



LEGACY OF
Les Dames

BY MELISSA MCCLELLAND
IMAGERY BY BETH SIEGLE

6 Countries. 44 Chapters. 2,500+ members, across the food, beverage, and hospitality industries.

Named after the innovative and philanthropic French chef, Auguste Escoffier, Les Dames d'Escoffier International grew out of a response to an all-male dining society called Les Amis d'Escoffier, or The Friends of Escoffier, created in 1936. There was a woman's branch of the organization (Les Dames des Amis d'Escoffier), whose women-only dinners (cooked by men, of course) raised money for the Escoffier Foundation. But through the foresight of Carol Brock, a Sunday Food Editor of the New York Daily News, a separate organization was created to provide leadership and support to women as they pushed their way into the food, beverage, and hospitality industries in greater numbers and wanted to take on head roles. By 1985, the original five chapters (New York, Washington, DC, Chicago, Dallas, and Philadelphia) were able to come together and create Les Dames.

The organization now has 44 chapters in six countries and a membership of about 2,500. It has members in all aspects of the food, beverage, and hospitality industry. It rewards individual achievements, provides scholarship opportunities, encourages philanthropy, and provides a space of support for women in the

industry. It is an energetic organization interested in tackling problems of diversity, inclusion, sustainability, and accessibility. It is also especially gratifying to travel as a Dame, because the chapters make members feel so welcome. Personally, I divide my time between Cleveland and Paris and the Paris Dames have provided not only an insider's guide to the restaurants and shops of Paris, but more rare, a warm welcome into Parisian homes.

A part of Les Dames since 2004, Cleveland is one of the smaller chapters, but we have been quite impactful. The most recent winner of the organization's highest award, the Grande Dame, and the most recent national past president is Bev Shaffer, a longtime pillar in the Cleveland food scene, with her cooking school, tv demos, and years of work as a Vitamix ambassador. (Julia Child was the first Grande Dame) Bev expertly steered the organization through the trials of covid, providing a lifeline to many in that stressful time. (Sometimes it was just the zoom cocktail hours that got us through!)

Image Caption: (top to bottom) Photo 1: Cleveland chapter members at local Cleveland Heights establishment, CLE Urban Winery; Photo 2: Members visit Adun Spice Co. for a workshop with owner and chef, Ramat Wiley.



The organization's current president, Jennifer Goldman is also a member. Elaine Cicora, a freelance writer won an MFK Fisher Award, the organization's award for food writing for her article for Edible Cleveland article, "Me and Chef Boyardee". And finally, Destiny Burns of CLE Urban Winery won a Legacy Award which enabled her to visit Wentz Vineyards for an intensive mentorship. That award is available to women who are not yet members because they have not been in their field for the required 5 years. Destiny has since joined and is now co-president of the chapter. Members of the Cleveland chapter are writers, chefs and restaurant owners, food manufacturers, food photographers and stylists, cookbook authors, educators, bar owners, food tour operators, and more. We are a highly opinionated group of strong women who want to support each other and our community. The greater Cleveland area has an amazing range of food-related enterprises which we are eager to highlight and help grow.

The chapter strives to be an active force in the Cleveland/Akron/Canton food scene, with a series of programs open to the public reflecting the wide variety of things going on in the area. In the coming months, there will be a ricotta cheese making class at Marchant Manor Cheese in Cleveland Hts. lead by Kandice Marchant, a doctor-turned-cheesemaker, a farm tour and omelette class at the family-owned farm La Fattoria in Novelty on June 11 and a Pitch Competition at the Garlic Festival at Shaker Square the weekend of August 26-27. The chapter is fundraising for that competition which will award first, second, and third-place prizes to women entrepreneurs in the food and beverage community who want to start or grow their businesses. Finalists will present their pitches live in the main tent!

Past events have included a foraging class with Jeremy Umansky of Larder as we wandered through the damp fields of the Medina farm of Bev Shaffer, a walking, eating, and drinking Canton Food Tour, with tour owner Dame Barb Abbott, and a spice tasting with

Ramat Wiley of Adun Spice, where we were able to hear the story of the creation of a brand.

The primary fundraising event is called Out of the Box and it runs in the late fall of each year. Local businesses donate all kinds of goods and services and these are grouped into different 'boxes' which can be purchased directly or in the case of larger items, auctioned. This fundraiser allows many of the Dames to showcase their own products, but also helps spread the awareness of the wide range of small businesses in the area. This grew out of the experience of Covid which forced a rethinking of how to reach the public, as in the past we had done a dining event in local restaurants. We literally said, 'We have to think out of the box on this!'

If the initial goal of the organization was to support the entry of women into the closed culinary world, the organization now looks to have an even broader mission. It also seeks out and supports women in communities of color and others who have continued to be shut out of opportunities. Supporting and inspiring all women is key. And there are so many opportunities in a place like Northeast Ohio, an area populated with waves of immigration, from ships crossing the Atlantic from Europe, to buses traveling north in the Great Migration.

Sustainability has also become vitally important to the organization through its Green Tables Initiative. This initiative seeks to highlight the connection between production and consumption and to support answers to the long term issues of environment and viability. Again, our area has a key role to play, with our many urban vacant lots ready to be turned or returned into productive land or our many small producers looking to have a light footprint on the land, but a big impact on our shared community.