



Les Dames d'Escoffier
INTERNATIONAL



Founded in 2013

ldeibirmingham.org

Fall 2024

President's Note

Dear Dames,

It's finally September, which has turned out to be one of the craziest and busiest months for our chapter. How did that happen?

The summer was busy too, but here we are and things are not slowing down. Fortunately our chapter is on a great path, with an extraordinary group of women. The sky is the limit!

This is my last President's Note for the newsletter, as the torch, gavel, and crown have been officially passed to our new Chapter President Sonthe Burge, voted in at our Annual Meeting on August 18th.

I'm honored and proud to have led this group the past two years and look forward to advising Sonthe in my new role as Immediate Past President. I know she'll lead our chapter to even more stellar achievements.

What's happened in the last three months? A lot! Monthly volunteering at the Food Bank and The WellHouse have continued to be helpful to them and feed our souls. The interviewing and approving of 14 new chapter members went smoothly and successfully. These women are all different, all amazing, and all dedicating themselves to our mission. I can't wait for us to

continued on page 14, see Letter

Champagne & Fried Chicken Gets Better Every Year



by Susan Swagler

Four years in, we know how to do this. Champagne & Fried Chicken has proven to be a reliable money-maker for our chapter, and this fundraiser, which we started from scratch during the pandemic, has grown in popularity and profitability. This year's event is set for Septem-

ber 29, and everyone is encouraged to be there and participate.

Each year sees some tweaks, says Dame Kathy G. Mezrano, who heads the Champagne & Fried Chicken event. The idea is to keep it familiar and make it feel fresh, too.

This year, we've partnered with

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Jack's Family Restaurants—a legacy brand with roots right here at home and where our own Dame Billie Jo Waara is the CMO—to produce the chicken. (With 300 totes, this is quite a production.) Our vegetarian option is another delicious Vegetable Frittata and Pesto Pasta Salad from Sorelle. Otherwise, the menu is similar to what we had last year.

Each picnic has Dame-produced sides including New Potato Salad with Tarragon and Shallot Vinaigrette and Fresh Herbs from Kathy G & Co., Collard Green Caesar Salad with Focaccia Croutons and Parmigiano Reggiano by chef Rita Bernhardt of Luca, Ashley Mac's Sour Cream Biscuits from Ashley McMakin, Southern Dill Pickles from chef Lindsey Noto King, a Fresh Pear and French Cheese Board from Kay Reed at IZ Weddings & Events, a Demi Baguette from Corey Hinkel, and Honey from Eastaboga Bee Company.

Dessert is Homemade Banana Pudding from Betsy McAtee at Dreamland Bar-B-Que and a Pistachio-Sour Cherry Financier handmade by Geri-Martha O'Hara of Big Spoon Creamery.

Of course, each picnic will have an icy bottle of Prince Alexandre Cremant de Loire and colorful dahlias from Stone Hollow Farmstead.

As in years past, our guests can pick it all up at our friendly drive-through and picnic where they want. Or they can join us at the tables we set up at Pepper Place Market. Our band will play until 7 p.m.

"The idea," says Kathy G., "is to make it more of an in-person event. A street party! That's something we've been pushing these past few years."

As far as the chance for a bundle of



Each picnic tote includes a chilled bottle of Prince Alexandre Cremant de Loire. Attendees can pick theirs up in the drive-through line or enjoy it on site at the tables that will be set up at Pepper Place.

restaurant certificates on offer for a \$25 donation, we will have only one drawing this year; it's far less complicated and much easier to gather enough for just one drawing for 12 \$100 certificates. People seem to like this element of our fundraiser; these donations are on track with last year's numbers. So far, we have certificates donated by Chez Fonfon, Bistro V, Cayo Coco, Bocca Ristorante, Bistro 218, Helen, Blueprint on 3rd, FoodBar, and The Bright Star. That means we need three more.

This time, we've decided to offer cocktails crafted to order during the picnic. Dame Jes Bennett will be bartending and making a signature cocktail as well as standard drinks. She wanted to be able to offer a better, fresher product than the batched and pre-bottled versions we've done in the past.

Dame Idie Hastings has been

working hard to secure sponsorships and says we still have some work to do. During the annual meeting, she shared her own story of overcoming her reluctance to ask for money. If someone says no, just move on, she advised. Do not take it personally. You are not asking for yourself—you are asking on behalf of an organization that does really great work in the community.

There is still time to add sponsors, so if you know of someone, make the ask! (And let Idie know you're doing that asking.)

Teams for the big day will be announced soon. If you have a request, let Kathy G know. Otherwise, she'll put you where your skills will be most useful.

This is our largest fundraiser of the year and the best (and most fun!) opportunity to work together for something larger than just ourselves. Let's do this thing!

Notes from the 2024 Annual Meeting

by Jes Bennett

On August 18th, Birmingham Dames gathered in the auditorium of the Birmingham Botanical Gardens for the 2024 annual business meeting. The event represented a milestone in our evolving chapter—four board members were approved and 14 new members were voted in.

Outgoing President Leigh Sloss-Corra spoke with pride about her two years of leadership, thanking the Dames for the privilege of representing them, and citing the creativity and mettle of the membership at large.

"You get from it what you put into it," Sloss-Corra said, "and the reward is tenfold." She reminded Dames that September is Women in Food Month and urged participation from all, from volunteering opportunities to mentorship, saying "I believe that women are doing the best work out there."

The Programs committee reviewed the year's events, including perennial favorite Personal Finance for Women, as well as new offerings like The Science of Happiness and Sustainability in Business. Particularly popular was Dame Speed Dating, a program designed to help our growing chapter stay closely connected to one another.

Community Outreach chronicled our monthly volunteer day at the Community Food Bank of Central Alabama, as well as our partnership for the annual gala, A Feast for Hope. Dames hosted a chai tea event with GirlSpring, a nonprofit providing information, events, and positive role models for girls aged 9-18. The committee also chronicled the third year of outreach



After the annual business meeting, Dames gathered at Char Bar 7 to celebrate board members stepping down, new ones stepping up, new members being voted in, and all of the good things planned for the coming year.

with The WellHouse, a residential program for the restoration of female victims of human trafficking. In addition to cooking classes and a casserole drive, Dames helped The WellHouse during a facility makeover by throwing a kitchen shower with donated items. Dame Sonthe Burge read a letter from The WellHouse thanking the chapter for their support and attention.

The chapter reviewed the previous year's budget with projections for the current year of giving. The scholarships and grants committee awarded \$43,000 in entrepreneurial grants and scholarships, largely funded through the annual Champagne & Fried Chicken event, Sweet Treats, and the generous giving of our many sponsors. Dame Gia McCollister codified her Sweet Treats fundraiser into a how-to handbook, an initiative that the chapter plans to implement with each of the fundraising events.

Finally, the chapter welcomed incoming board members—Presi-

dent Sonthe Burge, Treasurer Clara Darling, Secretary Audrey Pannell, and VP of Membership Cristina Almanza. Dame Sonthe Burge thanked Immediate Past President Leigh Sloss-Corra for her optimism and positivity, and noted her love of being surrounded by accomplished and inspiring women.

New Board Members

President: Sonthe Burge

Immediate Past President: Leigh Sloss-Corra

Vice President of Membership: Cristina Almanza

Vice President of Programs: Lindsey Noto King

Treasurer: Clara Darling

Secretary: Audrey Pannell

A huge thank you to our outgoing officers! We appreciate your service!

Meet Our New Members!

Our chapter gained 14 new members in August 2024. Here, get to know the first six of these extraordinary women a little better. The remaining Dames will be featured in the Winter 2024 newsletter.



Cynthia Kissik

Cynthia Kissik is the On Premise Sales Manager at Alabama Crown Distributing Company. She has been in the beverage industry since graduating from Auburn University's Hospitality Management Program in 2013. From running routes in both Huntsville and Birmingham, to now managing a team of 15 people, she is well versed in the wine and beer world.

In her free time you can find her grabbing a glass of wine at a local restaurant, volunteering on her neighborhood HOA Board, traveling, and spending time with her sheepadoodle, George.



June Glenn

A native of Birmingham, June Glenn is a retired school teacher who has been working in restaurants on the business and accounting side for over a decade.

She started working with chef and owner Tom Saab of Bistro 218 in downtown Birmingham when the restaurant opened in 2012.

She then partnered with Tom and his wife, Dame Christina Saab, when they opened their second downtown fine-dining establishment, Bocca Ristorante, in 2020. June currently works with Tom and Christina at both restaurants and is assisting them on their third project, Sloan's Bar, opening in the fall/winter of 2024.



Rachel Ishee

Specializing in creating mouth-watering content and marketing strategies that leave you hungry for more, Rachel Ishee is a multi-talented photographer, writer and strategist, who is incredibly organized and the ultimate brand cheerleader. With a background in journalism from the University of Mississippi and a passion for dining, Rachel leads the Pihakis Restaurant Group's marketing efforts and serves as a content creator for their six restaurant brands.

When she's not immersed in the culinary world, you can find Rachel exploring farmer's markets, gardening, and relaxing with an iced coffee at her favorite local coffee shops.



Katie Cornutt

Katie Cornutt, owner of Rolls Bakery, started baking as a child with her mom and grandmother. Food always brought her family together, whether it was a midweek dinner at the bar or a holiday with everyone gathered around the dining room table. The love of family and food was deeply planted in her upbringing.

Ironically, Katie's college degree is actually dental hygiene. She enjoyed that field for several years and got out of the profession due to her growing family. She became pregnant with her third child and learned that she would be born with a severe heart defect. This put any career plans on hold, as Katie became a full-time mom/caregiver for Lyla. During this time, Katie went back to her grandmother's roots and began making homemade cinnamon rolls again. She enjoyed the activity, and there was something very therapeutic about the lengthy process of the dough. As her personal therapy sessions of kneading and rolling out dough increased, Katie started sharing these cinnamon rolls with her neighbors to avoid constant consumption. Shortly thereafter, Rolls Instagram was born, and the rest has been history.



Tricia Manzanero Stuedeman

Tricia Manzanero Stuedeman is a Senior Recipe Tester and Developer for Dotdash Meredith Food Studios.

Her recipes have appeared in several major food and lifestyle brands including *Food & Wine*, *Southern Living*, *Real Simple*, *AllRecipes*, *Bake From Scratch Magazine*, and more.

She entered the world of food media in 2018 as a recipe developer/food stylist, then later as a Baking and Pastry Editor for Hoffman Media, before joining Dotdash Meredith in 2022.

A graduate of New York University and the Culinary Institute of America at Hyde Park, Tricia has worked in respected kitchens and bakeries across the eastern United States, as well as collaborated on cooking classes, culinary videos, and cookbooks.



Ashley Brazelton

Ashley Brazelton is the co-owner of Troup's Pizza in Cahaba Heights. Growing up in a large Italian family, her love for food started at a very young age. She gained valuable experience in the hospitality industry after moving to college at Auburn University.

Her love for wine and food continued to grow after college. She now has over 30 years of experience in hospitality, ranging from casual cafes to fine dining restaurants and country clubs, which has helped her form many fruitful relationships throughout the community.

Ashley is most proud of owning and operating Troup's Pizza with her husband, Terrill. The couple are often seen working alongside their two children, which is the greatest reward of all!

8th Annual “Les Dames Market Takeover” at Pepper Place for Women in Food Month

by Leigh Sloss-Corra

This September will mark the 8th Annual Women in Food Month Spotlight, aka “Les Dames Market Takeover,” at the Market at Pepper Place. Sponsored by the law firm Jones Walker, each year the program focuses on different cuisines each week (this time from September 7th to September 28th). Each Saturday has a different theme. In keeping with the theme, Dames will host a bake sale at the Market, and lead the Market’s cooking demo, “In the Kitchen,” at 9 a.m.

Many Market vendors are Dames, so it’s an even better way to show off our chapter. We benefit from the Market’s high attendance, and social media reach too—over 110K followers.

At a tent provided by the Market, Dames promote and sell tickets for Champagne & Fried Chicken. Proceeds from the bake sales help fund our cooking and nutrition instruction outreach program at The WellHouse. There is always room for more volunteers, so if you have questions and can help, email me at leigh@pepperplacemarket.com. Here’s this year’s lineup:

9/7: Latin Food Week, with cooking demo by Dulce Rivera and Mi Pueblo. Dames donating items for sale and working at the tent include: Cristina Almanza, Aimee Castro, Emily Roy, Pam Lolley, Gia McCollister, Becky Satterfield, Leigh Sloss-Corra, Susan Swagler, and Pat Terry.



Above: Fanoula Gulas, Billie Jo Waara, Susan Swagler, Gia McCollister, Pam Lolley, and Leigh Sloss-Corra were some of the Dames at the first week of the Market Takeover.

At right: Dames, including Takeeka Goshay of Adored Sweets, donated bake sale items.



9/14: Sweet Treats Week, with chef demo by Takeeka Goshay of Adored Sweets. This is usually the busiest of themed weeks at the LDEI Market Takeover and we need lots of volunteers. It’s also Takeeka’s debut chef demo at the Market, so come and show her some love!

9/21: Mediterranean Food Week teams up with FOOD+Culture Fest—a big day with LOTS going on! Chef demo by Dame Rita Bernhart of Luca at 8:30 a.m. with Chef Jody Adams of Rialto and TRADE (award-winning restaurants in the Boston area) doing a demo at

9:30 a.m. Grande Dame Chef Carla Hall will do an onstage talk with Sid Evans of *Southern Living* at 9 a.m. Dothan celebrity chef Kelsey Barnard Clark will chat onstage with *Southern Living* at 10 a.m. There’ll be book signings, meet and greets, plus our Dames’ tent with donated bake sale items from 7 a.m. to noon. This is a Market day not to miss!

9/28: Healthy Food Week, with chef demo by Dame Clara Darling of Samford Wellness Kitchen. This day will wrap up the month-long celebration by spotlighting our Dame dietitians and healthy-eating instructors. All are invited to volunteer, donate, and participate.

September is Dames’ month at the Market so make it about you—and all of us! Sign up to donate, and help at this link: <https://rb.gy/5eu8mk>.

For event details and to spread the word, check out pepperplacemarket.com, the Market newsletter, and social media posts @marketatpepperplace and @ldeibirmingham.

As a reminder, the Market is free and welcome to all, 7am to noon every Saturday, rain or shine. We’ll see you there!

2024 LDEI Annual Conference in Phoenix—Y’all come!

by Leigh Sloss-Corra

Treat yourself to an educational, delicious, and fun-filled long weekend with top dogs and newbies from LDEI chapters all over the world at the 2024 LDEI Annual Conference in Phoenix 10/17-10/20.

All members are invited (and you can bring a partner, spouse or guest...). The sessions cover various topics over three days, and all in a gorgeous setting that will blow your mind.

You can also sign up for day passes if you can’t come for the whole thing. Southwest has non-stop flights from BHM to PHX, and lots of airlines can get you there surprisingly inexpensively.

If you’re considering going, do it! I’ve been to two previous conferences, and promise it really is worth it. To review the schedule and read about additional field trips and excursions, visit ldei.org.

Events Calendar

The month of September	Women in Food Month LDEI booth *weekly volunteers needed	Every Saturday at The Market at Pepper Place
Sept. 19-22	FOOD+ Culture Fest *There will be a special event on Saturday, September 21 for Dames to work and attend.	More details to come
Sunday, Sept. 29	Champagne & Fried Chicken fundraiser *all Dames will be involved	The Market at Pepper Place
Friday, Oct. 10- Saturday, Oct. 11	Various events with humanitarian, designer, entrepreneur, and author India Hicks	Andiamo Lodge in Mentone More details to come
Tuesday, November 12	Beer or wine tasting with Rebecca Gann	More details to come
Monday, December 9	LDEI Holiday Party	More details to come

Bham FOOD+, #3 Best New Food Fest in America Returns this Month!

by Leigh Sloss-Corra

This month marks the return of the 2nd Annual Bham FOOD+Culture Fest, happening in locations all over the city, September 19-22.

Spotlighting 100+ chefs, with five signature events and 10 collaborative dinners over four days, it's guaranteed to have something for anyone who cares about food, drinks, music, culture and fun. Dames in our chapter are an important part of this event, voted #3 Best New Festival in America by USA Today in 2023.

The 2024 festival will be bigger and better than last year, with sparkling receptions, wine tastings, a street dinner, a sprawling cookout, storytelling, book signings, mega media celebrities, and more! The details are all on the Bham FOOD+ website, and most events are ticketed so your seats at the table are guaranteed. Dames and friends coming from near and far are all invited. (For football fanatics, there is even a beer garden and jumbo TV set up during FOOD+ Fire Saturday in the Sloss Furnaces shed.)

The big day for Dames is Saturday at the Market at Pepper Place, when the festival will shine a super spotlight on LDEI. In honor of Women in Food Month, aka "Les Dames Market Takeover," 29th Street will be set up with women-owned businesses only. The free event, FOOD+Market Mix, will begin at 7 a.m. and continue until noon. It will feature two chef demos, one by Dame Rita Bernhardt of Luca and second one by James Beard Northeast winner, Chef Jody



Above: FOOD+ is almost here, and this year's festival will be bigger and better than last year..

At right: The FOOD+Heritage dinner party last year at Pepper Place.



Adams from Boston. There'll be two onstage Market Talks, with superstar Grande Dame Chef Carla Hall at 9 a.m. and celebrity chef and Alabama native Kelsey Barnard Clark at 10 a.m., moderated by *Southern Living*, and opportunities for meet and greets with all the chefs and cookbook authors throughout the morning. Weather is predicted to be perfect so it should be an incredible day.

Several Birmingham Dames have been key in making the festival happen: on the Board, Cathy Sloss Jones, Leigh Sloss-Corra, Cheryl Slocum, and Chanda Temple with Rebecca Gann as festival program director. Literally dozens of Dames are working, volunteering, and hosting throughout the weekend so make plans to attend and see what our stellar women can do when they take over at last!

Summer Programs Round-Up in Pictures



Our group held two fun and fantastic programs over the summer, one in June, Sustainability in Business, and another in July, the Science of Happiness.

Both were well attended by Dames and future new members as well, and everyone learned a lot, ate and drank together, and really had fun.

In the Sustainability in Business program (at left and below left), Dame Rebecca Denson shared her journey on becoming a B-Corp, inspiring other Dames to make a business commitment toward more sustainable practices and more community outreach, operations, and philosophy that are good for the community and for the planet. See more about becoming a B-Corp on page 10.

For the Science of Happiness program (top left and top right), Dame Barbara Kenyon explained this specialty in which she has the degree. There are a number of scientific research-based foods and activities that can boost happiness, and the data shows they make a measurable difference in energy, acuity, general fitness, and longevity. Prescribing a minimum of eight hugs a day for baseline happiness seems like a pretty good one for all of us.

Others may have been vacationing, but those of us lucky enough to be part of these gatherings were informed, uplifted and inspired. Here's to more terrific programs in the year to come! Bravo!

—Leigh Sloss-Corra

Becoming a B-Corp: A Dame's Experience as One of the First in Alabama

by Rebecca Denson

From the beginning of Sachai Tea Company, the desire has always been to curate an authentic chai that sourced its ingredients intentionally and ethically.

For background, I joined the chapter last year and am so thankful for this group that is a hot spot for local women creatives, super women all 'steeped' in rich culinary experience and creative passion.

I am originally from South India, and after moving to Birmingham for higher education, I started my family here, followed by the tea company that I co-founded with my husband, Clint Denson.

In building our business, we have fought hard and long through health department permits; the unending process of finding business owners who are willing to give up sweet, dessert-like chai or poor-quality chai for Sachai's chai; funding a business while raising a family; the constraints posed by the industry and economy on female and immigrant-owned business; navigating real estate costs; as well as the infamous COVID-19.

Today, as a small manufacturer of authentic chai concentrate, we serve over 75+ cafes, restaurants, and shops with our delicious chai concentrates and loose leaf teas.

In the throws of growing our company, certification became an important conversation. We considered the "organic" or the "women-owned" certifications and others, but we began dreaming, though it was a bit ambitious, about the B Corp Certification.



On a sourcing trip to India in 2015, Rebecca and her husband, Clint, took their twins everywhere with them, to the tea gardens and markets and to the meetings with industry professionals.

What is B Corp Certification?:

B Corp stands for "benefit-motivated business." Brands like Patagonia and Ben and Jerry's—both of which are B Corps—were so inspiring to me: how they sourced their raw materials; their story telling; and their consciousness toward planet, environment, and people.

The certification itself is a very rigorous process that uses a point-system framework to evaluate areas of business that include governance, supply chain, workers, environment, and customers/community.

For example, when looking at your company's supply chain, some questions include what percentage of your ingredients are ethically sourced, locally sourced, and sourced from women or minority-owned businesses. For customers and community, there are questions about tracking and reporting volunteer hours, do you have a way to receive feedback, how do you evaluate it if you do, and then is there a process for review and implementation.

After two long years Sachai

certified last year as a B Corp, becoming the third in the state of Alabama and first in the city of Birmingham.

There is a statistic that over 90% of Gen Z and Generation Alpha consider an impactful business for job opportunities and for consumer choice over other businesses. To attract and retain a workforce, it is necessary for business owners and stakeholders to consider aligning business practices to mindfulness and impact creation.

On June 27, our chapter hosted an event about Sustainability in Business at Amavida's warehouse in Avondale with iced chai and mini strawberry cakes by Dame Takeeka Goshay from Adored Sweets. During this event, Dan Bailey, founder of Amavida Coffee Roasters, shared about their journey as a business buying directly from farmers, creating offset policies for emissions and plastics consumed, harnessing solar power, creating a work environment that has the highest standards, and Amavida's eco-friendly paper products that they are now distributing here in Alabama.

We arrived at the significance of businesses in driving impact in our local communities. If businesses valued buying locally and added that to their business impact model, then this would create a surge in circular economy—creating more demand for locally produced goods, retaining dollars in their communities, and driving GDP.

This creates a wave of mindful businesses that want to out-do each other in their business impact models and ultimately better communities through their presence.



From the beginning of Sachai Tea Company, owners Rebecca and Clint Denson wanted to create an authentic chai that sourced its ingredients intentionally and ethically, and those motivations took them down the path of B Corp certification.

Intersection of Purpose and Profit:

Is it possible to have multiple bottom lines as a business? There are over 8,000+ businesses across the United States, Canada, and around the world that are B Corp certified. They are highly successful businesses that continue to create impact through their business model.

We talked about how purposeful businesses that are not exclusively extractive outlast other businesses,

and we have seen this in several industries here in Birmingham.

As we try to find growth in our impact and profitability we are excited to be a part of a network of inspiring businesses that are doing both in creative ways.

To learn more about:

There's a regional southeast event happening in September. Reach out to Rebecca Denson or Dan Bailey from Amavida for more information.

LaCrista Hutchinson: This Busy Dame Balances Family, Career, and Service

by Donna Cornelius

LaCrista Hutchinson likes a fast-paced environment—and it's a good thing. She's one of our busiest Dames.

For the past two years, she's headed our membership committee; that's no easy task since it involves many hours spent soliciting nominations, gathering information, and setting up interviews with prospective members. Her day job, too, is a demanding one: She's a regional manager for US Foods, a leading food service distributor.

The Alexander City native relocated to Birmingham in the summer of 1990 after her graduation from Benjamin Russell High School to attend Jefferson State Community College to study mortuary science.

"My parents operated a funeral home in Alexander City, and because I hadn't definitively landed on a career path, it seemed only natural to pursue funeral service education until I determined my career trajectory," LaCrista said.

After graduating from Jeff State, she furthered her education by earning a bachelor's degree from the University of Alabama.

Here's more from LaCrista:
How did you get interested in a career in food?

My initial introduction to the industry came with an opportunity in 2000. At the time I was working for a health insurance company in Birmingham; however, it wasn't a



LaCrista and her family: From left to right: her husband, Ricardo, and two amazing children, Sabre and Victoria. Not pictured: their four dogs.

good fit for me. When I think back, it was a great opportunity, and it was essentially meant to become a start to a long career.

But I found myself dreading going to work week after week. While talking with a friend who operated a small restaurant, I learned they needed staff for purchasing and general management. I immediately thought, "I can do this!"

I managed this small concept (Wingo's) for the next five years. I had so much fun and forged great relationships while learning the industry. In 2007, I began my career with US Foods as a territory manager and remained in the role for seven years before being promoted to district sales manager.

When did you start your current job as a regional manager at US Foods?

I began the position in 2021 after spending four years as North Region District Sales Manager. While this is one of the most rewarding experiences of my career, it has also been one of the hardest. I began the role amid COVID, a time of uncertainty that created ruptures in the food supply chain.

The world learned in real time just how intricate the food service ecosystem was. Collaboration and communication were essential, and we didn't always get it right. The challenges weren't isolated, but that didn't make those conversations easier. COVID taught me the significance of being willing to adapt.

US Foods' website describes your company as "one of America's great food companies and a leading food service distributor, partnering with approximately 250,000 restaurants and food-service operators to help their businesses succeed." What else is important about your company? The description speaks well to our market strategy and how we show up. As well, I love that the company leads with technology and utilizes team-based selling to offer valuable resources for operators in support of their success. Food is the focus for restaurants, and we've got that; however, US Foods also shares how technology enables their business to thrive.

What's a typical day at work like for you?

My days begin with gauging performance metrics and conference calls. I've worked virtually for 17 years, so I've learned to incorporate best practices to maximize effectiveness and efficiency from the day. Once I know the numbers, this drives my activity; I typically utilize Monday and Friday for administrative activity, and I'm in the market interacting with customers the remaining time.

What's the most fun thing about what you do?

The people—hands down! I enjoy developing and maintaining relationships. I get the opportunity every day to engage with incredibly creative and smart operators and team members. Removing barriers is rewarding; day in and day out, relationships win. I also enjoy the fast-paced environment, sense of accomplishment, and opportunities to acquire new skills.



LaCrista said one of the most rewarding parts of the work Les Dames does is that our organization exists to build our communities and enrich the lives of others.

What's the hardest or most challenging aspect of your job?

Navigating supply chain and logistics continues to be the most challenging aspect as of late. Being able to source products needed in a timely manner is critical. We pivot frequently to meet the ever-changing demands.

Do you enjoy cooking, and if so, what kinds of food?

With a busy schedule, balance is important. I enjoy cooking; however, I don't find the time as frequently as I'd like to. The tradeoff for me personally equates to quality time with family and friends. When my husband and I spend holidays at home, we typically have family and friends around. We spend a lot of time cooking and dining together. My mom, Carolyn, and brother, Mark, are always up for a friendly cook-off! Some of my most precious memories have taken place around the table.

What do you enjoy doing in your down time?

I enjoy reading and spending time with family and friends, and I can't live without listening to music. We have four dogs, and there's always a couple who want playtime outdoors. The exceedingly high temperatures don't allow walks right now, but they get out in the backyard frequently for short periods while we enjoy the deck.

Tell us about your family.

I'm married to Ricardo Wright and have two incredibly amazing children, Sabre, 26, and Victoria, 24, who both are from Ricardo's first marriage. They're funny, smart, thoughtful beings. Sabre is a graduate of Georgia State University, and Victoria is currently pursuing her MBA at the University of Georgia.

When and how did you get involved with Les Dames?

Mary Esther Brocato Carpenter was my sales manager at the time and

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introduced me to the organization by inviting me to a monthly program and later to an annual fundraiser, Southern Soiree, which was held at The Barn at Shady Lane. I was impressed with the community work the organization was doing and the camaraderie amongst the ladies. Mary Esther was a founding member, so I gained in-depth insight as to the conception of the local chapter.

What did your position as vice president of membership involve?

As VP of membership, I managed the annual membership drive, along with supporting events. The new member drive opened in May and remained open for approximately 30 days, and the final event takes place in September. Once candidates for membership are identified and a completed application packet is submitted, all nominees take part in an interview process with the membership committee. This year we had 14 candidates. Following induction of new members in August, a new member reception was held September 9th to welcome the ladies into the Birmingham Chapter of LDEI.

What do you find most rewarding about being a Dame?

We are women of purpose, focused on uniting for the greater good. For me personally, to know the work we're doing exists to build our communities and enrich the lives of others is by far the most rewarding aspect. One of the most impactful experiences has been observing recipients of LDEI scholarships and grants go on to successfully navigate their careers in the industry.

know them better and unleash the power we will have as a chapter of 111 powerhouse women. Wow!

This summer we also prepared for a major leadership transition as five chapter board positions were rolling over. The Nominating Committee proposed a strong slate that has been ratified by the chapter: Sonthe Burge—President, Cristina Almanza—Vice President of Membership, Lindsey Noto King—Vice President of Programs, Audrey Pannell—Secretary, and Clara Darling—Treasurer.

We are so appreciative of the incredible service of the board members rolling off, and I hope you'll thank them in person next time you see them: Kathy G. Mezrano, rolling off from Immediate Past President; I'm moving from President to Immediate Past President; LaCrista Hutchinson is stepping down from VP-Membership; Alexis Douglas stepped down from VP-Programs; Andrea Kirkland is stepping down from Secretary; and Mary Grace Viado is stepping down from Treasurer.

This new board is proof that ours is a vibrant and engaged membership, where multiple Dames are ready to take responsibility, lead, and strengthen our collective power and voice.

When I look back on what we've achieved during my two years, it's the small and the big things I'm proud of. Our membership is strong. We've sustained our fundraising and increased our giving. We have strengthened partnerships that are paying growing dividends for us with the Community Food

Bank of Central Alabama, the Market at Pepper Place, The WellHouse, Fiesta, and FOOD+ Culture Fest. We are more "known."

Personally, I'm also proud of some recent work I did, helping to obtain the city, health department, and ABC Board permits for Champagne & Fried Chicken. It's been a long process, with an incredible amount of red tape, forms to fill out, documents to supply, and questions to answer, but as I discovered, these folks know who we are. They wanted to help because they know what we do for women in our community. They knew about our event and its impact and were thrilled to be a part of our success story. Win-win.

It's September, as I said, which means it's Women in Food Month at the Market, spotlighting different Dames—like YOU!—every Saturday. Donate, work the tent, spread the word on social, support your sister Dames and all the women-led businesses in our city. Volunteer at the Food Bank on 9/18. Give Grande Dame Carla Hall a warm welcome at FOOD+Culture Fest when she joins us at the Market on 9/21. Help out at the LDEI tent at Fiesta on 9/28. Show up and show out for Champagne & Fried Chicken event prep, 9/27 & 9/28, day-of prep 9/29 and then—ta-dah!—the big event itself that afternoon, when we'll lift, sweat, carry, pour, eat, laugh, drink, and hug. So get ready!

Thanks for the opportunity to represent you as Chapter President. Looking forward to more big things ahead.

Cheers!
Leigh Sloss-Corra

California: A Magical Week by the Sea

by Gia McCollister

Spending a week on the California West Coast, with Carmel-by-the-Sea as my home base, was nothing short of magical. It was a perfect setting for my birthday celebration. This trip, filled with breathtaking landscapes, charming architecture, and delightful culinary experiences, offered a perfect blend of relaxation and adventure. Each day brought new discoveries, from the rugged cliffs of Big Sur to the serene beauty of Pebble Beach, and the vibrant marine life of Monterey.

**Carmel-by-the-Sea:
A Fairytale Village**

Carmel-by-the-Sea is a picturesque seaside village that feels like it belongs in a storybook. The town is famous for its enchanting fairy tale cottages, each uniquely designed with whimsical details, steep roofs, and lush, colorful gardens. Walking through the narrow, winding streets, I felt like I had stepped into another world.

The cottages, surrounded by blooming flowers and towering trees, create an almost surreal atmosphere. The town's charm extends beyond its architecture. Carmel boasts a vibrant arts scene, with numerous galleries showcasing local artists' work.

Carmel Mission Basilica, founded in 1771 by Father Junípero Serra, is a profound testament to California's Spanish colonial past. Not far from the Basilica lies another gem: Tor House, built by American poet Robinson Jeffers in the early 20th century, using



Carmel-by-the-Sea was filled with fairy tale cottages like this one, each uniquely designed with whimsical details.

locally sourced granite stones.

The town's quaint shops, cozy cafes, and fine dining establishments made it a delight to explore. One of my favorite dining experiences was at Foray, a restaurant with a husband-and-wife team of chef and sommelier known for its innovative and exquisite menu.

Another memorable meal was at Grasing's, with an intimate, can-

dledit setting and delicious menu. Another surprise was an upscale Mexican restaurant, Nicolas Cocina de Herencia, owned by a mother and daughter, transported me to my memories of a truly Mexican flavor.

La Bicyclette and Casanova are classics in Carmel-by-the-Sea.

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The Majesty of Big Sur and Bixby Creek Bridge

Each day, I embarked on road trips to explore the stunning natural beauty of the region. One of the most memorable drives was along the Big Sur coast, a place where nature's grandeur is on full display.

The Pacific Coast Highway, which winds along the edge of the continent, offers some of the most breathtaking views in the world. Towering cliffs drop dramatically into the ocean, and the landscape is dotted with coastal redwoods, wildflowers, and rolling hills. A highlight of the Big Sur drive is the Bixby Creek Bridge. This iconic bridge spans a deep canyon and provides one of the most photographed vistas along the coast.

Standing on the edge of the bridge, I was awestruck by the panoramic views of the rugged coastline and the endless expanse of the Pacific Ocean. The combination of natural beauty and architectural elegance is truly inspiring. Last but not least, a lunch at Sierra Mar Restaurant—the Post Ranch Inn was the perfect last touch and true farm-to-table experience.

The Enchantment of 17-Mile Drive and Pebble Beach

Another unforgettable journey was the 17-Mile Drive, a scenic route that winds through Pebble Beach and Pacific Grove. This private toll road offers spectacular views of the rugged coastline, lush forests, and the world-famous Pebble Beach Golf Course.

Pebble Beach is renowned as one of the most beautiful golf courses globally, with its meticulously maintained greens and fairways set



Above: Big Sur is a stunning stretch of California's central coast between Carmel and San Simeon. At right: The iconic Bixby Creek Bridge was a highlight of the Big Sur drive. It spans a deep canyon and is one of the most photographed vistas along the coast.



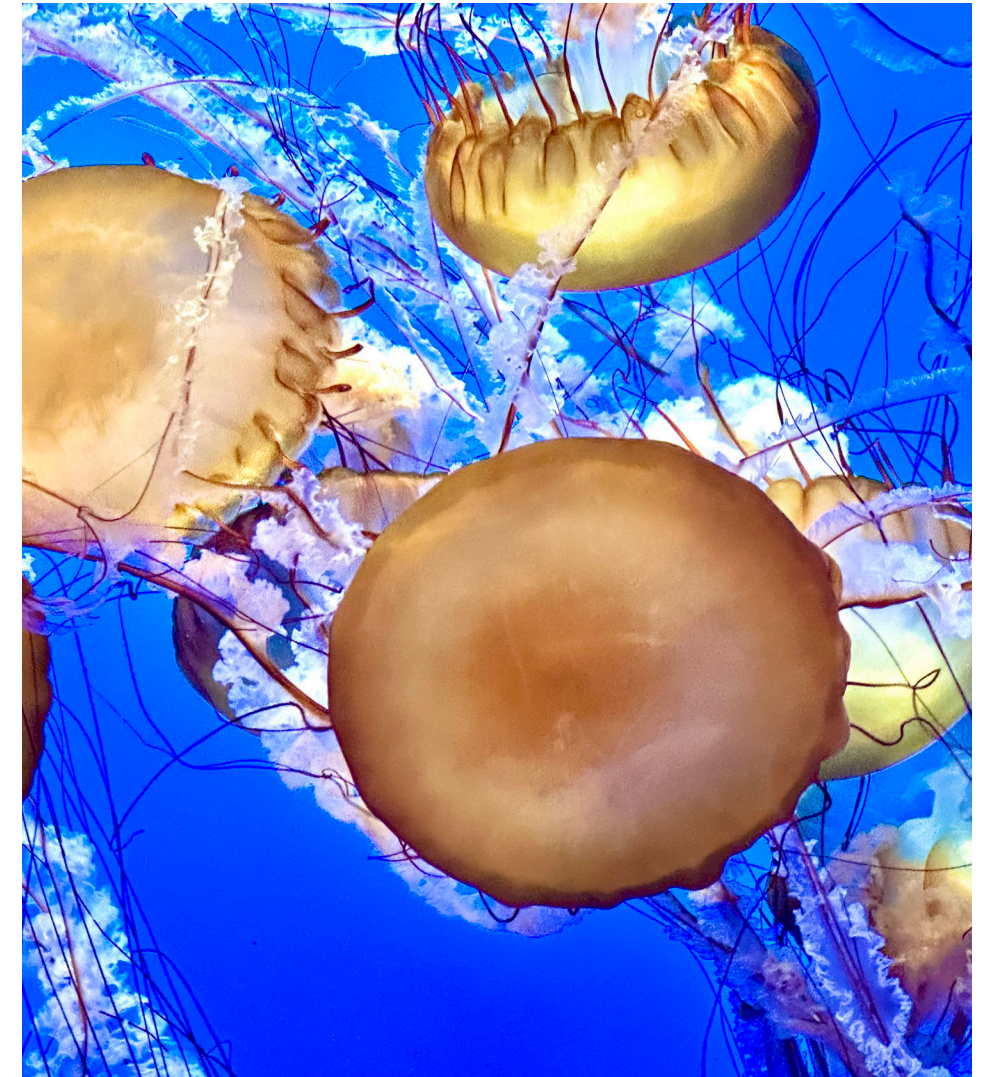
against the backdrop of the ocean. Even as a non-golfer, I was captivated by the serene beauty of the course and the grandeur of the surrounding landscape.

One of the most iconic sights along the 17-Mile Drive is the Lone Cypress, a solitary tree perched on a granite hillside overlooking the ocean. This ancient tree, which has stood for over 250 years, symbolizes resilience and beauty in the face of nature's elements. The sight of the Lone Cypress, framed by the blue ocean and sky, is both peaceful and awe-inspiring. The Bench Restaurant at The Lodge is located overlooking the 18th hole at Pebble Beach Golf, a must when you visit.

Monterey: A Marine Wonderland

A visit to the nearby city of Monterey added a different dimension to my trip. The Monterey Bay Aquarium, often considered one of the best aquariums in the world, was a highlight. The aquarium's exhibits are both educational and captivating, showcasing the rich marine life of the California coast.

I was particularly fascinated by the Open Sea exhibit, where I watched schools of sardines move in synchronized patterns and a massive sea turtle glide gracefully through the water. Monterey itself is steeped in history, with Cannery Row offering a glimpse into the city's past as a bustling sardine canning center. Today, this historic waterfront street is lined with shops, restaurants, and galleries. I enjoyed a leisurely lunch at a seafood restaurant overlooking the bay, where I could watch sea otters play in the water below while savoring fresh, locally-sourced dishes.



The sea nettles at Monterey Bay Aquarium were just one of the marine creatures that were fascinating to see. This aquarium is considered one of the best in the world.

Nature's Symphony: Flora and Fauna

Throughout my travels along the California coast, I was continually struck by the region's rich biodiversity. The coastal landscapes are a tapestry of diverse flora, from the towering coastal redwoods of Big Sur to the delicate wildflowers that blanket the meadows. Wildlife is abundant and varied, with harbor seals basking on rocky shores, pelicans soaring overhead, and sea otters frolicking in the kelp forests.

A Week to Remember

My week-long birthday trip celebration on the California west coast

was a journey through some of the most spectacular scenery and charming towns I have ever encountered. Each day brought new wonders, from the dramatic cliffs and scenic bridges of Big Sur to the tranquil beauty of Pebble Beach and the vibrant marine life of Monterey. The combination of natural beauty, enchanting architecture, and culinary delights made this trip truly unforgettable.

As I reluctantly departed, I carried with me not just memories, but a profound appreciation for the unique and magical allure of this extraordinary part of the world.

Ecuador: A Breathtaking Bit of Luck

by Rachel West

Ecuador was not part of the plan. But the high flight prices to our originally planned destination made us rethink that trip and turn to the map on Google Flights for inspiration. We landed on Ecuador, and in retrospect, luck was in our favor.

Ecuador outshined our imaginations. The people, the landscape, the history, the animals—all of it produced that magic mix of a memorable trip. During our time there, we focused on a small area of the relatively small country, which included time in Quito, day trips outside the city, a stop at the equator, and a stay in Mindo in the Cloud Forest.



We took the TelefériQo Cable Car to the top of Pichincha Volcano to a lookout at more than 13,000 feet above sea level. The views showed us the massive city of Quito below and the beautiful volcanos and mountains that surround it.

Quito

Quito is the second highest capital in the world, sitting at an elevation of 9,350 feet. While my family thankfully didn't have any issues with the altitude, it is something to be mindful of. A young man behind me in customs asked if I was having difficulty breathing—it had already hit him almost as soon as he walked off the plane.

This long, narrow city sits among volcanos and mountains of the Andes Mountains. On clear days, the almost symmetrical, snow-capped cone of Cotopaxi, the country's most famous and one of its most active volcanoes, is clearly visible from the city. It's an unmistakable part of the landscape.

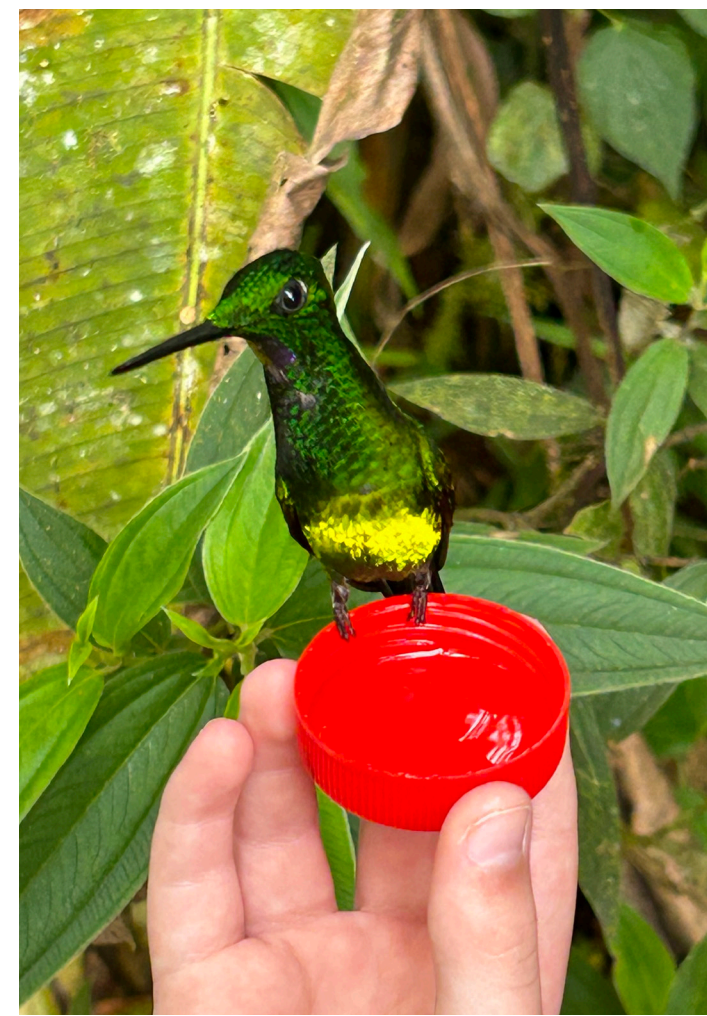
We wandered the parks and neighborhoods of Quito, ate lots of good food—Ecuadorian ceviche is a new favorite—and learned about

the long indigenous and colonial history of this country. Here are some of our favorite experiences in Quito:

- **TelefériQo Cable Car:** This gondola—one of the highest aerial lifts in the world—runs from the edge of the city center up the east side of Pichincha Volcano to a lookout that's more than 13,000 feet. The ride takes about 20 minutes, and while we didn't feel the elevation when we got off the gondola, we certainly felt it when we started climbing up to the lookout. Luckily, the 360-degree views along the way give you plenty of good excuses to stop and catch your breath.
- **Old Town:** The historic colonial center of Quito, which was built on the foundations of an ancient

Incan city, was the first city named a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is well preserved, with its churches and structures that are a mix of its European and indigenous history. San Francisco Catholic Church, the beautiful Independence Square (also known as Plaza Grande), the gilded and ornate Church of the Society of Jesus, and that church's huge, intense painting in one of the side naves called El Infierno (The Hell) by Hernando de la Cruz were all peak experiences.

- **El Virgen de Panecillo:** This large aluminum statue of the Virgin Mary is striking in person. It was created by a Spanish sculptor who made it from 7,400 pieces of aluminum that were meticulously numbered. The sculpture was then



At left: Visiting the hummingbirds in the Cloud Forest easily ranks as a top experience of our time in Ecuador. At right: Quito, which was built on the foundations of an ancient Incan city, was the first city named a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



disassembled, shipped to Ecuador, and reassembled on site. There's a small museum inside the statue, and you can walk to the landing for views overlooking Quito as well as an up-close look at some of the statue's details.

- **Carolina Park:** This large park in the middle of Quito was a fantastic place to wander and people-watch. There were soccer games, both professional and impromptu; playgrounds; runners; walkers; and lots of dogs. One particular delight was an unleashed cat wearing a red cape that was completely unconcerned with all the dogs running around during her photo shoot on a tree stump.

On a day trip from Quito, we headed south along the Avenue of Volcanos to reach Lake Quilotoa.

The Avenue of Volcanos is, in total, a 124-mile drive that is known for a high concentration of volcanic summits, including Cotopaxi. If you enjoy hiking, or even the more-intense version known as trekking, Ecuador and its numerous volcanos and mountain peaks have lots to offer you. We are not those people, so we simply marveled at the views.

From there, we made our way to Quilotoa, a crater lake in the Ecuadorian Andes that was formed after a massive eruption about 800 years ago. The water is a brilliant turquoise and green that comes from the volcanic minerals that are still suspended in the water from past eruptions. The walk down to the bottom to see the water up close takes 20 to 30 minutes, but the hike

back up takes about an hour thanks to the incline of the crater walls and the altitude—more than 12,000 feet above sea level. My guys weren't up for it, so we enjoyed the overlook and then went to lunch.

The Equator

En route to Mindo, we stopped at The Intiñan Equator Museum, a smaller museum not to be confused with the much larger Mitad del Mundo monument, which doesn't actually sit on the equator—the line is about 250 meters north.

The Intiñan Equator Museum was *fascinating*. We learned about the history, culture, and customs of the indigenous Jívaro tribes of the Amazon, including how and why

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Lake Quilotoa is a crater lake in the Andes that was formed after a massive eruption about 800 years ago. The colors of the water come from the volcanic materials still suspended in the water from the eruption.

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they made shrunken heads, how they made and shot poison darts, and their burial practices. We also learned all sorts of equator facts, and we got to do experiments to see how the equatorial forces work. I spent much of my time there having my mind blown. My kids also adored this museum, and this experience ranks near the very top of my family's favorites from the trip.

Mindo

The days we spent in Mindo in the Cloud Forest, however, proved to be my family's collective favorite. It was a welcome change from the bustle of the city. It's not quiet in the Cloud Forest per se, thanks to the animals and insects chatting at all hours, but its natural sounds were a refreshing alternative to human-made noise.

The mornings usually started clear, but the clouds would roll in around midday, and rain would often come in the afternoons. We went on hikes through the forest to see waterfalls, with lots of lessons about the animals and plants along the way, and an early-morning walk to spot as many birds as possible.

Our guide, Sandra Patiño, was one of those awe-inspiring people who knows a truly astonishing amount about seemingly all the creatures and plants in the Cloud Forest. She can also spot all sorts of animals that we would have missed without her keen eye and expertise.

A note: When spending time in the Cloud Forest, bug spray, long sleeves, and pants are a must for everyone, but particularly those of us who are beloved by mosquitoes.

We also attended the frog concert at Mindo Lago. This is really a night walk around the lake with a guide to spot some of the nocturnal

creatures who live in the forest. While you walk, you get to listen to the chorus of frogs making their evening sounds. We saw lots of spiders, bugs of all sorts, multiple species of frogs, and some very large toads. This concert actually grew from a conservation project intended to reintroduce frog species back into their habitat. Their efforts started with a couple of species, but now the area is home to more than two dozen types of frogs.

One of the undeniable winners of our time in Mindo—and indeed the entire trip—was visiting two different hummingbird sanctuaries in the Cloud Forest. There are more than 130 species of hummingbirds that live in Ecuador, and many of them don't migrate, so we saw birds that we will never get a glimpse of in Alabama.

There were hummingbirds of all colors, sizes, and sparkle, ones with long tails, some with adorably cute feathered feet, and some that had dazzling emerald green sequined feathers. We held Coke bottle caps filled with sugar water, and hummingbirds would zoom up to us and drink from them, inadvertently fanning us with their impossibly fast wings. Sometimes they would perch on the side of the cap or our fingers to have a drink. It was thrilling to see these magical creatures up close.

•••

Our trip to this part of the world was a happy accident, a side effect of original plans gone awry. The list for our next trip to Ecuador has already been started, but we are thankful to have experienced this beautiful country with our two boys this year, counting it as a wonderful bit of good luck.

Let's Toast

Tena Payne's Earthborn Studios has just been awarded the contract for installing her dinnerware at Duck & Waffle Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. This property is three times the size of the ones she supplies in the London and Edinburgh locations with 300+ seats. Shimon Bokovska, restaurateur, chose Earthborn for several of his properties, including Sushi Samba and Sugarcane, located in multiple European countries because of the distinctive, organic nature and its durability.



Joy Smith is celebrating the third anniversary of Sorelle, a locally owned and operated catering company as well as a grab-and-go café in Homewood. She offers made-from-scratch meals and desserts, including her popular cheesecake.



Geri-Martha O'Hara is celebrating the 10th anniversary of Big Spoon Creamery. Her ice cream business started



in her driveway with \$500, and she and her husband, Ryan, have worked their way up. Now they have three locations in Huntsville, Homewood, and Avondale.

Jenn Nix received an invitation to the International Luxury Travel Market (ILTM) in Cannes, France. As the premier annual travel industry event, the offer to attend as a fully hosted participant is an honor. This December, she'll join advisors and travel professionals from over 70 countries for a week of dedicated one-on-one meetings and networking events.



Emily Roy has accepted a position as culinary arts director for Pelham High School. She also runs an after-school program that helps students compete in the FCCLA and ProStart competition. She started her new role in August.



Emily McDaniel and her husband, Rob, celebrated Helen's 4th anniversary in August. Named after Rob's grandmother, Helen offers refreshing takes on Southern cuisine.



Aimee Castro and her husband, Jorge, were named the Retailer of the Year 2024 for their restaurant Sol y Luna by the Alabama Retail Association.



Christina Saab and her husband, Tom Saab, are opening their third project, Sloan's Bar, in the fall/winter of 2024.



Rachel West recently launched her illustration business and Etsy shop (<https://www.etsy.com/shop/RachelQWest>), which features illustrations that celebrate life at home and elsewhere. Her drawings focus on travel, maps, literary locations, and moments from everyday life—kitchen mishaps are some of her favorites to draw. The Birmingham skyline in the header of this newsletter is one of her illustrations.



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