



Les Dames d'Escoffier
INTERNATIONAL



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Founded in 2013

ldeibirmingham.org

Winter 2025

President's Note

As I write this letter, I just finished reading through 40 chapter reports from LDEI presidents worldwide in preparation for the LDEI International Council of Delegates Meeting.

Here is what I found most interesting: Out of 40 chapters worldwide, 10 chapters have over 100 members. Birmingham is among the chapters with over 100 members which also include Austin, Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, Nashville, New York, San Antonio, San Francisco and Washington D.C.

One more impressive fact, out of 40 LDEI chapters worldwide five chapters gave more than \$45,000.00 in 2025 through scholarships, grants and philanthropy. Birmingham sits in the top five for giving back to their community with Austin, Colorado, Dallas and New York for chapters.

And drum roll please...Big news from the Council of Delegates meeting on November 20, 2025!! Our Past President Leigh Sloss-Corra is now secretary for LDEI International 2026!! Wishing Leigh all the best in her new role as she will be a tremendous asset to the board.

And there is more BIG NEWS!

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Street Picnic: Champagne & Fried Chicken Draws a Crowd



Oct. 19 was this year's date for our annual Champagne & Fried Chicken fundraiser, and we couldn't have asked for a more beautiful evening.

As usual, the event was a rousing success that combined philanthropic efforts with a ton of fun and great food!

Co-chairs Lindsey Noto King, Chae Richards, Kathy G. Mezrano and Kay Reed designed a picnic party on 29th Street with live music and a bar serving specialty cocktails. Emily McDaniel and Dulce Rivera, plus many other Dames,

welcomed more than 200 guests to tables, where they enjoyed their picnic and Champagne under the lights. These diners accounted for half of our ticket sales!

Kay Reed and Maureen Holt organized the chicken frying on site and had a super team with Rita Bernhardt, Clara Darling, Sidney Fry, Fanoula Gulas, Emily Nabors Hall, Crystal Peterson, Agatha Pihakis and Tricia Stuedeman.

continued on page 11, see C&FC







Thank you to our Champagne

& Fried Chicken sponsors!



Produced in partnership with:



For the first time ever, International is presenting chapter awards at the annual conference in April 2026. Our Birmingham chapter has made the “shortlist” of nominees for TWO awards, the PHILANTROPY and SHOSTOPPER awards!! What a huge honor and recognition for our chapter!! Be sure to follow LDEI International on social to see more.

Speaking of awards let’s celebrate our Dames who were recognized with Michelin awards!! Dame Pardis Stitt received the Michelin Outstanding Service Award, Dames Kristen Farmer Hall, Idie Hastings, Emily McDaniel and Geri-Martha O’Hara earned Michelin’s Bib Gourmand Awards. Congratulations ladies! Our chapter is honored to see our members recognized among the best in the South. As my grandchildren would say, “That’s a BIG DEAL” and I could not agree more!!

The progress this chapter has made in only 12 short years is mind blowing. For comparison the New York chapter recently celebrated their 50th anniversary. We have active members who were not even born 50 years ago. It truly is an honor for me to serve as president of our chapter. Whether you are a founding member, new member or member for eight years like me; Birmingham Dames have much to be proud of. I will admit, my president’s report was one of the longest because our chapter does so much!! The work we do at the Community Food Bank of Central Alabama



and The WellHouse in addition to our fundraising events like Champagne & Fried Chicken and Sweet Treats is a meaningful and beautiful reflection of who we are. We are nominated for two very special awards because of you!!! Together our accomplished members have built a strong chapter and presence in Birmingham and that is a lot to be proud of, my friends!!

The International Board recognized our work ethic and commitment to LDEI when they visited in October. Thank you to all Dames who donated items for their welcome bags and joined the board for the potluck dinner at Leigh Sloss-Corra’s home. It was nice to spend time together and get to know the Dames serving on the International Board.

The gratitude I feel for each of you is overwhelming. Champagne & Fried Chicken was a success because of you. I realize many of our Dames did not attend the event this year. All had very good excuses, from work to travel commitments to unexpected illnesses, but that

did not stop these individuals from supporting the event. Out of the 50 event sponsors, almost half—22—were Dames!! Dames also sold and bought picnics, prepared the food, planned and worked day of. We had close to 80% participation!!

A big thank you to our amazing co-chairs, Dames Kathy G. Mezrano, Kay Reed, Lindsey Noto King and Chae Richards. Another team of Dames worked tirelessly included Idie Hastings, Susan Swagler, Leigh Sloss-Corra, Rachel West, Gia McCollister and Maureen Holt. We had real Champagne this year, which was delicious, thanks to Pardis Stitt. I am officially spoiled now.

Thank you to all our members who rolled up their sleeves and threw on their jeans to work the event. Each of you brought your best version of Southern hospitality. It was such an impressive evening—a showstopper for sure!!

Southern hospitality is the driving force for our chapter and the glue that binds us. If you are like me, you rolled up your sleeves once again and donned your most loved apron to prepare for holiday gatherings with friends and family.

I hope those around your table were as grateful for you as I am. I hope you found some time for yourself to chill, because you must be exhausted. I know I am.

Let’s all plan to meet on Tuesday, December 9th at Sol y Luna for our annual holiday party. We have a lot to celebrate and deserve a night off!

Lots of love,
Sonthe

Rachel West, Gia McCollister, Rachel Ishee, Cristina Almanza, Audrey Pannell Tyler and Christiana Roussel worked their magic marketing the event and creating new materials for media.

Susan Swagler used Zeffy, a new platform for us, for picnic tote sales. We sold 193 totes this year.

The 2025 edition of Champagne & Fried Chicken raised more than \$75,000 in sponsorships.

A big thanks goes to co-chairs Kathy G. Mezrano, Lindsey Noto King, Kay Reed and Chae Richards and to Leigh Sloss-Corra and Cathy Sloss Jones for graciously offering Pepper Place as our venue.

We’re also grateful to Deborah Stone and Alexandra Stone Flowers for the gorgeous dahlias that delighted our guests.

More thanks go out to the Dames who donated to the event as a sponsor or through an in-kind donation, bought a picnic tote, sold totes to family and friends. and worked the event.

“We could not do this without you,” President Sonthe Burge said of her fellow Dames. “Participation looks different for everyone, and every contribution matters. When considering all the different ways to support the event, we had 80 percent chapter participation, which is wonderful.”

We’re already gearing up for 2026: The date for next year is Sunday, Oct. 4.

.....Events Calendar.....

Thursday, Jan. 1	Scholarship and Grant Applications open	
Tuesday, Jan. 6	Sweet Treat Committee Meeting	Sloss Reality office Time TBD
Thursday, Jan. 8	Communications Committe Meeting	Sloss Reality office Time TBD
Tues., April 14- Thurs., April 16	Les Dames d'Ecoffier International Conference	The Cosmopolitan Hotel Las Vegas
Sunday, April 26	Scholarhip and Grants Reception, 2-5:30 p.m.	TBD

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Blessings Bags Bring Joy to The WellHouse
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by Charbett Cauthen and Sonthe Burge

Back by popular demand, our Blessing Bag drive for The WellHouse was a tremendous success.

Dame Charbett Cauthen took the lead and opened the purse drive to our community by recruiting Dames to volunteer their restaurant or business as a purse and toiletry drop off location.

Dames Joy Smith of Sorelle, Ashley McMackin of Ashley Macs, Chris Saab and June Glenn of Sloan’s, and Deborah Stone and Alexandra Flowers of The Farmstead at Stonehollow for serving as collection locations. Thanks to the generosity of their customers along with our Dames we collected over 300 purses and even more toiletries.

Caterer Sela Joseph Schatz even donated a sewing machine!!

On Tuesday, December 2, Dames Maureen Holt, Charbett Cauthen, Takeeka Goshay and Sonthe Burge delivered the Blessing Bags to The WellHouse and hosted a lunch and holiday reception for thirty ladies.

The delicious lunch was provided by Maureen Holt, Joy Smith and Takeeka Goshay. Each lady selected six purses, and several ladies reported “this is their best Christmas ever”. We had enough purses to leave more Blessing Bags with The WellHouse for women entering the program in the future. Goodwill gladly accepted the leftover purses.

Our Blessing Bags project is a blessing not only for all the ladies who received these special gifts but also to Dames who participated. Many thanks to all our members and especially those on The WellHouse committee for your generosity and support.

LDEI “Big Board” Visits Birmingham

by Leigh Sloss-Corra

Our chapter of Les Dames was thrilled and honored to welcome the LDEI “big board” for its quarterly meeting in Birmingham in October.

Lots of advance planning went into coming up with unforgettable activities that would offer a concentrated sampling of the city’s best offerings. The result was a whirlwind three days and a hit for all who participated.

Board members who arrived Thursday afternoon kicked off the trip with dinner at La Fete, Chef Kristen Farmer Hall’s charming French bistro. Kristen seated the lucky group at a beautiful table and sent out special treats from her kitchen all evening.

On Friday morning, the Dames set to work at their downtown hotel, but at noon headed to the Birmingham Botanical Gardens for a picnic lunch provided by Kathy G. Mezrano, who oversees the café and catering there. The gardens and grounds were spectacularly decorated for Antiques at the Gardens, the biggest event of the year there, with flower arrangements, elaborate vignettes and setups, excited well-dressed attendees, and top-tier guest speakers from around the U.S.

After lunch with Birmingham Dames who joined the fun, board members were offered free tickets, courtesy of Kathy, to explore the antiques show and the festive and fine fashions of decorating aficionados and ladies in the know. SuffICIENTLY wowed, the visitors returned to their hotel for more meetings.



Birmingham Dames were thrilled to host the international board of Les Dames d’Escoffier in Birmingham. Members gathered at Leigh Sloss-Corra’s home for a potluck dinner.

At 3 p.m., they were joined by leaders of the Birmingham board, who came with questions and thoughts about how to get members more engaged, be better ambassadors for LDEI, enlist more attendance for the conference, etc. It was a great session, and everyone felt energized after so much productive face time.

That night, visiting Dames enjoyed a fabulous meal at Chez Fonfon, the iconic spot owned by James Beard winner Frank Stitt and Dame Pardis Stitt. Once again, Pardis took special care to make sure the evening was enjoyable, spending time with our guests at the table and chatting.

Early Saturday morning, a few Dames set out on foot while others traveled by van to the Pepper Place Farmers’ Market, founded by Dame Cathy Sloss Jones and overseen by Dame and Executive Director Leigh Sloss-Corra. The producers-only certified farmers’ market is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year.

Joined by several Birmingham Dames, the visitors were welcomed by James Beard winner Chef Chris Hastings and Dame Idie Hastings, co-owners of Hot and Hot Fish Club and Ovenbird. Inside Hot & Hot, which was prepping for the market chef demo and a busy Saturday night at the restaurant,

everyone sampled pastries from Dame-owned Bandit Patisserie and female-owned Dalle Momo while learning about the history of Pepper Place, the Market, and Hot and Hot. A group of Birmingham Dames then took everyone on a guided walking tour of the market, where they chatted with vendors and sampled some of the yummy options offered by vendors, many of whom are Birmingham Dames and/or winners of LDEI entrepreneur grants. The visitors then returned to the hotel for a focused day of business meetings.

At sunset, our visitors and 30 Birmingham Dames gathered at Leigh’s house for a Dame-hosted potluck supper. Much Champagne was drunk, delicious food shared and great conversations had before the evening concluded. It was another night to remember, and the weather could not have been more perfect.

The next morning, a few of the not-too-sleepy Dames met up with Susan Swagler, Christina Almanza, Idie Hastings and Kate Nicholson for a fun and inspiring three-mile hike in Ruffner Mountain Park. It was the perfect finish to an incredible weekend. All were tired but felt energized and instilled with new, deeper loyalties to this amazing organization.

We Birmingham Dames can’t wait for our new friends to come back and are already planning the fun things all can see, taste and discover next time.



Top: (left to right) Chapter Board Liaison Nancy Veinneau, International Board President Stephanie Jaeger, and Secretary Anita Lau joined Sonthe Burge and other members (at right: Cristina Almanza and Kathy G. Mezrano; below: Billie Jo Waara, Susan Swagler, Martha Johnston, and Nancey Legg at the potluck dinner).



Making a Difference in Our Community, Growing Closer and Celebrating Women Through Fiesta

by Susan Swagler

In the past several years, our partnership with Fiesta, the largest Hispanic festival in Alabama, has grown in beautiful, meaningful and delicious ways. We partner with Fiesta to award a \$5,000 scholarship to a young woman pursuing a food-related career.

This year, it was Arantza Montserrat Rivero Flores, who is earning her master’s degree in human nutrition at the University of Alabama. Arantza had previously received a smaller scholarship from us when she was an undergraduate student.

This time, however, felt different. Our generosity this year will help Arantza over the finish line. And it comes during a moment when it just means more to lift up other women and help them toward a brighter future.

When Fiesta presented Arantza with her giant check, the announcer told the crowd: “Arantza is receiving this scholarship earmarked for women in the culinary and hospitality industry. This scholarship is possible through a partnership with Fiesta and Les Dames d’Escoffier International Birmingham Chapter.”

The presenter finished by reading the quote by A.A. Milne that Arantza had submitted with her winning application: “You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.”

Arantza herself explained the significance of that quote: “It is easy to feel out of place, especially



Above: This year, several Dames were involved at Fiesta—at our tent, at the fabulous Tito’s Airstream, putting on the event, and backstage at the scholarship awards. At right: Decorating our booth at Fiesta is lots of fun!



on the hard days when imposter syndrome takes over—a feeling that often comes with being a Latina pursuing higher education in healthcare. This quote reminds me that resilience in the face of self-doubt and obstacles is a strength I do not always recognize in myself. In competitive and demanding healthcare programs, success is not just about grades, it is about the ability to adapt, learn and persevere in unfamiliar territory. That persistence, resilience and empathy are proof that I truly belong here.”

Our partnership with Fiesta started about five years ago when I saw Cristina Almanza on Fox 6 talking about Fiesta scholarships. Kathy G was president then, so I called her and suggested that we channel some of our scholarship funds to Fiesta, so we could reach a population of young women we had not reached before.

Since then, we’ve also seen our grant giving in action at Fiesta, too. Joana Maldonado, owner of Pasteles La MoreliAna food truck, received one of our entrepreneurial grants a few years ago. It’s always a sweet pleasure to do our part to help her sell out of her amazing pastries at Fiesta.

Additionally, Fiesta has offered us another way to connect within our chapter and see, firsthand, the impact of our hard work. This year, Billie Jo Waara, our new chair of Grants and Scholarships, and Anna Theoktisto, our outgoing chair of that committee, and I decorated our booth with colorful flags, flowers and spicy candies and had a lovely time greeting people and sampling the delicious foods at Fiesta that day.

The time we spend each year with our scholarship recipients behind the big stage ahead of the scholar-



Arantza Montserrat Rivero Flores is pursuing her master’s degree in human nutrition at the University of Alabama. At right, she’s shown with our new chair of Grants and Scholarships, Billie Jo Waara.



ship presentation always is a special time of meaningful, face-to-face conversations that leave everyone a little teary and remind us of why we work so hard as a chapter.

But what we’re doing with Fiesta is way more than a beautiful cele-

bration of cultures coming together. The way I see it, our partnership with Fiesta is not only fun and rewarding, but it’s also another way for us to be active, hands-on participants in creating a better Birmingham and a better Alabama, too.

Dame Susan Swagler, a founding member and past president of our chapter and a food journalist with 40 years of experience, shares food, travel and life on her new Substack: savorbysusan-swagler.substack.com and on Instagram @savor.blog

Follow her for insider stories about our local restaurants, ways to enjoy the wider world, recipes of what she’s cooking at home and smart book recommendations. Savor what’s possible!



Big Flavor, Big Energy, Big Impact

Birmingham Dames bring their all to the Southbound Food Festival

by Cheryl Slocum

Birmingham's Southbound Food Festival returned for its third year. The festival team rolled out a fun lineup of dinners and outdoor parties with music Sept 19-28. These events drew local and regional chefs, farmers, makers and bakers who came to share their best.

And our Birmingham Chapter Dames were there—involved, contributing and supporting this young, fun city festival.

This year, the festival expanded from a single weekend to a 10-day run that spanned two weekends and the weekdays in between. And the festival also got its new name: Southbound, a change that clarified its identity and signaled the spirit of the gatherings.

The first Southbound weekend opened with the Heritage Dinner, a multi-course seated meal featuring local and regional Southern chefs. Taking place under the evening lights at Pepper Place, the annual Frank Stitt Award was presented, and the conversation flowed amid the live music. Dame Pardis Stitt worked with the festival board and program director to shape the coastal dinner concept. The theme reflected the work of award recipients Beth and Bill Walton, who have long supported healthy coastal aquaculture.

Later that weekend, Rooted, a Pepper Place Market takeover, showcased women in food. Dames Rita Bernhardt, Kristen Farmer Hall and Cheryl Slocum joined Toni Tipton-Martin on stage for a discussion about their personal perspectives on Southern cooking.



Dame Rita Bernhardt, chef and owner of Luca, preps pizza bites for FOOD & Fire at Sloss Furnaces.

Dame Susan Swagler later interviewed Toni Tipton-Martin and Morgan Bolling about their book “When Southern Women Cook.”

At the market, Dames staffed the chapter booth and engaged with local attendees and visitors about the good work we do in the community, and Dame Idie Hastings created a gracious and welcoming reception for talent, festival sponsors and VIPs at her restaurant Hot and Hot Fish Club.

...

“I was beyond honored and thrilled to be a part of Southbound Food Festival here in Birmingham! And I really loved Idie’s reception of craft cocktails and delicious brunchy bites.”

— Dame Susan Swagler

...

During the week, local chefs invited guest chefs into their kitchens to collaborate on special menus served during Hosted—a series of dinners that took place between the two

festival weekends (see Birmingham LDEI at Southbound by the Numbers).

As the second weekend unfolded, lively energy filled the Southern Living-sponsored Food & Fire, a walk-around barbecue tasting and tailgate party at Sloss Furnaces, with all the fixings and plenty of thirst-quenching drinks. Dames Rita Bernhardt and Geri-Martha O’Hara were there, serving tasty bites from their establishments. And the next day at the closeout event, Funk Brunch: Gospel Bird was the theme and along with a carefully curated lineup of chefs, Dame Lindsey Noto King served up a chicken dish inspired by the intimate, live-music event.

Through all of these events, there were Birmingham Chapter Dames everywhere—working behind the scenes, showing up as patrons, and serving on the front lines. No matter the role, each one helped bring honor and visibility to our chapter and to Birmingham’s food community.

Rebecca Gann: The Producer Leading Southbound From Behind the Scenes to Center Stage

Bringing Southbound, with its chefs, dishes, music, cooking demos and more, takes months of careful planning, coordination and vision. It’s a behind-the-scenes effort handled by a small team of dedicated people. Chief among them is Dame Rebecca Gann.

As Southbound’s programming director, Gann’s solid culinary-event planning background has been key in building Southbound from the ground up and is a major part of what has made it a success over the past three years.

“Putting on a festival like this takes a ton of work from a really small team,” Gann said. “There are so many details, so many moving pieces, and plenty of long days no one ever sees. But doing the work means we get to shine a light on a food scene that’s been overlooked for way too long.”

For her, the payoff is not just in the events themselves but in lifting up the chefs, makers and food storytellers who make places like Birmingham pulse with possibility.

Nancey Legg: Serving Birmingham

As one of the featured vendors at the *Southern Living*-sponsored FOOD & Fire, Dame Nancey Legg played an important role in rounding out the festival’s beverage experience. Attendees sampled an array of beer and wine at the tailgate-themed fest, and right alongside, Legg’s award-winning, locally brewed kombucha paired beautifully with the barbecue and other savory offerings—and with dessert as well.



Frank and Pardis Stitt at the Southbound kickoff event, Heritage Dinner, on Friday evening in the streets of Pepper Place. Winners of the Frank Stitt Award received an engraved copper skillet.

Birmingham LDEI at Southbound by the Numbers

This year over two dozen Birmingham Chapter members of Les Dames d’Escoffier helped build, shape and support Southbound in one way or another. For our chapter, 2025 felt different. The involvement was wider, the roles deeper, and the presence unmistakable. Dames weren’t just helping out, we were steering, guiding and amplifying the festival’s mission at every turn.

Overview

- 28 dames
- 2 festival weekends
- 1 hosted week
- 7 major events supported

Who Led the Way:

Festival Board + Year-Round Planning: Rebecca Gann, Cathy Jones, Cheryl Slocum, Leigh Sloss-Corra, Chanda Temple

Dames at the Festival

Heritage Dinner: Rebecca Gann, Fanoula Gulas, Cathy Jones, Cheryl Slocum, Leigh Sloss-Corra, Pardis Stitt, Chanda Temple

ROOTED: Women in Food: Rita

Bernhardt, Kristen Farmer Hall, Idie Hastings, Nancey Legg, Emily McDaniel, Cheryl Slocum, Pardis Stitt, Susan Swagler

Market Takeover: Anne Born, Sonthe Burge, Becca Flanagan, Takeeka Goshay, Fanoula Gulas, Maureen Holt, Erin Isbell, Trisha Manzanero, Kimberly Brock McNair, Kathy G. Mezrano, Kay Reed, Joy Smith, Aquilla Stanback, Susan Swagler, Brianna Tamburello, Chanda Temple, Billie Jo Waara, along with LDEI grant winners Toni North and Alexis Kimbrough

HOSTED dinners: Rita Bernhardt, Kristen Farmer Hall, Idie Hastings, Geri-Martha O’Hara, Pardis Stitt

Southern Living’s FOOD & Fire:

Rita Bernhardt, Nancey Legg, Allison Lowery, Geri-Martha O’Hara, Jasmine Smith, Amanda Stanfield

Funk Brunch: Gospel Bird: Maureen Holt

Amplifying the festival Public Relations/Social Media
Rachel Ishee, Gia McCollister

9th Annual Les Dames Market Takover Success

by Leigh Sloss-Corra

This past September, LDEI Birmingham teamed up with the Farmers’ Market at Pepper Place to celebrate Women in Food Month, also known as “Les Dames Market Takeover,” since this began in 2016.

Every year during September, the Market devotes 30 days to promoting members of Les Dames—the female chefs, food producers, culinary instructors and cookbook authors who are defining the food scene in Birmingham. It’s become a tradition for the Market audience and for our group.

Through this partnership we have the opportunity to promote new members, get to know each other, broaden our network and sell tickets to Champagne & Fried Chicken, so it’s become an important marketing tool for us too. Plus, everyone always has fun!

There were two bonuses this year. First, since 2025 has been the Market’s 25th anniversary, it has received more attention, better attendance and more love and support generally, which have all benefited our chapter’s presence there and extended our reach. (The Market has a combined social following of over 120K currently, so that’s a lot of new eyeballs on our activities.)

The extra bonus this year was that Southbound Food Festival, formerly FOOD+Culture Fest, which began partnering with LDEI and the Market at Pepper Place when it began in 2022, took place over two of the four Market Takeover weekends, on September 19 and 27.

The first weekend Saturday of the



The annual Les Dames Market Takeover during Women in Food Month at the Market is an opportunity to highlight the talent of our members and spread the word about LDEI Birmingham.

festival, September 19, Southbound brought in women chefs from all over the US for one of its signature events at the Market, ROOTED: Women in Food. Les Dames received loads of added visibility onstage, in the press and promotion and at the Market tent. All in all, it was a great month for women in food in Birmingham and our organization received a lot of the credit.

As in past years, each Saturday market during the takeover had a different culinary theme, meant to showcase Dames with different specialties. Week 1 was Mediterranean Food Week. Tina Liollo (at right) hosted the chef demo—her market debut—and did a great job. Seventeen more Dames either worked in the Market or volunteered in the Dames’ tent selling Mediterranean specialties donated by Dames. Week 2 was Latin Food Week, scheduled to coincide with the kickoff of Hispanic Heritage

Month. Dame Becky Satterfield hosted the chef demo, which was a treat as she is known to so many in the city.

At the Dames tent and at tents at the market, 19 Dames helped make the day a success. Week 3 was Southern Classics week, in honor of Southbound Food Festival and their promotion of the new cookbook by Dame Toni Tipton-Martin (award-winning author and editor of *Cooks Country*) and media celebrity Morgan Bolling, *When Southern Women Cook*. Idie Hastings hosted a celebrity Meet and Greet inside Hot & Hot Fish Club and Dames at the tent sold a ton of Southern specialties. This was a huge day for chapter participation—over 30 Dames volunteered, attended, were featured in panels onstage during the festival and did the work to make the day a success. The final week was Sweet Treats week, with the chef demo hosted by the indefatigable Kristen

Farmer Hall of Bandit Patisserie and La Fête, and a tent full of Dames and sweets so varied and beautiful you would have thought it was Christmas. Kristen did great at the chef demo, then scooted off to Lovelight Farm where she was host/chef that evening of Outstanding in the Field, the uber-popular traveling al fresco dining series which had come to Birmingham for the first time—a lot in one weekend!

There is one last bonus of this program, which is that sales of baked goods donated each week support our chapter’s outreach programs. This year, after fees and expenses, we netted \$1,600, making the 2025 Les Dames Market Takeover a success for our programs too.

Who knows what we will achieve in 2026 for the 10th annual takeover? Market organizers have already said they’re looking forward to a more impactful partnership with Les Dames in 2026. Stay tuned!



Birmingham Dames gathered each weekend of the takeover at our tent to share information about our chapter, our outreach efforts in the community and Champagne & Fried Chicken. Tina Liollo (at right) hosted the chef demo week 1 while Kristen Hall (bottom left) demo'd on week 4.



Wheel of Fortune: In the Studio with Tena Payne of Earthborn Pottery

by Donna Cornelius

From experimenting with a loaned potting wheel as a teenager to having her pottery recognized across the nation, Tena Payne has thrown her heart into her art.

Tena made pottery as a hobby while she was in the middle of a busy life working and raising her family. Things changed when she met Chef Chris Hastings of Hot and Hot Fish Club through selling him shiitake mushrooms (read on for more about that). He saw her pottery and commissioned her to make dinnerware and serving pieces for his restaurant.

Hastings also thrust Tena and her business, Earthborn Pottery, into a bright culinary spotlight when he used her creations in the process of beating celebrity chef Bobby Flay on “Iron Chef America.”

Over the years, Tena has expanded her business. In addition to providing the hospitality community with her wares, she sells pottery to retail stores, produces several custom lines, produces awards for corporations, and even makes a line of bathroom sinks.

She’s also a charter member of Artists Inc., is an American Craft Council member, serves as a judge for art shows across the country, and is a certified member of the Women’s Business Enterprise National Council.

She has seven grandchildren. And she still loves what she does.



Tena Payne loves sharing her passion for pottery with relatives and friends. Several family members are involved in her business either full time or by pitching in when they’re needed.

Tell us a little about your background: where you grew up, what you were interested in as a child/teenager, any important family members or mentors.

My formative years were in Homewood where I attended Homewood High School. I was always a curious child, and many times that curiosity would get me in trouble. My father’s life attitude is that if you want to do something, you can. He would say: “See that man over there? If he can do it, I can, too.” I took that to heart with everything I attempted, and the negative thoughts that often plague people had no purchase on my mind. I thought I could do anything I put my mind to.

You mention in your website bio that you were a “somewhat troubled teen” and that a teacher’s loan of a potting wheel helped you during that time. Why did this make such an impact on you?

I was in trouble a lot because I didn’t always think things through. Being able to take the wheel home over the Christmas holidays gave me the opportunity to stay on it and teach myself how to make a pot. Practice is essential and one needs focus. The wheel captivated my imagination then, and now. Pottery takes what you give it and returns what you need.

Tell us about how growing shiitake mushrooms turned out to be pivotal in your pottery career.

We love mushrooms and jumped at the chance to grow them. We were way more successful than we anticipated and had pounds and pounds of mushrooms, more than we could consume, so I took them downtown and knocked on the back door of restaurants. Hot and Hot was one of them.

For the next six years, we had a back and forth. Chris would make suggestions; I would make changes. Eventually he quit commenting, and I knew I had a product I could sell to other chefs.

What was it like to have a chef like Chris Hastings believe in you and buy your pottery?

At the time I met Chris Hastings, he had been in Birmingham just a few months. I knew nothing about fine dining, the hospitality world or chefs in general. He was a businessman, buying a product I was making. I was trying to make the best pottery I could. He made it sing. “Iron Chef” was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It was an amazing experience. There was a certain amount of stress involved, but putting yourself “out there” is always stressful. In my opinion, that’s how we grow.

How did you come up with your signature design and colors?

Testing, testing, testing, testing. I love a spiral—so many things in this world, and universe, are in a spiral. Our DNA is in a spiral. So when I saw the ammonite fossil at a gem and mineral show, I knew right away I would use that design element on my pottery. Since I wanted my work to look like a rock that had been dug up and polished, this fit perfectly.



Earthborn Pottery is found on the tables of a wide variety of restaurants and retail shops. It also made an appearance on “Iron Chef America” thanks to Chris Hastings in his win against Chef Bobby Flay.

Did you make any major changes to your pottery or your business over the years?

I’ll try anything! We’ve even made replacement tiles for historic buildings on Southside.

Your pottery is in a great many restaurants and retail outlets. Although we don’t have room to list them all, are there any that you would particularly like to mention?

Of course Hot and Hot and Rumi’s Kitchen in Atlanta, Washington, D.C., and Houston. Cucina in Miami. Pappas Restaurant Group has me in several of their properties. Lamarina in Miami, several of the Marriott properties including two of the Renaissance properties ... I love them all—it’s hard to pick out just a few.

Do you still love sitting down at your wheel?

I do. I create the original designs. I make the first run of any item. I love the discovery process with the chefs. They tell me their vision, and I bring it to life for them. It can be a back and forth until we get it right; it’s a process. It’s a lot of fun to experiment. I get to teach, so that’s wonderful too.

How is your family involved in your business?

Nathan, my son, runs the production, glazing and shipping. He’s been with me 20 years. His sons, and occasionally his youngest daughter, help out around the studio. My husband retired from working here in 2023.

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Tell us about your recent induction into the James Beard House permanent collection. Did you attend the ceremony?

I was invited to the event celebrating Julia Child where Jerry McDonald, executive vice president of culinary at Midas Foods, specified my dishes for his part in this collaboration—there were 10 chefs participating. There was an extensive guest list, approximately 100 people. Many were sustaining members of the JBH. With the appetizers, we enjoyed 18 courses with wine and mocktails. Even a bite or so apiece, it was a lot to eat! These pottery items remain in the JBH for future use by future guest chefs. While we've initiated with two items, more are in the works at the present time.

What gives you the greatest joy about your work?

Transforming materials. Making beautiful work. Taking nothing but dirt (yes, special dirt, but still earth), adding my influence and then putting them through the fire, yielding the glory of the earth. If history holds, these pieces will still be around many, many years from now. Hopefully as heirlooms, not as midden fodder!

What's the hardest thing about what you do?

It used to be rewiring the kilns. Now Nathan does that. Keeping the whole thing turning. Orders in, orders out. All day. Every day. We're always looking for new business; once an order is received in a restaurant, it might be two years before we get a reorder. It's just that durable.



Careful attention to detail makes each piece of Earthborn Pottery a work of art. Tena still enjoys sitting down at her wheel and makes the first run of any new item in her company's line.

How do you de-stress and relax in your spare time?

I have a comfortable chair on my patio that looks out on our garden and the river beyond. I never get tired of hearing the birds and watching the wildlife. In the early spring we start seeds, then relocate them to the garden. I love watching things grow, then eating and sharing them! We also play mah-jong and take care of our Brittany spaniels. Our children and their children remind us of how blessed we are to have them close.

Why did you want to be a part of Les Dames? What do you most enjoy about the group?

The combined wisdom of such a group of women is staggering. I wanted to be able to absorb some

of this and their energy. As a group, we're better able to help more people in more meaningful ways, as well as each other. I love that we're all Alphas—and still get along and accomplish goals.

What do you think the future holds for you and Earthborn?

Anything we want. We're exploring more wood products, glass, candles, flatware and other tablescape items. Of course, pottery will always be the leader, but I see Earthborn as a place to build out one's love of nature in their homes.

Costa Rican Adventure

A Birmingham Dame Will Be Professor in Residence at Samford Study Center

by Pat Terry

As a registered dietitian and Samford University professor for 30 years in the Department of Nutrition and Dietetics, I am thrilled by the purchase of a new international property in Costa Rica and to be named the first Professor in Residence at the Finca de Samford (finca means country estate or ranch), Ciudad Colón, spring semester 2026.

Before Samford, I was a missionary in Venezuela for 11 years, having done Spanish language study in Costa Rica for a year prior to that.

While at Samford, I shared my passion for other cultures and people by taking nutrition and dietetic students to London in January and summer terms for our Food, Culture and Society class for about six years.

After becoming a Samford Latin American Studies Scholar in 2008, I adapted the same class for Costa Rica. From 2008-2018, I took Samford nutrition and dietetic students to Costa Rica in January.

While students learned Spanish at their appropriate level while staying in Costa Rican homes, our class experienced the mix of African, Spanish and Caribbean influences in the culture and cuisine that make Costa Rica unique.

Having been retired for almost six years, I've been given the opportunity by Samford to take my years of connections and experience in Costa Rica to a new level. For spring semester 2026, we will have five students in the first "Finca Family."

The class that I will be teaching, Costa Rica Culture and Society, will introduce the students to Costa Rica, its people, landscapes, econ-



This spring, Pat Terry will be based at Finca de Samford in Costa Rica as the Samford University educational program's Professor in Residence.

omy and history, with a focus on sustainable agriculture, organic farming and Costa Rican cuisine.

This course is one of the foundational courses for study abroad in Costa Rica and interconnects with the two other foundational courses: Spanish for Costa Rica and Mastering the International Experience.

The Finca de Samford is a unique property on 14 acres of mountainous countryside near the capital of San Jose. The property is surrounded by coffee plantations and national forests. It is very close to the United Nations University of Peace, a unique global academic institution with over 6,000 alumni from more than 120 nations working for peace on a global scale.

Because most students at this university live in nearby Ciudad Colón, Samford students will not

only be exposed to Latin American culture, but also to many other cultures from around the world.

Ciudad Colón is located a few miles from the Samford Finca on the western side of Costa Rica's Central Valley. It is a small city just 30 to 40 minutes from the heart of downtown San Jose and only 10 to 20 minutes from two upper class suburbs, Santa Ana and Escazu.

Having spent 10 days there recently, I was very impressed by the wonderful shopkeepers, restaurant owners and everyday "Ticos"—the affectionate, colloquial name for Costa Rican people—who made us feel at home while we were exploring the city for opportunities for our students in the spring. We look forward to our Samford students experiencing the "pura vida" of Costa Rica.

Hyperlocal: Exploring Local Foodways Off the Beaten Path in Japan

by Jes Bennett

Chef Takashi Miyanaka's bicycle comes to a screaming halt that nearly topples the stack of lettuce in his overstuffed market basket. It's five minutes before our lunch-time reservation, but Takashi isn't particularly fussed.

"The rest of the group is going to be late," I offer, stepping in behind him as he flips on lights in Le Garçon Chinois.

"Oh, yes, well ... it's your brother," he adds knowingly. He gestures behind his bar as he prepares to wash the lettuce. "Just go back there if you want to fix a drink or two."

My once-vagabond brother has settled down, with both real furniture and a fiancé to prove it. With his career in culinary and adventure tourism, it's no surprise he chose here.

We are in Sakuraicho, a neighborhood of Kochi City, in Kochi prefecture, on Shikoku, Japan's smallest main island. Garçon is Sakuraicho's French bistro—every neighborhood needs a French bistro—and Chef Miyanaka's homecoming restaurant after years in San Francisco and Shanghai.

Takashi cooks and provides service at the eight-seater bar solo most nights. A bartender, Nagi, helps him on the weekends, and sometimes his sister, a local nurse, bakes fresh chestnut rolls. He offers one lunch a week, reservation only, and we manage to clinch it. We even get to have the chestnut rolls.



Kochi's countryside is studded with greenhouses bearing eggplants.

Kochi prefecture in general, and Sakuraicho specifically, doesn't seem to know what a chain restaurant is. Dinner reservations are snapped up nightly at the hundreds of tiny independent restaurants, izakaya, and counter joints that dot the city. When phone calls fail we simply wander door to door. The galvanizing force behind every establishment is one that would seem obvious to the denizens of Kochi, it's local.

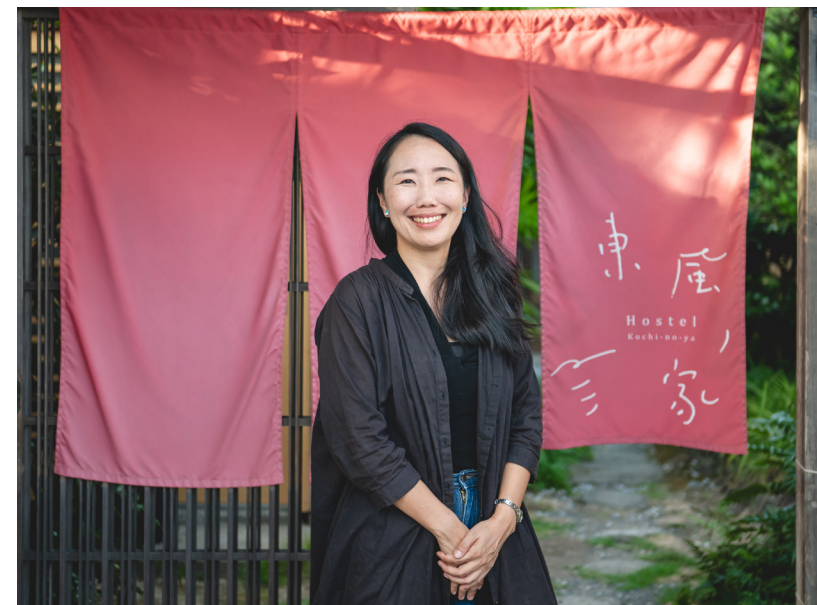
It's no surprise that the busiest night out is Sunday. Daytime is reserved for Sunday Market, a multi-block showing of farmers' bounties in the central city. The restaurants get in and out early, amending menus to the turn of the season week by week. Even the market's

taco truck—every farmers' market needs a taco truck—confides in me that the sweet potato tacos are specific to this week.

This is Tosa country, the region's historical name spanning 300 years from the Tokugawa Shogunate to the Meiji Restoration, and Tosa remains a proud byword for anything local. In addition to Tosa beef, eggs, chestnuts, sake, and a large citrus fruit called buntan, Kochi is the largest national producer of yuzu citrus, eggplant, cucumber, garlic chives, ginger, and purple sweet potato. Myoga, an obscure but delicious aromatic relative of ginger, accompanies many plates, and I find myself looking forward to its unique and delicate flavor. One chef



Above left: A thriving culinary scene serves up food both traditional and diverse. Above right, top image: The weekly Sunday Market, complete with taco truck. Above right, bottom image: Azumi Sento, owner of Kochi-no-ya Guesthouse, and host to talented regional chefs and traveling troubadours alike.



confidently assures me that even other regions of Japan are ignorant of myoga; Kochi keeps it for themselves.

Food is becoming central to Kochi's burgeoning tourism scene. Once known primarily for hiking the Henro Pilgrimage, a 750-mile walk to the 88 Buddhist shrines surrounding the island, the wider world is awakening to a central truth of Kochi life—these people are eating well. Really well.

Kochi-no-ya Hostel in Aki City is in the vanguard of food tourism, its common room and kitchen

hosting guest chef counters and local bar takeovers alike. Proprietor Azumi Sento's latest tour group represents a major food magazine in the Netherlands, so the order of the day is Aki's most famous crop, the eggplant. The coursed tasting menu features traditional and creative dishes from three local chefs, all of them women.

The hour-long trip to Aki is dotted with beguiling peeks of rocky coastline and tiny villages. You can forget about Japan's image of futuristic maglevs (a transportation system in which trains glide above a track) and

bullet trains; Aki is still waiting for completed access to a highway. We pass row after row of white-tented greenhouses, "Eggplant," Azumi says. Studded at deliberate intervals, practical five-story steel and concrete towers rise into the air. "And Tsunami shelters," she adds.

Aki itself is an old samurai town, a charming maze of tile roofs and foot bridges. At 80 years old, Kochi-no-ya fits right in with its classical tatami rooms and curated courtyard.

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But Azumi's next project is a departure. She recently has completed renovations on the building next door, unveiling a new set of accommodations in the Showa style. The vintage '70s building is outfitted with chic Japandi flare, a sleek premium offering for a more premium clientele. For Azumi, this represents part of a bigger plan.

"The purpose of the new guesthouse is to resolve issues facing Kochi," she says. "My town is losing population as young people move to the big cities. If we create new, enjoyable things here, people will return or move here. I want this new guesthouse to be a place where people who like my town can stay longer and grow to love it even more. The same goes for guests from abroad. I want them to stay long term, relax in my town and experience local life."

As a business owner, she feels the importance of shaping to local culinary landscape, particularly for women.

"I hear it's uncommon in other prefectures for women to go out drinking together, but in Kochi's izakaya you can see groups of women happily eating and drinking," she says. "This scene of people laughing and enjoying themselves over drinks is what I think defines Kochi's food culture."

"The memory of delicious food stays with people, making them want to come back to visit my town. That's why I want to introduce local cuisine. Simply, I want guests to eat something delicious and feel happy." Accommodations at Kochi-no-ya can be found at Kochinoya.com.



At left: Kochi Castle's extensive gardens crown the city center. Below: Fresh Pacific sashimi and local fruit pastries are a part of daily life in Sakuraicho.



..... *Inquiring Dames Want to Know*
What's a dish that's always on your holiday table?

Katie Cornutt

"Our Thanksgiving table would not be complete without my family's grape salad. I start receiving reminder texts all of October to not forget! It is the perfect blend of buttery, toasted pecans smothered in brown sugar and the white fluff around the grapes. You better classify it as a side on your plate or it might be gone if you are waiting for the desserts!"



Emily Nabors Hall

The holidays wouldn't be complete without sausage balls. The ideal recipe was my grandmother Margie's. She just used the same three ingredients most people use, but her trick was to use the least amount of Bisquick possible, and she never measured with anything other than her heart.



"They were these little greasy rounds of goodness that just barely held together. They were always made with sharp Cheddar and breakfast sausage, which she made from scratch most of her life from pigs my dad and grandfather raised. My sausage balls will never compare, but that doesn't stop me from trying every year."

Heather Hay

"My mother's asparagus casserole was something she had to make every year at Thanksgiving, or she would see some disappointed faces. She made it with layers of asparagus, roasted red peppers, sautéed mushrooms, béchamel sauce with more than a hint of nutmeg, and sharp Cheddar cheese. The topping was cheese and chopped toasted pecans."



Carolyn Williams

"Dad's pork tenderloin' is a staple on my New Year's Day menu. It uses a marinade recipe he adapted from a recipe in a grilling cookbook over 30 years ago (and whose page is now covered in drips and spills). The key ingredients are soy sauce, balsamic vinegar, rosemary and ginger, and I've never found another pork marinade that can come anywhere close!"



Scholarships and Grants Update

Since 2015, the Birmingham Chapter of Les Dames d'Escoffier International (LDEI) has proudly awarded nearly \$250,000 in scholarships and grants to support women pursuing excellence in food, beverage and hospitality.

Each year, the chapter offers scholarships to female students pursuing degrees or continuing education in culinary or pastry arts, agriculture/farming, beverage management, hospitality or nutrition or dietetics at accredited educational institutions.

Under this program, four (4) scholarships of \$5,000 each will be awarded for the upcoming academic year (August 2026-May 2027).

These scholarships honor the importance of diverse leadership in driving meaningful progress within the food, culinary and hospitality industry and in strengthening the health and wellbeing of our communities. Recipients are expected to demonstrate leadership, vision, and a commitment to using their talents to educate, advocate, and activate positive change.

Applicants must also show a clear intention to support the health and well-being of Alabama communities through their studies and future careers.

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Application Details 2025
Scholarship Award Applicant
Eligibility

- Female applicants pursuing a degree from an accredited 2- or 4-year educational institution in culinary or pastry arts education, agriculture/farming, beverage management, hospitality, nutrition and/or dietetics.
 - Applicants must be enrolled in classes for the upcoming academic year (August 2026 – May 2027); graduating seniors who will not be continuing their studies are not eligible.
 - Applicants must demonstrate their intention to serve and support the health and welfare of communities in Alabama. They should exhibit leadership skills, a desire to influence systems and communities for broader impact, and have a record of positive involvement in improving the wellbeing of others.
- Has a completed application form below including:
- Applicants must have a GPA of at least 3.0 on a 4.0 scale or the equivalent thereof.
 - A completed essay.
 - 2 letters of recommendation.
 - Submit a video (no longer than 90 seconds) introducing yourself and your goals in a unique and personal way.
 - Include a headshot.

Individual Educational Scholarships:

- Each scholarship is a minimum of \$4,000, and the recipient(s) must submit a complete application by the deadline. Money is to be used only for tuition.
- The scholarship money will go directly to the school or institution in which the recipients are enrolled

and can be used only for tuition (not living expenses).

- Any change in the enrollment status during the scholarship year is to be communicated to LDEI by the recipient within seven (7) days of the change. Applicant monies are to be refunded by the institution in the event of withdrawal or a change in enrollment status.
- Should the awardee's debt with the institution be paid in full by the time funds reach the institution, all funds shall be returned to LDEI.
- Agree to collaborate with LDEI by allowing the use of your likeness and testimonials, and sharing your goals, activities, and future plans with the organization as requested.
- If awarded, you will be invited to attend the Scholarship and Awards Ceremony on Sunday, April 26, in Birmingham, AL

Grants Update

The mission of LDEI Birmingham is to mentor and support women working in the food, culinary and hospitality industry. Our chapter assists female-owned businesses in the industry with cash awards up to \$5,000 to help them expand and enhance their business.

Application Details 2025
Entrepreneur Award Applicant
Eligibility

- Female business owner in the food, agriculture, culinary, or hospitality industry.
- Has a completed application including:
- A completed application.
- A completed essay introducing your business, your goals, and explain how your work supports Alabama's food, agriculture, culinary, or hospitality community.

- 2 letters of recommendation.
- A brief business plan outlining your mission, goals, financial needs, project budget, and most recent profit and loss statement to show how the grant will support your organization's growth.
- Submit a video (no longer than 90 seconds) introducing yourself and your goals in a unique and personal way.
- Include a headshot.

Individual Entrepreneur Grants

- Each grant is awarded up to \$5,000, and the recipient(s) must submit a complete application by the deadline.
- Only complete applications with all required information and forms will be considered for this award.
- Commit to community engagement. Agree to participate in LDEI chapter events and activities that strengthen our shared mission.
- Provide progress updates. Submit written reports at six and twelve months showing how the award funds were used to enhance your business.
- Agree to collaborate with LDEI by allowing the use of your likeness and testimonials, and sharing your goals, activities, and future plans with the organization as requested.
- If awarded, you will be invited to attend the Scholarship and Awards Ceremony on Sunday, April 26, in Birmingham, AL

Visit <https://www.ldeibirmingham.org/scholarships-grants> to find the Entrepreneur Award Application.

by Jan Walsh

Rachel West
recently joined Hoffman Media as the editorial director of 83 Press, the book publishing division. She oversees the editorial and creative teams producing books across a variety of genres, including culinary and lifestyle.



Tena Payne
The James Beard House has discovered Tena Payne's pottery. Requested by a visiting chef, her pottery will remain in the Beard House for future chefs to choose and use. Earthborn will continue to provide specialty plating for this prestigious venue, continuing to build on a mutually beneficial relationship.



Brianna Tamburello
The Vecchia Gelato & Cafe is now open a few doors down from Vecchia Pizzeria & Mercato in the Preserve. The new cafe, owned by Benard "Bernie" and Brianna Tamburello, replaces Moss Rock Tacos & Tequila, which the couple closed in late summer to make way for this passion project.



Michelin Guide News!

Pardis Stitt of Bottega received the Michelin Outstanding Service Award, one of four special awards bestowed this year.



Michelin's Bib Gourmand awards (given to restaurants that deliver great food with terrific value):

- **Emily McDaniel:** Bayonet
- **Kristen Farmer Hall:** La Fête
- **Geri-Martha O'Hara:** Pizza Grace
- **Idie Hastings:** OvenBird



Michelin Guide Recommendations

- **Pardis Stitt:** Bottega and Chez Fonfon
- **Idie Hastings:** Hot and Hot Fish Club

Idie Hastings
OvenBird celebrates its 10th anniversary as Hot and Hot Fish Club celebrates its 30th anniversary.



Colleen Duffey
Andiamo Lodge was featured in *Flower* magazine.



Leigh Sloss-Corra:
In honor of its 25th anniversary, The Market at Pepper Place was featured this fall in *Garden & Gun*, *Afar* and *BMetro* magazines.



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Birmingham Chapter
P.O. Box 43542
Birmingham, Alabama 35243

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Newsletter committee members:
Donna Cornelius (co-chair),
Rachel West (co-chair),
Jessica Bennett, Rita Bernhardt,
Rebecca Denson, Leslie Register,
Leigh Sloss-Corra, Susan Swagler,
and Jan Walsh.