

Les Dames d'Escoffier women thrive in the culinary industry

By CYNTHIA SCHUSTER EAKIN

Les Dames d'Escoffier International is an organization of women helping women to succeed and grow in the highly competitive, male-dominated culinary industry.

“Les Dames d'Escoffier International (LDEI) is a philanthropic organization of women leaders in the fields of food, fine beverage and hospitality. The by-invitation membership, composed of more than 2,400 members in 43 chapters in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France and Mexico, is highly diversified and reflects the multifaceted fields of contemporary gastronomy and hospitality,” LDEI Cleveland President Beth Davis-Noragon said.

“LDEI, as a whole, is unique for its exclusive focus on women and for the mechanisms it provides for women to support women in this male-dominated industry. Our chapter is part of this international network of support and empowerment,” she added.

“The Cleveland chapter of LDEI was founded in 2004, so we just celebrated our 15th year! I will always remember attending one of the first meetings at Dame Karen Small's Flying Fig restaurant with my infant daughter in tow to find out more about this organization of, ‘women in the culinary field.’ That description is only the tip of the iceberg,” Davis-Noragon said. “I remain attracted by not only the network of leaders in all fields around hospitality, with everyone from food stylists to cookbook authors, in addition to higher profile chefs, but also by the spirit of mentorship and co-operation that exists at the local and national levels.”

Bev Shaffer, a past LDEI Cleveland president, now leads the international organization as board president. “I have been a longtime member of other culinary and leadership organizations and was a founding member of the Cleveland chapter,” she said. “What attracted me to LDEI is its emphasis on professional women with eclectic culinary backgrounds.”

“Especially on a chapter by chapter level, we create a supportive culture within our communities through philanthropy and by supporting excellence in the culinary fields that include, but are not limited to farming, beverage, food and hospitality,” Shaffer noted. “The LDEI International board just completed a three-year strategic plan and updated our guiding principles. We are committed to life-long learning, mentoring, career advancement and professional development for our members.

Davis-Noragon added, “Membership in our chapter provides regular networking opportunities for like-minded women in the food, fine beverage and hospitality industries by way of regular business meetings, committee meetings, a business-to-business directory on our website that helps to support each others' businesses, and informal happy hours. Membership also provides access to learning opportunities via tours, demos, speakers, webinars and attendance at the annual conference. Our chapter also awards scholarships to female culinary students and grants to organizations that fit within the Green Tables model.”

The Green Tables Initiative, launched by LDEI International in 2006, connects innovative, sustainable agriculture, including urban and rural farms and gar-

dens with restaurant, school and kitchen tables across LDEI chapter communities. Its goals include: promoting community health and well-being; fostering LDEI's leadership in the sustainable food movement; building upon existing community food, gardening and agricultural efforts; inspiring focus on the value of local farmers and enhancing the use of locally grown food; and sharing skills and knowledge to further the local food movement and to enhance public health.

“We are proud to say that the Cleveland chapter has been awarding Green Tables grants to local nonprofits since 2007. Besides the 2019 recipient, Cleveland Roots, some other past recipients have included the Tremont Urban Learning Garden, the Junior Chef program at Countryside Conservancy's Farmers Market, and the Take Charge and Learn Food program at the Coit Road Farmers Market,” Davis-Noragon said. In addition to grants, LDEI Cleveland also offers a \$2,000 scholarship annually to a woman in Ohio enrolled in an accredited culinary program. The 2019 scholarship was awarded to Melissa Holden, a student at Hocking College.

“Within the next five years, I would like to see the chapter be able to increase the number and possibly amount of our grants and scholarships. Just last year, we awarded our first \$2,000 culinary scholarship. We have been giving \$2,000 grants for many years,” Davis-Noragon said. “I would like to see us be able to award on a regular basis two or even three of each. We continue to implement strategies to make that happen, so stay tuned!”

Membership in LDEI is by invitation only and is limited to women with at least five years of professional experience in the food, fine beverage or hospitality industries. “Our chapter admits new members twice each year, in March and August. The March membership application deadline for 2020 has passed, but a new round of applications will be accepted between May 25 and June 25, 2020. A formal induction ceremony is held for all new members at our annual meeting in September,” Davis-Noragon noted.

The Cleveland chapter holds six meetings a year, all of which are open to the public except the September annual meeting. “We look at each meeting as an opportunity to learn and explore areas of interest that are food-related,” she said.

SummerDine, a fundraiser for the scholarship and grant programs, takes place simultaneously at restaurants across the area on the third Wednesday in August. This year's date is Aug. 19, 2020. Local restaurants donate between two and 10 seats at a common table, and guests may purchase however many of those seats as they wish. For a prix-fixe of \$80, the restaurant provides a special menu of several courses highlighting both the restaurant and the season's bounty. A cocktail or glass of wine is also provided, with additional beverages available for purchase. In many cases, the chef will speak to the diners about the menu and Dames in attendance will speak about the year's grant and scholarship winners. Participating restaurants have included Dante, Paladar, Flying Fig, La Campagna, fire, Michaelangelo's and many others. Visit www.cleveland.ldei.org for additional information about SummerDine.