



Les Dames d'Escoffier  
INTERNATIONAL



Founded in 2013

[Ideibirmingham.org](http://Ideibirmingham.org)

Summer 2026

## President's Note

Birmingham Dames have much to celebrate! Our chapter won the first ever Showstopper Award at the LDEI Annual Conference in Las Vegas, Nevada, April 14-16. This award went to the chapter with a unique fundraiser which engaged our members, supported the community, and sparked creativity. Our chapter's Champagne & Fried Chicken and Sweet Treats fundraisers were recognized as award-winning by International. Congratulations on this impressive award!

You can read more about the conference in this issue's wonderful article put together by Susan Swagler and other Birmingham Dames who attended. While there were many highlights throughout the conference, Elizabeth Blau's keynote address really hit home with me, especially when she talked about the power of connection.

I see the power of connection in all the work Dames do in Birmingham. We show up for each other to volunteer our time, talents and treasure. This power of connection was recently reflected at our Scholarship and Grants reception. Thank you to Dame Billie Jo Waara and her committee for selecting deserving recipi-

*continued on page 14, see Letter*

# We Hit the Jackpot!

*And we won an award, too!*



*by Susan Swagler, Sonthe Burge, Leigh Sloss-Corra, Rachel Ishee and Audra Seachris*

Birmingham Dames presented, participated and showed up in big ways at the 2026 LDEI Annual Conference at the Cosmopolitan Hotel in Las Vegas on April 14-16. We were one of the 36 out of 40 worldwide chapters in attendance.

The Birmingham chapter won LDEI's very first Showstopper Award for transformative and successful fundraising events, too! We were up for the Philanthropic Award as well, but Des Moines won that one. Kansas City won the Cultivating Impactful Change Award, and St. Louis won the Power of Connection Award for bringing the

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# Meet Our 2026 Scholarship and Grant Recipients

*Our chapter awarded \$50,000 this year to support women across Alabama pursuing their education and building their businesses.*

## Grant Recipients

**Alicia's Coffee:  
Na'imah Alicia  
Elmore,  
\$5,000**



Alicia's Coffee, located inside the historic A.G. Gaston Motel, is built on a simple but powerful belief: Coffee is connection. This space serves not only as a café, but as a hub for community, healing, and hospitality in Birmingham. This \$5,000 award will support staff training, essential equipment maintenance, and expanded community programming, including outreach to unhoused neighbors and mental health initiatives.

These investments will strengthen daily operations while allowing Alicia's Coffee to deepen its role as a welcoming, community-centered space rooted in care and connection.



**NOIR Café:  
Tierra Robinson-Jeter  
and Tiffany Strayhorne,  
\$5,000**

NOIR Café is an exciting new concept bringing elevated food, beverage, and hospitality into the Hoover Public Library. Founded by two accomplished culinary entrepreneurs, NOIR blends creativity, culture, and community into a space that will serve thousands of visitors each year. With this \$5,000 award, NOIR will support startup equipment, inventory, and early operations, helping launch the café successfully in May 2026.

Beyond opening its doors, NOIR is committed to workforce development through youth workshops and a future internship program, helping shape the next generation of hospitality professionals in Alabama.



**Pasteles La  
MoreliAna:  
Joana Maldonado  
Araujo,  
\$3,000**



Pasteles La MoreliAna is Birmingham's first Mexican mobile bakery, bringing authentic tres leches cakes and traditional pan dulce to the community through family recipes passed down for generations. Through her food truck, Joana Maldonado Araujo has not only introduced new flavors to the local food scene, but also created meaningful connections by celebrating culture and supporting local schools and community events.

This grant will help Pasteles La MoreliAna continue growing toward a permanent brick-and-mortar location while strengthening day-to-day operations. It will support participation in more festivals and events, help stabilize the business after recent challenges, and allow Joana to expand her reach—sharing her culture, supporting her community, and bringing more people together through food. The bakery recently announced plans to open a new location at the Pizitz Food Hall in June.

**Nothing But  
Love Homestead:  
Vanessa Sanders,  
\$3,000**



Nothing But Love Homestead is a Birmingham-based urban farm rooted in wellness, sustainability, and community care. Founded by Vanessa Sanders, this micro-farm produces fresh food, holistic products, and hands-on learning experiences that empower families and individuals to reconnect with the land.

This award will help expand growing infrastructure, improve packaging for retail readiness, and support educational workshops for youth and adults. With these resources, Nothing but Love Homestead will increase access to healthy food, deepen community education, and continue creating spaces that nourish both people and the community.



**Trapezi Foods,  
LLC:  
Alexis Pappas,  
\$3,000**



Trapezi Foods is a Birmingham-based specialty brand redefining the salad dressing category with premium, all-natural ingredients rooted in Greek tradition. What started as a catering favorite has quickly grown into a

retail product now found in stores across Alabama and beyond.

With this award, Trapezi Foods will scale production by transitioning to a co-packer, allowing the business to meet growing demand, expand its retail footprint, and strengthen partnerships with local farms and food producers. This investment will help bring more Alabama-made products to market while supporting job creation and keeping food dollars in the local economy.



*Above: The 2026 class of grant recipients  
Far left: Dames Kathy G. Mezrano and Barbara Kenyon  
At left: Grant recipient Vanessa Sanders of Nothing But Love Homestead, a Birmingham-based urban farm, with her family at the reception.*

## Scholarship Recipients

### Caroline Wilkins, Auburn University



Caroline Wilkins is a Hospitality Management student at Auburn University and a standout leader dedicated to shaping the future of Alabama's hospitality industry. As the founding president of Auburn's Hotel and Restaurant Management Club, she has created opportunities for students through industry connections, events, and career development initiatives. Her service extends throughout the community, including work with the East Alabama Food Bank and Campus Kitchen.

Caroline plans to lead in high-end hospitality while continuing to prioritize community impact. This scholarship will allow her to remain fully engaged in both her academic and service commitments as she continues building opportunities for others.

### Bronwyn Sanders, UAB



Bronwyn Sanders is a Nutrition Sciences student at UAB with a passion for using food as a tool for healing and prevention. Inspired by her personal experience, she is pursuing a career as a clinical dietitian focused on supporting cancer patients through nutrition. Bronwyn actively serves her community through volunteering at food shelters, church outreach, and leading initiatives such as canned food drives.

This scholarship will support her pursuit of an accelerated master's degree, helping her take the next step toward becoming a Registered Dietitian and expanding her impact across Alabama's healthcare and food communities.

### Josii Chesser, UAB



Josii Chesser is a Nutrition Sciences student at UAB with a passion for combining food, healthcare, and community impact. Through her work as a Student Shift Supervisor in UAB's Metabolic Kitchen and as a Resident Assistant, she is already supporting others by creating environments centered on care, connection, and well-being.

Josii plans to become a Registered Dietitian Nutritionist and improve access to nourishing, practical nutrition across Alabama. This scholarship will allow her to reduce financial pressure from working multiple jobs and focus more fully on her education and hands-on experience as she prepares to make a lasting impact in the field.

### Jenna Williams, UAB



Jenna Williams is a marketing student at UAB who is using her career to strengthen Alabama's food and hospitality industry. With experience managing large-scale catering and events for Rodney Scott's BBQ and supporting food brands through Cravings Creative, she has already helped bring people together through meaningful food experiences. Jenna is passionate about elevating local businesses through storytelling, marketing, and community engagement.

This scholarship will relieve financial strain as she independently funds her education, allowing her to focus more deeply on her academic and professional growth while continuing to support and amplify Alabama's culinary community.

## Scholarship Recipients

### Andi Emerson Sharp, Samford University



Andi Emerson Sharp is a Nutrition and Dietetics student at Samford University with a clear mission to improve nutrition and food access across underserved communities in the South. Through her work with organizations like Jones Valley Teaching Farm, Grace Klein, and Pepper Place Market, she is already educating and serving others through food and nutrition.

Andi plans to become a Registered Dietitian and pursue additional certifications to expand her reach and impact. This scholarship will reduce her financial burden, allowing her to dedicate more time to service, leadership development, and advancing her goal of changing the nutrition culture of the South.

### Lauren Washington, Auburn University



Lauren Washington is a Hospitality Management student at Auburn University with a focus in culinary science and a strong foundation in both culinary nutrition and pastry arts. Through her hands-on experience working in professional kitchens and country clubs, she has already contributed to Alabama's hospitality industry by delivering high-quality service in fast-paced, team-driven environments.

Lauren's long-term goal is to open her own restaurant concepts and eventually expand into hotel ownership, creating welcoming spaces that bring people together through food and experience. This scholarship will ease financial pressures and allow her to focus on continuing to build her skills, gain industry experience, and prepare to become a future leader in Alabama's hospitality community.



Our 2026 class of LDEI Birmingham scholarship recipients.



# Les Dames Market Takeover Gets Ready for 10th Anniversary

by Leigh Sloss-Corra

It's been 10 years since our chapter and the Pepper Place Farmers' Market began teaming up to celebrate Women in Food Month in September—a.k.a. Les Dames Market Takeover.

Ten years—wow! This partnership has helped us engage and spotlight our members, build LDEI brand awareness in the community, and sell more tickets to Champagne & Fried Chicken—triple win!

The annual event has a tried and true format, and we'll be following that again this year, so read on and decide how you'd like to help: by hosting/helping with the chef demo, donating items to sell at the Dames tent on Saturdays, working at the tent each week, and/or helping with the Southbound VIP event inside Hot & Hot Fish Club on Sept. 19. Mark your calendars and join the fun as often as you can. You'll be glad you did!

For those who are new or haven't participated, the Dames Market Takeover focuses on different cuisines each week. In keeping with the week's theme, Dames host a bake sale at the market and lead the market's cooking demo at 9 a.m.

Many market vendors are Dames, and a few are entrepreneur grant winners, so our presence and our message can reach visitors in multiple ways and places. Besides the market's high attendance, its social media reach is broad too, with over 120K followers, so it offers a big megaphone for our chapter.



September is Women in Food month at the Market at Pepper Place where Les Dames take over the market. This year is this event's 10th anniversary.

At a tent provided by the market each week, Dame volunteers sell donated goods which promote Dames' businesses. They also talk about LDEI and promote and sell tickets for Champagne & Fried Chicken. Proceeds from the sales help fund our chapter outreach programs, and selling tickets to our biggest fundraiser is key to the event's success. Here's this year's lineup:

**Sept. 5: Picnics, BBQs and Tailgates**

Labor Day weekend is the perfect time to show off fun foods like snacks, dips, chicken salad and pimento cheese, sliders, pickles, cookies and bars. What can you

contribute? You only need to bring/donate 10 of anything, packaged, labeled and ready to sell for \$5, \$10 or \$20 each, depending on what you make.

**Sept. 12: Mediterranean Food Week**

Think Italian, Greek, South of France, Spanish, Turkish and Middle Eastern. We love 'em all!

**Sept. 19: Les Dames Takeover teams up with Southbound Food Fest for ROOTED: Women in Food—Legacy in Motion**

This jam-packed morning will feature special guests, multiple chef demos and panel discussions on the 29th Street Stage. Legacy in Motion will explore the lineage

of Southern cooking, featuring four contemporary women chefs who'll honor the women who inspired them—mothers, grandmothers, aunts, culinary icons. This will be a very visible day for our chapter, so show up and think big. If you're donating goods for sale at our tent, you might make a favorite recipe from your grandmother or great-aunt, or perhaps something you love from Julia Child or Edna Lewis.

There also will be book signings, a VIP meet and greet inside Hot & Hot, and opportunities to help host Dames visiting from out of town. Fun!

**Sept. 26: Sweet Treats Week**

This is the busiest Saturday of the month at the LDEI Market tent. Everyone loves our baked goods (it's also a teaser for our Sweet Treats sale next February), so we'll need lots of bakers and lots of volunteers. Remember 10 portions of whatever you make is plenty.

Questions? Ready to sign up to bake or to work at the tent or at the VIP event? Email Leigh Sloss-Corra at leigh@pepperplacemarket.com.

For event details and to spread the word, check pepperplacemarket.com, the market newsletter, and social media posts @pepperplacefarmersmarket and @ldeibirmingham. As a reminder, the market is free and open to all 7 a.m.-noon every Saturday, rain or shine.

Happy 10th anniversary to Les Dames Market Takeover. We'll see you there!

## Events Calendar

Mon., June 22 Hands-On Dumpling Making Class 2400 1 st Ave. N, Suite 6 at 6 p.m.

\*Chef and Registered Dietitian Dixya Bhattarai will teach us to make two different types of Asian-style dumplings with chili oil. Each attendee gets a 4-ounce jar of Chef Dixya's famous chili oil. The cost is \$30, and the class is open to members and guests.

Mon., July 27 Tito's Cocktail Infusion Session, 5:30 p.m. The Upstairs at Sloan's Whiskey Bar 2308 2nd Ave. N

\*Watch for more details about this fun class, which will be open to members and guests

Tues., July 28 LDEI Board meeting Sloss Real Estate conference room 5:30 to 7 p.m.

Mon., Aug. 17 Chapter-wide mandatory Business Meeting Location TBD 5:30 to 7 p.m.

Mon., Aug. 17 Member Appreciation Reception to celebrate our Showstopper Award Location TBD 7 p.m., following annual meeting

Sun., Oct. 4 Champagne & Fried Chicken fundraiser Pepper Place

Nov. 3-9 10th Anniversary of Flavors of Mexico: Guadalajara and Tequila Registration info will be emailed soon

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most members to conference. The Birmingham delegation included first-time attendees Aimee Castro, Chae Richards and Audra Seachris as well as conference veterans Dulce Rivera, Rachel West, Christina Saab and Stacey Ballis. Lindsey Noto, Rachel Ishee, Susan Swagler and Sonthe Burge served as delegates, and Leigh Sloss-Corra was there on the “big board” as International’s secretary.

Audra Seachris’ first LDEI conference made quite an impact on her.

“The Power of Connection conference in Las Vegas was exactly what the title says,” Audra said.

“It was great to connect with women from other chapters across the country and gain insight on how they operate. However, the most powerful connections that I made were within our own Birmingham chapter. The conference allowed us to have a space to build relationships with each other in a new way. I cannot wait to attend for years to come and build many new connections along the way.”

#### Notes from Sessions

The Birmingham attendees split up to attend various sessions. Here are highlights of each:

ASK THE EXPERT with LDEI attorney Jackie Henson always offers a wealth of information. She urged chapters to govern with these tests in mind:

1. Primary Purpose Test. Remember your purpose: educational and charitable. If what you are doing/posting isn’t educational or charity-related, then don’t do it!
2. Inurement Test. This is a non-ne-



*Birmingham Dames gathered at the opening cocktail reception to kick off the conference with fellow Dames.*

gotiable standard used by the IRS to ensure that a 501(c)(3) nonprofit’s resources are dedicated to its public mission rather than enriching individuals with inside influence. The IRS has zero tolerance. Any amount of inurement to an insider is grounds for revocation of tax-exempt status. Chapters are encouraged to have a strong conflict-of-interest policy to safeguard against this.

3. Advertisement Test. Be careful with social media and activities when it comes to members’ businesses. If something looks like advertising, don’t post or do it. Be especially careful when dealing with officers’ and board members’ businesses! Members cannot benefit financially in any way from the chapter.

Other key takeaways from the attorney include:

- Make sure you have checks and

balances in place, especially when it comes to finances. Transparency is key. No one person should be in charge of the chapter funds.

- Update your bylaws regularly—every couple of years.
- Each chapter needs an attorney and an accountant.
- Use AI to help, not create. It’s invaluable with something like creating minutes, but you should not start and end with it.
- Each chapter needs to write down a succession plan and follow it. Aim to incorporate new talent.
- Beware of conflicts of interest, especially involving the board. Conflicts of interest are not always financial but can involve both state and federal law. Missteps can destroy the reputation of a chapter.
- Follow procedure and policy when awarding grants and scholarships; the process should be

open and fair with absolutely no favoritism.

- Finally, run your chapter like a business. It is a nonprofit business!

HIGH STAKES, HIGH IMPACT: Winning with Strategic Fundraising Partnerships featured fundraising expert Alex Argiris of Powered by Professionals. Some key points:

- Look for long-term partnerships, not just year-to-year asks.
- Customize the partnerships, and create customized asks.
- Make sure you are aligned with your partners.
- When seeking partners, look at who serves your audience, who supports similar causes, what corporations are invested in your region, and who has supported before.
- Make sure your website is up to date and your chapter is active on social media; sponsors will look at these things.
- Invite sponsors to your event such as your grant and scholarship awards.
- Spotlight someone in your community during your event; they will bring new people to you.
- Create a great pitch that includes mission alignment, benefits to the sponsors, a specific offering, measurable outcomes (success for them and you).
- Be specific when asking: “Your gift will support three women ...”
- Create a 2025 Impact Summary.
- Create a fundraising toolkit available to all members with a one-page impact report, social media graphics all can use, and a sponsorship deck (that can be easily personalized).
- The Donor Cultivation Cycle is: Identification, Qualification, Cultivation, Solicitation and Stewardship.



*Susan and Lindsey were presenters at the Conference and our chapter won LDEI’s first-ever Showstopper Award for our successful—and inspiring—fundraisers.*

- Keep up engagement with post-event thank-you notes and periodic messaging to keep the conversation going. Use social media posts to show a donor’s impact, keep them updated about what the chapter is doing, share awards and successes with them, invite feedback (what can we do for you?).

SUCCESSION Roundtable hosted by Immediate Past President Stephanie Jaeger

In this session, around 20 chapter presidents and vice presidents gathered to talk about how to train members and board members for board leadership positions at the

chapter and international levels. Dames talked about implementing a “training ladder.” A committee chair trains an engaged committee member to ultimately take over the chair’s place. The committee chair then transitions to the chapter board and works her way through various board roles to become president and then possibly join the international board. Others said that sounds good, but you’re talking about a lifetime of service to LDEI when family, work and personal development can, and usually do, get in the way. Fair point.

A question was posed: How to keep past presidents engaged? The consensus was to channel their knowledge but not let them be on the board. The board needs constant refreshing of leadership and vision. Many said they created a Brain Trust Council or Executive Advisory Committee made up of past presidents, including the immediate past president (who has a vote on the board). This council or committee of past presidents may lead strategic projects, handle issues for the board at the board’s request, etc.

Some best practices: Each board member and committee should create/maintain/update a Standard Operating Procedures Manual for each role that is updated regularly to ensure board transitions are smooth. Boards should meet monthly, a mixture of in-person and Zoom. It’s advised that meetings never last more than 90 minutes. Board members should send out a monthly report no later than three days before each meeting, and board members must read these in advance of the monthly



*Of course, we had plenty of time together. We shared dinners, drinks, a little bit of downtime and one memorable night at a speakeasy called The Barbershop.*

meeting so that actual meeting time is not wasted on reporting but rather is dedicated to discussion and problem solving.

Board training should be done every year so new and existing board members are clear about their responsibilities and expectations. Members who don’t fulfil their responsibilities should be made aware they are “failing” and be given the opportunity to get back on track. If they don’t improve, they may need to take on a co-chair or assistant. In special cases, the board member may need to resign or be forcefully removed.

AI: HOW TO USE IT AND ENJOY USING IT! Presented by Dame Pat Bennett, Chief AI Strategist, Benmar Consulting

Pat talked about how to leverage AI tools to enhance efficiency, spark creativity, and elevate customer experiences. Key takeaways:

AI can act like an invisible sous chef by helping with things like menu development.

Staying visible and adaptable is key to staying relevant. We have to embrace AI to some extent.

Industry challenges AI can help solve:

- Tight margins
- Labor shortages
- Climate volatility
- Tech overload

Understand the difference: Generative AI creates; predictive AI forecasts.  
Key takeaway: AI is a tool to enhance, not replace people or jobs.

STRATEGIC PLANNING: THE WINNING HAND, presented by Dame Kersten Rettig, Principal, Prêt Marketing

Having a strategic plan is essential for chapters to operate successfully. By establishing clear objectives and actionable steps, chapters can achieve their goals effectively and ensure long-term sustainability. Dame Kersten Rettig offered practical tools and fresh ideas.

The purpose of planning: Set direction, establish goals, reduce uncertainty, show leadership, minimize waste, improve decision-making.

How to create a strategic plan: Conduct situational analysis, set strategic objectives, formulate strategies and tactics, implement the plan.

First remind the group of LDEI’s mission and vision. The mission: to inspire, advance and support women in food, beverage and hospitality to achieve excellence in leadership and philanthropy.

We do this by sharing knowledge, supporting members, providing leadership educational and philanthropic opportunities.

Next, recruit a group of Dames from the board and membership at large. Kersten suggested 12 members or fewer. Assign a facilitator. Respect the history of the chapter and be open to new ideas. Commit



*In what proved to be a highlight of the evening, Audra Seachris came on stage to help Leigh Sloss-Corra, who had forgotten her glasses, read out the names of the raffle winners. According to Leigh, “She was a lifesaver!”*

to seeing the strategic plan through. Establish strategic priorities. The priorities come from the group. Examples of priorities are to increase chapter participation with programs, improve communication, find more sponsors, increase membership, have fun, assign mentors, give more grants and scholarships, etc.

Kersten explained the SWOT analysis to look at Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. Overall, this was a great session with practical information to help chapters get started with strategic planning. Kersten’s plan is workable for chapters to do as a one-day retreat.

**Officially in the Program** Additionally, two of the Birmingham Dames were presenters this year.

**HITTING THE JACKPOT:** Building a Winning Fundraising Strategy

Dame Susan Swagler was part of this panel discussion on fundraising. She detailed both Champagne & Fried Chicken and Sweet Treats, sharing tips and tricks and best practices with other chapters. She said she’s grateful for the Comms Committee for producing an excellent slideshow and making her practice! It’s worth noting that several chapters have already repurposed our C&FC to suit their own organizations and regions. Members of the panel shared their own chapters’ successful fundraisers and tips including a Wine & Pie pickup during the holidays, a Bastille Day Picnic, early-bird pricing to increase buzz,

incentivizing participation with rewards, a female-only “You Grill, Girl” fundraiser in Austin (where volunteers wear Dame on Duty t-shirts), wine pulls and pie auctions (with really nice pie plates), Happy Hour Partnerships, seasonal pop-ups like pie bars, merchandise sales at events (raffles are not allowed in Alabama), themed events like prom-style fundraisers, silent auctions, exclusive events and experiences, and more.

Susan also led a FUNDRAISING roundtable discussion, addressing such common challenges as member participation and burnout. She shared some of what works for Birmingham—marketing tactics, assigning tasks according to skill-sets, and efficient ticketing platforms—to encourage others to raise more dollars with less effort.

Participants shared some of what works for them, too: British Columbia has a “Dine Around” event, where, in exchange for promotion, Dame-owned or Dame-supporting restaurants donate a small percentage of profits one or two nights a week to the local LDEI chapter. Another chapter brings in retired chefs to re-create their beloved, old menus in Dame-owned restaurants. Others hold Culinary Garage Sales. One chapter teams up with a local cooking school to host its fundraiser, allowing the students to work with professionals and eliminating the expense of renting a venue.



*We were thrilled to connect—and reconnect—with sister Dames from other chapters around the world*



## WHY AUSSIE LAMB? Land, Care and Flavor

In this session, Dame Lindsey Noto King headed a discussion about Australian lamb. Lindsey is a “Lambassador” for Meat & Livestock Australia, and she even secured a large sponsorship for the conference and made sure everyone could enjoy tender, delicious Australian lamb during lunch.

Lindsey shared the story of her two-week trip last fall as a guest chef with 20 others from around the world to learn about lamb and its cultivation in Australia. It was an intense trip during which she made amazing contacts, grew professionally and personally, and ultimately was transformed into an enthusiastic advocate for Australian lamb, Australian regenerative farming practices, and the culture of respect, caring, and compassion that seems to exist everywhere there.

The MLA reps shared data and information about what makes their lamb different. In Australia, they focus on raising healthy, happy lambs that are well cared for and processed for maximum quality, safety and efficiency. They see the U.S. as their next big market and they hope, with the help of “Lambassadors” like Lindsey, that more Americans will discover Australian lamb, the large diversity of cuts available, and their affordability.

Lindsey pointed out that for a chef, lamb is an impressive and “sexy” menu option that is increasingly attractive because it is becoming cheaper than beef. The MLA were thrilled to share their story with LDEI members and hope to become more involved sponsors of LDEI in the future. Bravo to Lindsey whose experience

made it all happen!

## More Reasons to Gather

Other conference highlights included a keynote speech from Elizabeth Blau, a highly respected leader in the hospitality industry and founder and CEO of the global restaurant development firm Blau & Associates.

She told the fascinating story about how Las Vegas has grown into a premier culinary destination in just the past few decades and how the industry is changing for women. She invited us to “Think boldly, take risks, and build something that hasn’t been built before.” “Excellence is not a moment,” she said. “It is a culture and a standard that must be passed on.”

And she reminded us that, “The art of making a stranger feel like they belong is what many of us are trying to achieve every single day.”

Leaning into the conference theme of “Connection,” Elizabeth shared insights and experiences to empower women in the hospitality industry, including:

- Connection is about showing up for each other. It is not about the accolades.
- Excellence is a set of values that is cultured, nurtured and passed on. She talked about her mentor, the late Elaine Wynn. Elaine told Elizabeth, “How you do anything is how you do everything.”
- The most powerful connection women can make is with other women.
- Connection, vision, determination and support are necessary for ambitious work and success.
- Women are establishing a new language for what hospitality means. Don’t be afraid to champion a new vision.

• Ceilings are not market facts; ceilings are a failure of imagination and innovation.

• The fact is 50% of CIA graduates are women, but fewer than 7% become executive chefs or restaurant owners. We need to change that through education and career pathway programs.

• Organizations like LDEI matter now more than ever before. LDEI is a testimony to what collaborations and mentorship can bring. Collaboration is the foundation on which everything extraordinary is built. This is what connection is.

## Woman of Purpose Award

Haley Maston-Mathes was this year’s Woman of Purpose, and she was honored on Thursday night.

As part of the program honoring Haley, a well-known traditional hula dancer performed with dreamy and touching grace—extraordinary!

Her nonprofit, Hawaii Culinary Education Foundation, has provided fully funded, hands-on culinary experiences for more than 77,000 students and culinary professionals in the past two decades.

“Dreams can be grown like crops through consistency, hard work, and dedication,” she said.

The International Conference, as always, was an opportunity to learn and to bond. We supported each other, dined together at Border Grill in the Mandalay Bay Hotel one night, teamed up to promote raffle ticket sales and announce the winners, reconnected with friends from other chapters, and spent one memorable evening together in the Barbershop speakeasy.

Work hard. Play hard. We know exactly how to do both.

ents for scholarships and grants. How great is it that in 2026 our chapter awarded the most ever in scholarships and grants: \$51,000! Pretty amazing!

Have a safe and fun summer. Be sure and read this entire newsletter to stay informed about our chapter events and activities. Save August 17 for our chapter-wide business meeting and Showstopper Award celebration.

Lots of love and gratitude,  
Sonthel  
XOX

..... *Inquiring Dames Want to Know* .....

## What's the most unusual dish you've ever eaten?

### Rebecca Gann

"While I pride myself on being an adventurous eater and "trying everything once," I think the weirdest food I've eaten (so far!) is



pigeon. On the menu at one of London's top restaurants, Brat, we went for it and were served a fried bird on a platter—claws intact! Despite being perceived as a "dirty bird," it was quite delicious, and apparently one of their menu staples. We later learned that pigeon is very common in England, seeing it on menus throughout the rest of the trip.

### Jessica Bennett

The rivers of Shikoku, Japan, boast some unique culinary biodiversity, including sword clams, a freshwater mollusk similar to a snail. The restaurants of Kochi prepare these in the shell and serve them like escargot—but with one caveat: The snail has an inedible horn-like protrusion that gives it its name. I loved eating a whole bowl of them and ending up with a pile of shells and swords!



### Lindsey Noto

The most unusual thing I've ever eaten was horse ragu. I was in Puglia, Italy, at a little cafe having dinner, and the waiter recommended the horse ragu with orecchiette. Surprisingly delicious and tasted somewhat like veal!



### Stefanie Maloney

One of the most unusual foods I've ever experienced was natto while visiting a chef friend in Kyoto. This traditional Japanese dish is made from fermented soybeans and has a distinctive sticky, stringy texture that becomes more pronounced when you stir it with your chopsticks (think cheese pull). Typically served as a breakfast dish with hot rice, soy sauce, green onion, and raw egg, it has a deeply savory, earthy, umami flavor and a slightly pungent smell that is undeniably funky. Surprisingly, I loved eating it on its own and was fascinated by both the flavor and texture.



# A Touching Tribute: Temple Emanu-El Honors Dame Sherron Goldstein

by Leigh Sloss-Corra

Dame Sherron Goldstein recently received a very special honor for her decades of dedication to culinary education, cooking for her community and her service.

On May 16, the congregation of Temple Emanu-El in downtown Birmingham held a celebration for Sherron and unveiled its newly renovated kitchen, officially named the Sherron Goldstein Kitchen.

As part of the temple's Love Pray Eat series, the celebration began at 10 a.m. with a traditional service in the packed chapel where Sherron's many gifts were recognized. A fabulous lunch for attendees in the meeting hall followed the service. Some 200 guests enjoyed a delicious meal, prepared in the new kitchen, with recipes found in "From Generation to Generation," a cookbook Sherron co-authored in 2003. Many of her favorite and most popular dishes are featured in the book. As a bonus, each guest received a free cookbook to take home.

Sherron basked in the love and attention, expressed by old and young, but stayed busy in and out of the kitchen, chatting with guests and offering final touches on the dishes served. Dames Rosalyn Bloomston and Leigh Sloss-Corra attended the festivities and joined Sherron and her husband at their table. Many stories were shared, with hugs all around.

A longtime member of LDEI's Birmingham chapter, Sherron is the author of "Fresh Fields, A Celebration of Good Food" and "Fresh Fields, Entertaining with



*The congregation of Temple Emanu-El named its newly renovated kitchen for Dame Sherron Goldstein for her decades of service.*

Southern Comfort."

She also founded a cooking school, Fresh Fields Cooking, to encourage home cooks to create good food for their family and friends.

A culinary author, caterer and

community leader at Temple Emanu-El, Sherron is widely known and loved for celebrating Southern cuisine and bringing Jewish and local communities together through food and hospitality.

# Food Fireworks

*Birmingham Dames share summery, patriotic recipes*

by Jan Walsh

July Fourth food traditions are deeply rooted in communal, outdoor cookout, or picnic-style meals. This tradition emphasizes easy-to-make, grilled and shared foods meant for large gatherings. From cocktail to dessert, the Dames featured below recommend some of their favorites.

## BBQ Chicken Dip from Betsy McAtee

*Scoop up this savory sensation with crispy corn tortilla chips or crusty French bread.*

**Ingredients:**  
1 pound Dreamland Chopped Chicken  
6 ounces Dreamland Dipping Sauce  
16 ounces reduced-fat cream cheese at room temperature  
2 cups shredded sharp Cheddar cheese

**Instructions:**  
1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Combine chicken, dipping sauce, and cream cheese in a large bowl, and mix until chunky. Pour mixture into nonstick baking dish. Bake for 15 minutes. Remove mixture from oven, and stir well.  
2. Top mixture with Cheddar cheese, and bake for an additional 10 minutes or until cheese is thoroughly melted. Remove from oven and let rest for 5 minutes. Serves 8.



## Colorful Couscous Salad from Susan Swagler

*This fresh, colorful, crunchy salad serves 8 to 10 as a side dish or 4 as a main dish. In the summer, you might want to substitute halved fresh cherry tomatoes and crumbled feta for the sun-dried tomatoes and gorgonzola.*

**Ingredients:**  
1 medium fennel bulb  
12 sun-dried tomato halves (or more!)  
1 pound asparagus, trimmed  
1¾ cups couscous  
½ teaspoon salt  
6 scallions, thinly sliced  
16 oil-cured black olives  
6 tablespoons fresh lemon juice  
3 tablespoons olive oil  
6 ounces gorgonzola cheese, cubed  
Freshly ground black pepper to taste

**Instructions:**  
1. Trim fennel bulb, and remove tough pieces. Sliver bulb and mince the dill-like fronds. Pour boiling water over the sun-dried tomatoes, and let stand for about 5 minutes to plump; drain, and sliver the tomatoes.  
2. Slice asparagus on the diagonal, and steam 3 to 4 minutes or until crisp-tender; drain and dry with paper towels.  
3. In the same pot, bring 1¾ cups water to boil. Stir in couscous and salt; cover and remove from heat. Let stand 5 minutes; stir with a fork to fluff grains.  
4. In a large serving bowl, toss together fennel, tomatoes, asparagus, couscous, scallions, olives, lemon juice and olive oil. Taste and adjust seasonings with salt and pepper. Gently fold in cheese. Serve at once.

## Organic Foot Long Chili Dogs from Jan Walsh

**Ingredients:**  
12 organic uncured footlong beef weenies  
12 Birmingham Breadworks hotdog buns or hoagie buns (special order)  
1 pound Barber Cheddar Sweet Red English Cheese grated (to sprinkle over top of chili dogs)

**Instructions:**  
1. Place weenies directly over the coals, perpendicular to the grate for proper grill marks and for ease of rolling and rotating them, to avoid burning.  
2. Once your hot dogs are nicely charred and covered with grill marks, move them to the cool side of the grill to finish heating. The weenies are fully heated at an internal temperature of 160°F, which is approximately 5 to 7 minutes depending on the size of your hot dogs. Plate hot dogs and cover in chili and cheese.

**Chili**  
2 pounds Joyce Farms ground chicken  
1½ cups chopped organic onion  
1 organic red pepper, chopped  
2 teaspoons organic garlic powder  
1 teaspoon organic onion powder  
1 (15-ounce) can organic Goya kidney beans, drained and rinsed with purified water  
1 (15-ounce) can organic Goya black beans, drained and rinsed with purified water  
1 (15-ounce) can organic tomato sauce  
2 tablespoons organic tomato paste  
2 tablespoons organic unsweetened cocoa powder  
2 teaspoons organic ground cumin

2 teaspoons organic smoked paprika  
2 teaspoons organic ground coriander  
1 teaspoon organic dried oregano  
1 teaspoon organic chili powder  
1 teaspoon organic pink Himalayan salt  
2 cups organic chicken bone broth

1. Cook the ground chicken over medium heat until browned and cooked through. Place in slow cooker.  
2. Add the remaining ingredients except chicken broth to the chicken; stir it all together. Stir in chicken broth.  
3. Cover and cook in slow cooker on low for 8 hours or on high for 4 hours. Refrigerate leftovers or freeze. Makes 12 to 24 footlong chili dogs, depending on how much chili you prefer on each dog.

## New Potato Salad from Kathy G. Mezrano

*Warm new potatoes are tossed with shallots and vinaigrette dressing, then cooled and finished with a touch of mayonnaise or sour cream. This is a very flavorful recipe and a different twist on traditional potato salad.*

**Ingredients:**  
2½ pounds new potatoes  
¾ cup diced celery  
½ cup green onions  
½ cup chopped fresh dill (or 1½ teaspoons dried dillweed)  
2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley  
2 tablespoons mayonnaise or sour cream (optional)

**Instructions:**  
1. In a large pot, cover potatoes with salted water. Cover and boil

gently until just tender. Drain and cool slightly.  
2. Slice warm potatoes, and place in large bowl. Toss with vinaigrette (recipe follows), then let stand for 30 minutes.  
3. Mix celery, green onions, herbs, and mayonnaise or sour cream, if using, into potatoes. Adjust seasonings to taste. Cover and refrigerate. Serve at room temperature. This can be prepared one day ahead. Serves 6.

**Vinaigrette Dressing**  
1½ tablespoons tarragon vinegar  
½ teaspoon Dijon mustard  
1 garlic clove, minced  
2 shallots (may substitute 4 green onions), minced  
4½ tablespoons olive oil  
½ teaspoon salt  
½ teaspoon pepper

1. In a small bowl, combine vinegar, mustard, garlic and shallots. Gradually whisk in oil, then add salt and pepper.

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### “West Indies” Salad from Christy Saab

You'll need a food ring, mixing bowls, and a refrigerated plate for this yummy dish.

#### Ingredients:

- 4 ounces fresh lump crabmeat, picked
- 2 teaspoons non-GMO oil
- 2 ounces shredded iceberg or other mildly flavored lettuce
- 2 ounces diced tomato, seeds removed
- 2 tablespoons Aioli (recipe follows)
- Pinch of salt
- 2 teaspoons freshly squeezed lemon juice
- Bermuda onion rings (recipe follows), for garnish
- 2 teaspoons finely chopped chives

#### Instructions:

1. Combine all ingredients in a non-reactive mixing bowl, and refrigerate overnight.
2. The following day, you will need two more empty bowls. In one bowl, combine crabmeat, lemon juice, 2 teaspoons oil, and 1 teaspoon chives. Mix to combine.
3. In the second bowl, combine finely shredded lettuce, 1 tablespoon aioli and pinch of salt.
4. Place a food ring on the center of the refrigerated plate. Place aioli-dressed lettuce in the bottom of the food ring followed by the diced tomato, seasoned crabmeat and Bermuda onion. Spoon-drag another tablespoon of aioli around the plate and garnish with remaining chives.



### Aioli

- 1 large egg yolk
- 1 tablespoon cold water
- 1 cup vegetable oil
- 1 teaspoon lemon juice
- 1 teaspoon salt

1. Combine egg yolk and cold water, whisking vigorously for 1 minute.
2. Slowly add oil while continuing to whisk, creating an emulsion. Stir in lemon juice and salt. Refrigerate until needed.

### Bermuda Onion Rings

- 1 small red onion, thinly sliced
- ½ cup red wine vinegar
- ¼ cup granulated sugar
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt

1. Toss together all ingredients in a bowl, and marinate for 2 to 4 hours until onions are softened.

### Charlotte's Watermelon Margarita from Heather Hay

#### Ingredients:

- 1 to 2 jalapeños (use your own judgment according to how much heat you like)
- 1½ shots agave
- 2 ounces white tequila
- 1½ ounces fresh watermelon juice, made by using a juicer
- ½ ounce freshly squeezed lime juice
- Rim choice of Tajín, sugar or salt
- 1 slice fresh watermelon, for garnish



#### Instructions:

1. Blend jalapeños and agave in a blender.
2. Fill a cocktail shaker with ice; add jalapeño mixture, tequila, fresh watermelon juice and fresh lime juice. Shake vigorously for about 15 to 20 seconds until ingredients are thoroughly blended, diluted and ice-cold. Serve in chilled glass rimmed with Tajín, sugar or salt.

### Cobbler for A Crowd from Emily Tuttle Shell

- 12 fresh Chilton County peaches, peeled and sliced
- 2 pounds fresh strawberries, leafy tops removed and sliced in half
- 18 ounces fresh blueberries
- 4 cups sugar, divided
- 2 tablespoons cornstarch
- 4 cups self-rising flour
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 3½ cups whole milk
- ¼ cup buttermilk
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- 1 tablespoon limoncello (optional)
- 1 pound butter (4 sticks)

#### Instructions:

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F.
2. Combine peaches and berries in a large bowl. Sprinkle ½ cup sugar and cornstarch over fruit; stir just until sugar dissolves. Set aside.
3. In a large bowl, whisk together flour, 3½ cups sugar and salt. Add milk, buttermilk, vanilla and limoncello, if desired. Set aside.
4. Place butter in a 12 x 20 full hotel pan; heat in the oven until melted. If using a full pound of butter instead of sticks, butter must be cut into 4 quarters so it melts evenly. Do not brown the butter.
5. Carefully remove pan from oven. Pour half of the batter over the hot butter in the pan. Gently place fruit evenly in the batter with a slotted spoon. Discard remaining juice from the fruit. Cover the fruit evenly with remaining batter.
5. Cover the pan with foil. Bake at 350°F for 30 minutes. Remove foil. Bake for 20 to 30 additional minutes or until golden brown. Serve warm with vanilla ice cream. Serves 18 to 24.

## Belize: Beyond the Blue

by Rachel Q. West

There's a lot more to Belize than its beaches, turquoise water and the famous Blue Hole.

We went to this small Central American country in search of the full spectrum of vacation highlights: adventure and relaxation, history and wildlife. Rather wonderfully, we found our seemingly unreasonable wish list wasn't all that unrealistic.

And while the Blue Hole was part of what inspired us to visit Belize, my family and I didn't make it there in the end. Instead, we divided our time between the beach and the rainforest.

Once we landed in Belize City, we picked up our rental car and headed south on the Coastal Highway towards Placencia peninsula for the first half of our trip.

We went there first because of the moon phases. For this trip at the end of March, we needed a new moon phase with the darkest possible skies and limited moonlight. Our hope was to see the bioluminescence in Anderson Lagoon near Hopkins in all its glowing magic—and we did. To get there, you travel by boat from the Sittee River through a narrow man-made cut-through in the giant mangroves into the lagoon. When the water is disturbed by oars or hands or a boat's motor, the millions of tiny plankton called dinoflagellates glow with a neon-blue light.

This boat tour operates only from January through May during the drier months and only during certain times of the month. We



*There are hundreds, if not thousands, of caves in Belize, many of which were sacred to the Mayans, who believe caves to be entrances to the underworld.*

were able to make it on the last day of that month's tour, just in time, before the waning moon made those tiny creatures invisible. It was enchanting, and while we didn't know this before we arrived, you are able to swim in the lagoon. None of us wore our swimsuits, but my youngest child jumped in in his shorts nonetheless and came out of the water sparkling from the dinoflagellates clinging to his skin.

Snorkeling is another popular activity to enjoy the coast and its beautiful turquoise blue water. We headed out to South Water Caye and, with our guides' help,

we saw all sorts of fish, coral, sting rays, sharks and, quite accidentally, a young Portuguese man o' war. We also got to see our guides dive down to hunt fish with spears underwater. They were searching for their dinner and were delighted to find a conch that would be made into ceviche, a hawkfish, and a lionfish, which is an invasive, venomous fish that they are encouraged to catch since they can quickly decimate natural ecosystems.

While English is one of the languages of Belize, our guides and most everyone else we encountered also spoke Spanish and Creole,

often using a mix of all three in conversation.

About halfway through our trip, we headed inland to the rainforests of western Belize. Our route took us on the beautiful Hummingbird Highway that traverses the country, and we made a handful of stops along the way.

One was St. Herman's Cave. Belize is home to one of the most significant caves systems in Central America. There are hundreds, possibly thousands, of caves, many of which were sacred sites for the Mayans, who believed caves to be entrances to the underworld called Xibalba. The Mayans performed sacred rituals in the caves, including human sacrifice, and not just at the entrance, but deep inside them.

The entrance to St. Herman's was a beautiful, easy walk through the jungle on a path from the parking area. You can walk into the cave by yourself for the first 200 meters, but you'll need a guide to take you beyond that. And each person in your group needs a headlamp to navigate the stairs, walkway, rocky terrain and darkness. While you can rent one at the ticket office, you may want to bring your own to ensure you have a bright light.

We also visited the Inland Blue Hole, a cenote (a deep, natural sinkhole) filled with cool freshwater fed by an underground river. It's edged in limestone rock walls and surrounded by dense jungle. You can swim in the cool water there. It was quiet when we arrived, and we only saw a handful of people while we were there.

One note: You must visit St. Herman's Cave first to purchase an entry ticket that gives you access to both the cave and the Inland Blue Hole. If you're heading



*Above: Tikal in northern Guatemala is one of the most significant archaeological sites in Mayan civilization.*

*Left: The reefs near South Water Caye are popular snorkeling spots.*

west, as we were, that means you have to drive past the Inland Blue Hole to go to the caves and then come back.

There are a number of ways you can explore caves in Belize, including going cave canoeing or kayaking, hiking inside the caves, or cave tubing. We opted for the latter and

spent half the day floating through the caves of Nohoch Che'en with headlamps on, jumping off cliffs inside the caves, and learning about the Mayans, the cave system, and the natural formations inside with our tour guide, Milton, who also

*continued on page 22*

happens to be a farmer.

We stayed in San Ignacio for our time in the western side of the country. A handful of Mayan ruins are nearby, including Cahal Pech and Xunantunich, but we opted to do a day trip into northern Guatemala to visit Tikal, one of the most significant archaeological sites in Mayan civilization.

Tikal has been identified as a UNESCO World Heritage site both for its natural biodiversity and its cultural significance as an archaeological site.

The ruins are in Tikal National Park, an area of about 222 squares miles of protected rainforest. There are thousands of ancient Mayan structures there, including the photogenic and impressive plaza mayor where two of the best-preserved temples, including Gran Jaguar, as well as the necropolis are located. The central urban area, which is where the wealthy lived, covers about

16 square miles. Farms and less affluent citizens stretched into the surrounding areas.

In Tikal, you are allowed to climb some of the temples, and while it's a workout, the views at the top are incredible. We also saw spider monkeys, howler monkeys and coatimundis, which have long noses, raccoon-style feet, and long raccoon-like tails.

It was unseasonably cool while we were there, which didn't mean it was actually cool. We were certainly still warm, but it can get quite hot, so much so that there were tents set up at the entrance to Tikal with health professionals ready to start IVs to replenish fluids in dehydrated visitors. There are small areas inside the park to purchase drinks and snacks, but it's



*Chrysalis come in a range of colors, sizes and textures. These at left are from a range of butterfly species. Some were small and looked like metal while others were smooth and green and others more rough-textured.*

also a good idea to bring your own water. These shops don't take credit cards, so you'll need U.S. dollars or Guatemalan quetzales, named after the country's national bird, the resplendent quetzal.

One of our other wish list items was seeking out hummingbirds. After a magical experience with hummingbirds in Ecuador a couple of years ago, we were hoping to see them in the rainforest of Belize too, where many live year-round. We visited Green Hills Butterfly Ranch, which was about a 30-minute drive from San Ignacio. The ranch focuses on butterfly conservation, but the surrounding forest is also home to hundreds of species of birds, including hummingbirds, and a variety of other wildlife.

The hummingbirds, with their

beautiful colors and astounding speed, were delightful, but we also found the butterflies to be extraordinary. We learned about and got to see the entire life cycle, from the eggs being laid on leaves, the caterpillars and their insatiable hunger, the formation of the chrysalis, and finally their birth as a butterfly. The butterfly enclosure was filled with food and plants for the 30 or so species of butterflies flitting around, and all stages of the life of a caterpillar were visible in that area. The ranch proved to be one of the trip's highlights.

But it was one of many. Our experiences across the country were engaging and energizing, ideal for really anyone of all ages, which after having visited Belize, now seems perfectly reasonable.

## Let's Toast

by Jan Walsh

### Sidney Fry

Sidney is back in food and magazines. She recently joined Hoffman Media as the Editorial Director of *Bake from Scratch* magazine.



### Pardis Stitt

Chez Fonfon is celebrating its 26th anniversary. Félicitations!



### Emily Roy's

Pelham High School Prostart Team won the Alabama competition and placed 19th in the national competition. They made it to the top 20!



### Cathy Sloss Jones

was recently honored by the Birmingham Business Journal as one of the "Birmingham Power 60," also described as the most influential leaders in our city. Cathy was one of the 10 women recognized, so 16% women were recognized. Not bad, but clearly we have some more work to do!



The LDEI Birmingham Chapter has been invited to present to the prestigious Downtown Kiwanis Club on August 8. They've asked a panel of Dames to speak about LDEI and offer insights about the state of the restaurant industry in our city and beyond. It's an honor for our organization that we hope will connect us with top business and civic leaders who may become sponsors or supporters of our fundraising events.

## Get on Board! Nominations are Open for New Officers

by Sonthe Burge

Now is the time for fresh ideas and faces: Nominations for officer positions are open until June 30. Our nominating committee is taking nominations for chapter president, vice president of membership, secretary and vice president of communications.

Each position is a two-year commitment and will run from August 2026-August 2028. The LDEI Birmingham Chapter Manual states the responsibilities of each board position. You'll find the manual on the LDEI Google Drive.

Our newly elected officers will join Sonthe Burge, past president; Anne Born, treasurer; Rebecca Denson, assistant treasurer; Lindsey Noto, vice president of programs; Martha Johnston, executive adviser; and Susan Swagler, digital technology.

Our chapter is made up of amazing women who have much to offer. Please seriously consider serving LDEI Birmingham in a leadership position. Our chapter needs positive leaders who are committed to continuing the great work this chapter is known for.

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Rebecca Denson, Leslie Register,  
Leigh Sloss-Corra, Susan Swagler,  
and Jan Walsh.