Les Dames d'Escoffier
INTERNATIONAL

Birmingham

ldeibirmingham ldeibirmingham

Founded in 2013 *ldeibirmingham.org* *Fall 2026*

President's Note

Dear Members,

As I conclude my term as president, I want to extend my heartfelt appreciation to all 109 members of our award-winning chapter. I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to have served alongside you and to have witnessed the dedication and commitment that each of you brings to LDEI Birmingham.

I would like to extend a special appreciation to our outgoing officers: Immediate Past President Leigh Sloss-Corra, Vice President of Membership Cristina Almanza, Interim Vice President of Communication Gia McCollister and Secretary Audrey Tyler, for their leadership and service to our chapter. My appreciation also goes to Kathy G. Mezrano, Martha Johnston and Susan Swagler, whom I appointed to serve as executive advisors and digital technology advisor during my presidency.

Thank you to Rachel West for chairing the Nominating Committee and to Vice President of Membership Cristina Almanza for leading our new member drive. I am excited to welcome our new officers and newest members, and I look forward to the energy, ideas and leadership they will bring as

continued on page 8, see Letter

Nourishing Lives Through Cooking at The WellHouse



by Sonthe Burge

Each month, LDEI members share their culinary knowledge with survivors at The WellHouse through hands-on cooking classes. These classes focus on preparing simple, healthy meals while building practical skills in meal planning, nutrition, cooking techniques and kitchen confidence.

Through this program, members are able to share their passion for food while helping survivors develop skills that support greater independence and healthy living.

The committee is chaired by Dames Maureen Holt and Pat Terry, with 28 LDEI members having completed the onboarding

continued on page 9, see WellHouse

Annual Meeting Recap: Celebrating Our Members, Our Mission and a Year of Accomplishments

by Sonthe Burge



Members, including Denise Koch, Dulce Rivera and Aimee Castro gathered at our annual meeting on August 17.

The Birmingham chapter of Les Dames d'Escoffier gathered Monday, Aug. 17, at the beautiful Theodore by Tre Luna for our annual meeting and a celebration of another year of fellowship, service, philanthropy and professional development.

Applauding Our Achievements
President Sonthe Burge opened the meeting by highlighting our chapter's accomplishments over the past year. A special congratulations went to our members for earning the chapter's first Showstopper Chapter Award in recognition of our two outstanding fundraising events, Champagne & Fried Chicken and Sweet Treats.

Sonthe also highlighted the addition of a Vice President of Communications position, increased participation by Birmingham Dames at the LDEI Annual Conference, and the board's approval to begin strategic planning for the chapter's future.

The chapter also celebrated Immediate Past President Leigh Sloss-Corra, who will continue to serve as secretary on the LDEI International Board.

Exploring LDEI Opportunities
Leigh encouraged members to continue taking advantage of opportunities to connect with Dames beyond the Birmingham chapter. Leigh announced that the LDEI Annual Meeting will be held in Chicago March 18-20, 2027, and urged us to make plans to attend. She also invited members to participate in LDEI Live Online, the organization's monthly online programming, providing Dames with opportunities to learn, connect and engage with fellow members throughout the year.

Growing Our Membership & Connection
Secretary Audrey Tyler presented a report on behalf of Vice President of Membership Cristina Almanza and shared encouraging membership news. The Membership Committee received 11 applications during the year, with 10 applicants completing interviews and being recommended for membership. All 10 were subsequently voted into the chapter.

Programs continue to provide opportunities for Dames to learn, connect and have fun together. Vice President of Programs Lindsey Noto recapped recent activities, including kickboxing at Battle Republic with Dame Audra Seachris, a tea-blending class with Dame Aquilla Stanback, and a dumpling-making class with Dixya Bhattarai, a chef and registered dietitian.

Fundraising for Our Future
Fundraising remains an important part of our ability to support the culinary and hospitality community. Idie Hastings reported that the sponsorship goal for Champagne & Fried Chicken is $80,000, with $24,500 raised to date. Members were encouraged to reach out to their professional and personal networks to help us reach our goal.

Denise Koch shared details about this year's C&FC and encouraged members to volunteer.

Leigh Sloss-Corra also reminded everyone about the September Pepper Place Farmers Market Takeover and asked members to participate by donating baked goods and helping at the tent.

Members also were encouraged to get involved with Sweet Treats, including an opportunity to chair the event.

Making a Difference Through Outreach & Philanthropy
One of the most meaningful highlights of the year was the continued growth of our volunteer and philanthropic efforts.

Billie Jo Waara presented a detailed report on grants and scholarships. This year, LDEI Birmingham awarded five grants totaling $19,000 and six scholarships totaling $24,000, along with a $5,000 scholarship to Fiesta and a $1,000 Camp Grow scholarship to Jones Valley Teaching Farm bringing the total for grants and scholarships for 2026 to $49,000.00. These investments reflect our chapter's ongoing commitment to supporting education, professional development, and the next generation of culinary and hospitality professionals.

Our outreach efforts also continue throughout the community. Dame Audra Seachris announced that LDEI Volunteer Day at the Community Food Bank of Central Alabama will move to the third Monday of each month from 1–3 p.m., beginning Oct. 19.

Kay Reed shared information about the Hope Gala, while Maureen Holt reported on The Well-House's monthly cooking classes and its partnership with GirlSpring.

Looking Ahead
The annual meeting also provided an opportunity to look ahead. Martha Johnston shared plans for a new Career Accelerator Legacy Award, being developed with fellow Dames, with a goal of launching in fall 2027.

The new LDEI board of directors was announced. New board members are President Andrea Kirkland, Vice President of Membership Erin Mooney, Vice President of Communications Rachel Ishee-Nowell and Interim Secretary Dulce Rivera.

Members also heard updates regarding changes in membership, including four resignations and seven one-year membership hiatuses due to personal circumstances, relocation or career changes. While we will miss these Dames, we are grateful for their contributions and hope to remain connected.

Before adjourning, Sonthe invited members who attended the LDEI Annual Conference in Las Vegas to share their experiences. Dulce Rivera, Audra Seachris and Aimee Castro offered inspiring and entertaining reflections and encouraged fellow Dames to take advantage of opportunities to learn, connect and represent our chapter at future conferences.

Celebrating Our Members
The evening concluded with a member appreciation reception, hosted by the outgoing LDEI Birmingham board in celebration of our chapter's first Showstopper Award.

Sonthe expressed her appreciation to all of our members for their continued commitment to Les Dames d'Escoffier and to the work we do together in our community.

A special thank you goes to Tito's for sponsoring the LDEI chapter awards and to Erin Mooney and Sara Walker Hubbard for hosting our annual meeting at Theodore by Tre Luna.

What a year it has been—and what an exciting year lies ahead! We are grateful for the dedication, generosity, talent and friendship that make LDEI Birmingham such a special organization.





Above left: Assistant Treasurer Rebecca Denson and Treasurer Anne Born
Above right: Briana Tamburello, Billie Jo Waara, and Audra Seachris

Meet Our Terrific New Leaders: Four Dames Join the Board of Directors

by Donna Cornelius

Our LDEI Birmingham chapter has a history of great leaders, and we're sure that new officers Andrea Kirkland, Erin Mooney, Rachel Ishee-Nowell and Dulce Rivera will follow in their footsteps.
Here's a little more about our shiny new leaders!



Andrea Kirkland
President
Andrea Kirkland, MS, RD, is a registered dietitian, culinary educator, food editor and president of the Birmingham chapter of Les Dames d'Escoffier International.

With more than 20 years of experience, her career spans food media, culinary education, community nutrition, and healthcare, bringing together nutrition science, cooking, recipe development, and real-world food solutions.

Andrea is the founder of Culinary Med Ed, an online continuing education platform that equips dietitians and other health professionals with practical culinary skills to use with patients. Her professional experience also includes leading meal and nutrition content strategy for a medically tailored meal program serving Medicare Advantage members and providing nutrition leadership for meal planning and recipe development at eMeals. As an editor, writer and content developer, she has contributed to nationally recognized publications and brands, including EatingWell, Cooking Light, Diabetic Living, and Hoffman Media.

A member of LDEI since 2020, Andrea served as our chapter's secretary from 2022–2024. Her chapter involvement has included work with the Community Food Bank of Central Alabama and coordinating LDEI's partnership with GirlSpring. She is passionate about using her experience to support and empower women throughout the food and beverage industry.



Erin Mooney
Vice President of Membership
Born in Selma and raised in Birmingham, Erin grew up in the food and beverage industry with an Italian restaurant on her mom's side and a butcher shop and grocery store on her father's side.

Throughout her childhood, she spent time helping wherever she was needed, which sparked an early interest in serving others.

Erin began her career as a teacher. After starting a family with her husband, Brian, she opted to stay home with their children. To help pay the bills, Erin began catering and ultimately found her passion in doing so.

Erin's greatest goals are to invoke a sense of nostalgia and for people to feel at home when dining with Tre Luna. From her love for customer service and relationship building, Erin and Brian founded Tre Luna Catering in 2014, Tre Luna Bar & Kitchen in 2019 and Tre Luna & Grocery in 2025. She acquired Theodore by Tre Luna in 2026.

Erin is excited to serve as vice president of membership for Les Dames d'Escoffier Birmingham. As the owner of Tre Luna Hospitality Group, Erin leads with a servant heart and believes that same spirit is exactly what our membership needs. She has a deep passion for bringing women together, putting them in touch with one another, and helping them feel welcomed, celebrated and excited to be part of a community that lifts each other up in this industry we all love. Erin is honored to pour that same heart into helping our chapter grow.

Rachel Ishee-Nowell
Vice President of Communications



Rachel Ishee-Nowell is the founder and owner of Cravings Creative marketing firm.

Specializing in creating mouthwatering content and marketing strategies that leave you hungry for more, Rachel is a multi-talented photographer, writer and strategist who is incredibly organized and the ultimate brand cheerleader. With a background in journalism from the University of Mississippi and a passion for dining, Rachel leads the company's marketing efforts and serves as a content creator for six restaurant brands. When she's not immersed in the culinary world, you can find Rachel exploring farmers' markets, gardening and relaxing with an iced coffee at her favorite local coffee shops.

"I'm excited for the opportunity to serve LDEI Birmingham as vice president of communications," Rachel said. "I look forward to sharing the incredible work our chapter and Dames are doing in our community while creating opportunities to elevate the voices, stories and accomplishments of our members. It's an honor to help tell the story of LDEI Birmingham and shine a light on the impact our Dames are making in the culinary, hospitality and food industries."



Board members passed the torch to the newly elected board members at the annual meeting on August 17.

Dulce Rivera
Secretary



Dulce Victoria Rivera is CEO of Mi Pueblo Supermarket, a family-owned multicultural grocery business with locations in Alabama and Mexico. Born in Houston and raised in central Alabama, Dulce is a first-generation Mexican American and a 2017 graduate of Samford University, where she earned a bachelor's degree in business administration.

As CEO, Dulce oversees operations, food procurement, purchasing, marketing and strategic growth for Mi Pueblo. Her work includes sourcing authentic and specialty international ingredients for both families and food industry clients while helping make culturally significant foods accessible to Alabama's increasingly diverse communities. Under her leadership, Mi Pueblo also has continued its longstanding commitment to community partnerships, cultural events, nonprofits and outreach initiatives throughout central Alabama.

Beyond Mi Pueblo, Dulce serves as board chairperson of HICA and secretary of Fiesta Birmingham and is involved with the Birmingham Human Rights Commission and other organizations. She's passionate about using food, culture and connection to bridge communities and contribute to a more inclusive Alabama.

"Les Dames d'Escoffier is important to me because of the women who make up this organization and the sense of community they create," Dulce said. "I have so much admiration for the experiences, knowledge, and energy each member brings to the table. There is something incredibly valuable about sitting alongside women in the food industry who understand many of the challenges that come with leadership, while also being able to learn from, encourage, and motivate one another. What keeps me coming back is that sense of connection, but also the mission behind it. I believe a woman's career or dreams should never be limited simply because she lacks access to the right resources, opportunities, or support. LDEI creates those opportunities while building a network of women who genuinely want to see other women succeed.

Dulce added, "I'm excited to give back to an organization and a group of women who already have given me so much inspiration. To me, Les Dames is about making sure there is always room at the table—and helping more women find their seat."

Handmade with Fun: A Hands-on Dumpling Class Became Dinner with Friends

by Susan Swagler

Oh, we Dames love to learn—especially when it's a delicious lesson!

That's exactly what we had in our latest program. Our VP of Programs, Lindsey Noto, owner of Feast Birmingham, teamed us up with Dixya Bhattarai—a chef and registered dietitian and owner of the food and wellness brand Food, Pleasure, Health—for a fun, informative and tasty hands-on dumpling-making class.

The event drew Dames as well as prospective members (Dixya being one of them) and even some of our beloved, longtime community supporters.

We grabbed glasses of wine to sip and sat at tables of four to create two different kinds of Chinese-style dumplings—beef with vegetables and a spicy tofu mixture. And we made them in a variety of shapes—from graceful (and easy) half-moons to more complicated pleated versions.







Above: Silvia Espinosa Laxson from ¡HICA! and Fiesta and Dame Dulce Rivera along with other Dames and friends created two different kinds of Chinese-style dumplings in a variety of shapes. Far left: Dixya Bhattarai (pictured at left with Lindsey Noto), who led the dumpling class, also demonstrated how to create a homemade chili oil.

No matter the final shape, they all started with small, round sheets of dough that are readily available in the freezer section at Hometown Supermarket (over by the produce). You'll want to get the rest of the ingredients at this great Asian foods grocery on Green Springs Highway, too.

Dixya says you can fill these dumplings with whatever you want—meat or veggie, meat with veggie, tofu, etc., but "fresh ginger is non-negotiable" in all. We didn't just make dumplings in this class.

Dixya also demonstrated how to create our own homemade chili oil with dried spices like star anise, bay leaves, cinnamon sticks and Szechuan peppers.

It's way easier than I thought! And everyone got a jar of Dixya's own famous chili oil to take home! That should last us for a little while at least.

Of course, we enjoyed all the dumplings we created. Our time spent eating together in friendly fellowship was just as satisfying as making this fun, delicious meal.

Events Calendar

Mon. Sept. 14	New Member Orientation 5 to 6 p.m. New Member Reception 6 to 7 p.m.	Theodore by Tre Luna

**Sara Walker Hubbard will take headshots starting at 5:30 p.m. Come early for a new head shot and stay to welcome our new members.*

Fri, Sept 19-Sun., Sep 28	Southbound Food Festival	various locations around Birmingham
Thurs., Sept. 24	Community Food Bank of Central Alabama Grand Opening Celebration, 2-5 p.m. Tours at 2:15, 3:45, and 4:30 Remarks at 3 p.m. rsvp to assistant@feedingal.org	4336 Turin Drive Bessemer, AL 35020
Sat., Sept. 26	Fiesta visit fiestabham.com for more information	
Sun., Oct. 4	Champagne & Fried Chicken fundraiser	Pepper Place
Mon., Oct. 19	Food Bank of Central Alabama, 1-3 p.m.	4336 Turin Drive Bessemer, AL 35020

**Our volunteer workdays move to the third Monday of each month beginning in October.*

Nov. 3-9	10th Anniversary of Flavors of Mexico: Guadalajara and Tequila	Registration info will be emailed soon
Wed., Nov. 11	Member Speed Dating Session and Potluck	Details TBA
Mon., Dec. 7	Save the date: LDEI Annual Holiday Party	Details TBA
Thurs. Jan. 14, 2027	Financial class with Julie Helmers, CDFA	Details TBA
March 18-20, 2027	2027 LDEI Annual Conference, InterContinental Hotel in Chicago	More details to come
Sat. April 10, 2027	Book signing event with beloved baker, cookbook author and blogger Rose Levy Beranbaum	Details TBA

Letter, continued from page 1

we continue building on the strong foundation of our chapter.

I also want to remind everyone about our major fundraiser, Champagne & Fried Chicken, on Sunday, Oct. 4. This event is an important part of supporting our chapter, and we need every member to be involved! Please help by selling picnics, securing sponsorships and spreading the word through your personal and professional networks. Every effort makes a difference, and when we work together, we can make an even greater impact. Special appreciation goes to Denise Koch, Kathy G. Mezrano, and the entire C&FC team for leading this important event.

September will also give us a wonderful opportunity to showcase LDEI Birmingham at the Pepper Place Farmers Market each Saturday from 7 a.m.-noon. Dames will be sharing their baked goods, promoting Champagne & Fried Chicken and introducing our organization to the Birmingham community. I encourage everyone to stop by, participate, bring a friend and help us celebrate the talents and spirit of our chapter. Special appreciation goes to Leigh Sloss-Corra for coordinating this opportunity.

Looking ahead, January 2027 will begin an exciting new chapter as we embark on our strategic planning process. In just 13 years, Birmingham has grown from our founding group of 55 Dames to 109 active members. That growth is something to celebrate, and it gives us an incredible opportunity to look ahead and consider what we can accomplish together.

One of my greatest takeaways from serving as president is recognizing the extraordinary depth of talent, experience, creativity and leadership within our membership at large. Our Strategic Planning Committee will help us identify ways to bring more of those talents forward, establish meaningful goals and update our policies, procedures and handbook to support a strong and vibrant chapter for years to come.

There will be many opportunities for members to participate, share ideas and help shape our future. I hope each of you will find a way to lend your voice and your talents to this exciting process.

As I pass the leadership torch to President Andrea Kirkland and the new LDEI board of directors, I do so with tremendous confidence in our future. May we continue to support one another, welcome new members, serve our community and celebrate the incredible women who make LDEI Birmingham what it is.

I am deeply grateful for your trust, your friendship and the opportunity to serve as your president. I encourage each of you to stay connected, stay involved and continue to believe in what we can accomplish together.

Together, our best is yet to come.

With gratitude,
Sonthe



Dames Share Thoughts about City's Restaurant Industry at Kiwanis Meeting

LDEI Birmingham members were pleased to join the Kiwanis Club of Birmingham's Aug. 11 meeting for a conversation about the state of Birmingham's restaurant industry.

Dames Leigh Sloss-Corra, Emily McDaniel and Billie Jo Waara shared their perspectives on our city's evolving restaurant community, the opportunities and challenges facing the industry, and the important role food and hospitality continue to play in Birmingham.

Dames Joy Smith, Ashley McMakin, Billie Jo Waara and Laura Zapalowski added to the event's success by providing delicious food enjoyed by those who attended the presentation. We're grateful to the Kiwanis Club for the invitation and the opportunity to share the knowledge and experience of Les Dames d'Escoffier Birmingham with our community.



WellHouse, continued from page 1

process to serve as volunteers. In August, Dames Joy Smith, Emily McDaniel, Jenn Nix and Sonthe Burge hosted a WellHouse cooking class at Jones Valley Teaching Farm.

The class featured a delicious menu of chicken fajitas, Mexican street corn salad, strawberry Bisquick shortcake, and pink lemonade made with fresh strawberries. The experience provided an opportunity for participants to learn practical cooking skills while preparing a nutritious and enjoyable meal together.

If you would like to participate in this program, please contact Maureen Holt or Jenn Nix for more information.







Dames Joy Smith, Emily McDaniel, Sonthe Burge and Jenn Nix hosted a hands-on cooking class for The WellHouse at Jones Valley Teaching Farm in downtown Birmingham that focused on preparing a simple, healthy meal while building practical skills in meal planning, nutrition, cooking techniques and kitchen confidence.

It's Time to Get Excited About the 2026 Version of Champagne & Fried Chicken

Every year we think Champagne & Fried Chicken can't get any more fun for Dames and guests alike—and every year, our expectations are exceeded. This year's event should be no exception.

The 2026 edition of C&FC is set for Sunday, Oct. 4, from 4-7 p.m. at Pepper Place on 29 th Street. Those who attend can take advantage of our convenient drive-through line to pick up their orders, or they can stay at the site for a full-on party featuring gracious table service and live music.

Leading the way this year are event event chairs Denise Koch and Kathy G. Mezrano. They'll be supported by the rest of us, who will be working front and center as well as behind the scenes to make our fundraiser a real success story.

As always, our signature insulated tote bags will be bursting with a gourmet picnic for two along with beautiful fresh flowers and a cold bottle of bubbly. This year's menu is a mouth-watering one and includes:

• Fried chicken: prepared by Birmingham Dames
• Tomato pie: Café Iz
• Spinach artichoke dip with pita: Tre Luna
• Lemon dill and shallot potato salad: Lindsey Noto, Feast Catering
• French green bean salad with vinaigrette: Joy Smith, Sorelle
• Kettle Corn Birmingham Mix – savory cheddar and French toast: Tanesha Sims-Summers, Naughty But Nice Kettle Corn





Above: This year's event will have a larger seating area for dine-in guests as well as the beloved drive-through line. At left: A group of our talented members fry chicken on site at Pepper Place.

• Chocolate cake: Telia Johnson, Telia's Cakes
• Sweet potato cheesecake with cinnamon graham butter crust and candied pecans with caramel glaze: Takeeka Goshay, Adored Sweets

Be sure to wear white tops and blue bottoms—jeans, pants, shorts, skirts—and don't forget your name tag. We want to look our best for our group photo, which will be taken at 3:30 before our guests arrive.

Encourage your family, friends, co-workers and random folks who love good food to buy their tickets and/or purchase sponsorships. It's going to be a special night!

Inquiring Dames Want to Know

What's your favorite Champagne & Fried Chicken memory?

Susan Swagler
My favorite Champagne & Fried Chicken memory happens every year when my check-in/ticketing team members all contact me individually ahead of time requesting to remain on what I call "The A Team." It's not an easy job. We get there early and are often the last ones working. And I am so proud every time of how they handle the day's constant pressure with grace and patience and poise. So, mine is the same fantastic memory made fresh every year!



Sonthe Burge
My favorite C&FC memories happen before the big day. Building the dahlia bouquets at Stone Hollow Farmstead surrounded by hundreds of gorgeous dahlias is the best feeling in the world. It's also a lot of fun to pack up the nonperishable items for our C&FC tote. Every year, our committee looks at the tea towels, flutes, dinnerware and that huge Ziploc bag trying to recall exactly what we did the year before!





Leigh Sloss-Corra
It was maybe a couple of years ago. Mayor Woodfin had just been reelected and I was talking to another Dame in the busy pickup line. Everything had been going so well, then one of us commented, "Darn, we should have invited the Mayor. That would have been a cool photo..." We were feeling disappointed for about 2 seconds, then all of a sudden we looked up and there was our fabulous Mayor, smiling, coming to pick up his picnic tote with Dame Crystal Peterson right beside him! (We have the photo to prove it.) Crystal said, "I invited him!" The Mayor thanked everyone profusely and drove on home. Talk about timing!



Kathy G. Mezrano
I loved the years we wore the masks saying "Merci, Y'all!" My fondest memories are toasting each other at the end of the event to a job well done!



Sister Act: Family and Friends Come First for Dame Joy Smith

by Donna Cornelius



Joy has been making the vegetarian option for Champagne & Fried Chicken for years, including this year's event.

If you know Joy Smith, you know she's as sweet as cheesecake, as special as chicken with sage cream, and as down to earth as meatloaf muffins—all of which just happen to be examples of the food she whips up in her kitchen at Sorelle in Homewood.

Sorelle, which specializes in grab-and-go good eats and full service catering, is the product of a dream that goes back to Joy's childhood. In Romeo, a small one-stoplight village in Michigan, she grew up with a mom who loved feeding her family—and passing that love on to her daughter.

"I've always fed people, always cooked," Joy said. "My father left when my mother, who was a nurse, was pregnant with me. My older sister married when I was in the fourth grade, and my mom often worked at night. She would prep food for dinner, and I'd finish cooking."

A very special memory was a foreshadowing of Joy's eventual career in food.

"When I was about 7, I remember my mother and me driving around, talking about a restaurant where we could serve pot roast, pies, and food we loved," she said.

At age 16, Joy got a job at a bar, starting out in the nonglamorous role of dishwasher.

"I was only there for three months, but they wanted to make me the manager," she said.

After a stint in Florida, Joy moved to Birmingham to join her sister, who was attending medical school here.

"I went to UAB," she said. "I was a single mom when I moved here, and I took my time getting a psychology degree with a heavy emphasis on neuro sciences."

She was just 21 years old when she catered her first wedding from a tiny apartment kitchen.

Other cooking jobs included fine dining and front of house positions. "About 10 years ago, I was a Montessori teacher and became food services director," she said. "But I got tired of dealing with parents, and my husband said, OK, quit. So I did."

In 2017, Smith started down a culinary career path by opening a space at the West Homewood Farmers' Market. As her reputation grew, she moved to the Pepper Place Saturday Market and sold her food in Piggly Wiggly stores and at Smiley Brothers Specialty Foods in Pelham. She also catered for her family and friends.

"Having my own place was always on my heart, always a fantasy," she said. That's when Sorelle—pronounced soh-reh-lay and Italian for "sisters"—was born. In 2021, Joy found a charming space on Broadway Street in Homewood's Edgewood neighborhood and then began to consider names for her fledgling business.

"My girlfriends kept wanting me to put my name into the name of the restaurant, but I asked myself, what's the most important thing?" she said. "I have such a strong support system. It's your sisterhood, your tribe. You'll tell your husband something—but you're calling your girlfriends when you really want to talk things out."

Joy is proud of what she and her team produce at Sorelle, where you'll find everything from breakfast favorites to mouth-watering desserts.

"The food is all made in house," she said. "The love and caring comes through. We have chicken parm, meatloaf, four kinds of lasagna and seasonal specials. We have dips and appetizers you won't find anywhere else."

Since becoming a member of our LDEI chapter, Joy has contributed to the Champagne & Fried Chicken menu with a vegetarian option.

"Sorelle isn't a vegan/vegetarian restaurant—it's just that I want to feed all people the things they want," she said. "We do special orders. I just made Cornish hens for someone who really wanted them. We can tailor our food to what people like."

You might find chicken or vegetable pot pies, sliders and salads, and cheesecake with fruit sauce as well as a host of other yummy options. Joy said the most fun thing about what she does is "making people happy."

"It's especially fun planning parties with them," she said. "When you're having a party, you're happy and excited. And we love meeting the new people who come in all the time."



Joy has often offered space at Sorelle in Homewood for LDEI meetings, including this one about The WellHouse, one of our chapter's outreach efforts that Joy has long been an active part of.

The toughest thing, she said, is being away from her family and friends.

"I used to love cooking dinner for my family," she said. "Another difficult thing is to finding good, hard-working people."

But Joy is immensely proud of her staff.

"My full-service people will do anything and are happy to do it," she said.

Joy and her husband, Gregory Smith, live in Homewood. Her three children are Allise Fortinberry, Jacob Smith and Olivia Smith. She also has three much-adored cats.

While her spare time is at a premium, Joy usually prioritizes dinner with her husband and children and likes antiquing.

"I'm very creative and do all kinds of painting, mosaics, dollhouse miniatures," she said. "I like weird, artsy stuff. I'm always up to something!"

On her bucket list is a trip to Italy. "I've been to Europe but never to Italy, so it's high on my list," she said.

Joy learned about the Birmingham chapter of Les Dames d'Escoffier from a newspaper article. The organization has given her another sense of sisterhood.

"When I had my interview for membership, I said, I've never been a club girl," she said. "When I found this philanthropic group of women, I thought, these are my people. I love the easy camaraderie. I like the philanthropic stuff, such as helping teach at The WellHouse, and helping with fundraising. It's really a powerhouse group."

Spotlight on Southbound: 2026 Event Features Birmingham Dames and Lots More

by Jes Bennett





Above: The food staging for the Heritage Dinner happened at The Red Cat
At right: Guests enjoy the Heritage Dinner

Southbound Food Festival returns on Sept. 18 for its fourth year celebrating food culture in the Magic City, with 10 days of events featuring 100 chefs.

The festivities kick off with the Heritage Dinner on Friday, Sept. 18, a long-table dinner in the streets and under the stars. The dinner spotlights pivotal regional ingredients—the chicken and the egg—and honors legendary chef Anne Quatrano with the Frank Stitt Award for Industry Excellence. The immersive multi-course dinner features both local and regional chefs, including our own Dame Rita Bernhardt.

Dame Cheryl Slocum is spearheading Saturday morning's LDEI sponsored event, Rooted: Women in Food, at the Pepper Place Market. The program explores the lineage of Southern cooking, celebrating Southern women chefs, and the culinary influences and traditions they carry forward. Slocum will moderate a panel discussion along with Dames Billie Jo Waara and Amanda Stanfield and featuring chefs Erika Council, Sandra Gutierrez, Megan Pinckney Rutherford and Virginia Willis, in a conversation honoring the women who inspired them. A ticketed meet and greet with bites and cocktails will be held at Dame Idie Hasting's Hot and Hot Fish Club.

HOSTED, a collaboration series inspired by the spirit of opening kitchens to friends, will run during the week. The series of 25 events showcases local businesses, artists and culinary talent in collaboration with guests ranging from chefs and farmers to artists, and most will be open to the public through walk-ins or reservations.

The Birmingham chapter is well represented on the HOSTED slate with Dames producing diverse events throughout the week.

On Sunday, Sept. 20, Dame Geri-Martha O'Hara of Pizza Grace hosts Chef Michael Hanna of Nashville's St. Vito Focacceria for a dynamic menu showcasing two philosophies on pizza dough—Pizza Grace's signature style and Hanna's Sicilian street-food inspired sfincione.

Monday, Sept. 21, sees Dame Cheryl Slocum screening "Shellbound: An Anthology of Southern Oyster Culture" at Sidewalk Cinema. Dame Erin Byers Murray of the Nashville chapter is set to moderate a diverse panel after the film.

Wednesday, Sept. 23, features a collaborative dinner hosted by Dame Kristen Hall in concert with Alex Eaton, culinary director of Charleston's La Cave, for a night inspired by the heart of France and the soul of farm fresh seasonal ingredients from the South's best farms.

Dame Emily McDaniel is set to host two events. On Wednesday, Sept. 23, McDaniel's Bayonet will host chef Roscoe Hall for an art show and tuna tasting dinner. The night features a five-course tasting menu, built from a whole tuna breakdown on the raw bar, and Hall will debut 13 original art pieces produced for the event. On Thursday, Sept. 24, McDaniel will transport diners to Lovelight Farm in Wilsonville for a family-style menu inspired by the season, the Gulf Coast and the farms themselves. Chef Rob McDaniel of Helen will be joined by Chef Bill Briand of Little Bird in Fairhope to bring this vision to life.

Dame Pardis Stitt hosts Highlands x babas: Aperitivo at the Bar on Thursday, Sept. 24. The evening is a family collaboration between Frank, Pardis, Weston Stitt and Frank's daughter Marie and her husband, Edward Crouse, co-owners of babas in Charleston.

The cornerstone event of Southbound will be Southern Living's Food x Fire, a daytime event at Sloss Furnaces inspired by live-fire cooking, barbecue pitmasters and Southern tailgate culture.

Musical acts include Marc Broussard and Jon Cleary and the Absolute Monster Gentleman. Birmingham Dames Lindsay Noto, Geri-Martha O'Hara and Kristen Hall will be on hand with open-fire takes on tailgate classics.





Above: Pitmasters show off at Food and Fire. At right: Southbound's festivities close with the Funk Brunch

The festival will wrap up with Saturday afternoon's Funk Brunch Juke Jam, a porch-party inspired event mixing music with cuisine. Early James and Blind Mississippi Morris will provide the jams, and Dame Raquel Lenzie of SLIDE café and Panoptic Catering will be among the chefs.

Tickets, reservation links and more information can be found at SouthboundFoodFest.com.

©2026 Les Dames d'Escoffier, Birmingham Chapter
P.O. Box 43542
Birmingham, Alabama 35243

No part of this newsletter may be reproduced in any form without the prior written permssion of the chapter president.

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.