

My name is Ashleigh Pearson and I was awarded a scholarship by Les Dames d'Escoffier's D.C, chapter in 2015. I remember being asked by the committee, why? It was such a loaded question but ultimately I knew I wanted a chance to be formally trained. At the time, and even now, chefs often debate on whether or not to receive a formal culinary education versus an apprenticeship in a restaurant. I was already a full pastry chef working under great Chef Robert Wiedmaier, but I kept hearing a little voice that was curious about what I hadn't seen. So back to the original question, why a scholarship? I explained to the board that I wanted to be the best chef I could be; I wanted to be a technician. I desired to tell my story through my food but I couldn't stand the idea of sending out plates with technical errors, marring my message and distracting from my purpose.

So, once awarded the scholarship, I was off to Paris, France. Long days. Up by 3 a.m. to work at the bakery at 4 a.m. Then off to start a day's worth of classes by 10 a.m. The smell of bread baking in the streets, alone, was inspiration for me to wake up on time. Every day, I was excited and overwhelmed by the techniques I was learning and the challenges I was facing. At Le Cordon Bleu, there was a daily push to prove why I was there. I learned to move with confidence in what I knew and what I was learning. I remember days being the first to finish in practical exams and Chef saying to the French men "you let Washington beat you again?!" I ended up graduating with honors and ranking first in my graduating class. I was offered an internship with Chef Joel Robuchon but I wanted so badly to go back home to the United States.

Landing back at what I call home with Chef Wiedmaier, another opportunity quickly arose for me to work at three Michelin-starred Per Se for Chef Thomas Keller. With Chef Wiedmaier's blessing I left for New York. I am confident my Le Cordon Bleu experience allowed me to be noticed by the team at Per Se. I started on specialty cakes and within six months, quickly was offered to become head chocolatier of the restaurant. Excited, but nervous to fill such big shoes of the chefs before me, I accepted. I fell in love with the entire chocolate making process. Per Se, my biggest challenge and my biggest blessing. It taught me a skill I would later build a business around.

While I've painted a very colorful and romantic picture up until this point, there were some lows. They weren't necessarily bad. They were actually enlightening. But the level of self-exploration I was being forced to deal with in these intense and prestigious cooking cultures was not easy. Trying to understand chocolate tempering concepts, like latent heat of crystallization, and striking a balance of conforming but maintaining my inherent identity, was a real struggle.

I remember, as I often would on my days off, sitting in a little shop called Kitchen Arts and Letters and skimming through cookbooks, when I saw a cover that struck me immediately! It was *The Jemima Code*. I sat in the store the entire evening with that book and then decided to buy it and bring it home. Seeing an entire book full of extraordinary black cooks and chefs who overcame their own struggles served as such a major inspiration to me at a pivotal time in my career. It brought the beginning of understanding to me in an area of my life where there was some confusion.

So, after spending some time at the gardens of the French Laundry, I decided to end my time at Per Se on a great note. I had to come back to D.C. Since being back this past year, I've started my small chocolate and confection business *PetiteSoeur*.

I said all of this to say: that's where my scholarship has taken me so far. It has drastically changed the path of my career and given me a voice in rooms where I may have never had one. But most importantly, though I asked for technique, I was gifted with stories. What I've seen is what I pull from to make my creations. Whether it's my black walnut bonbon inspired by my grandfather's cake or a summer *fraisier* thinking back to the wild berries of France. Every time you give a scholarship, you give back to D.C. and you diversify its food culture. You're helping create great chefs and food industry professionals who may not have all the resources they need to add to their story. I've said a lot of words today but could never use enough words to express my gratitude for my scholarship and the mentorship the Les Dames d'Escoffier D.C. chapter has provided me. I'm grateful to be able to tell my story through desserts and can only hope, one day, I will be able to give a scholarship to someone else and make what seems like a total dream an absolute reality.