and delivery options. It's available in the App Store.

Kristen Hall, co-owner and pastry boss at The Essential and Bandit Patisserie, and **Andrea Snyder**, founder of Urban Cookhouse and Farm Bowl + Juice Co., were featured speakers for the Contenders Collective International Women's Day program and celebration benefiting First Light Shelter for homeless women and children. The March 7 panel held at Pizitz Food Hall & Gallery also included 2020 LDEI Entrepreneur Grant Winner **Jennifer Ryan**, founder of BLUEROOT. (Read more about BLUEROOT on page 6.)



Laura Newman, owner of the nationally recognized Queen's Park, is planning to open Neon Moon, a neighborhood cocktail bar in

downtown Birmingham in March. It specializes in draft and package beer, whiskey, fun cocktails, and a small snack menu. The cocktail menu has 6-10 drinks featuring updated versions of 70s, 80s, and 90s favorites.



Jasmine Smith's recipe for Brown Butter Chocolate Chip Cookies was among *Food & Wine's* Top 10 recipes of 2020.



Anna Theoktisto's story "Chef-Inspired" is featured in the March issue of *Food & Wine* magazine, with weeknight recipes from acclaimed national chefs.



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