

Food alliance fosters friendship, networking

By Maggie FitzRoy
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Marie Milton wanted to buy an Airbnb-type vacation home in historic St. Augustine — and when she saw the three-story Victorian style home at 102 Bridge St. in Lincolnville, she fell in love with its potential.

To transform it into the "jewel" she knew it could be, she extensively renovated the building and named it the

Three Stories Inn. New paint, new wallpaper, new furniture, "new everything, including every utensil," she told fellow food and hospitality career women at a September Women's Food Alliance Leadership Team meeting there.

"It's a three-story building, with three units, and every stay has a story," she said. Once the home of Thomas Jefferson's great granddaughter, Maria Jefferson Eppes Shine, "I wanted you to feel like you could write your own story when you stay here. Like time stands still."

Milton, who lives in Nocatee, is one of 12 members of the food alliance's leadership team and reflects the career and cultural diversity of the team and the Women's Food Alliance (WFA) as a whole. She is of Asian descent, with parents from South Korea and Guam, and her inn sits above a French Bistro restaurant, La Nouvelle. She enjoys the support she gets from other members of the alliance despite the diversity of backgrounds and careers.

"It's the friendships," she said. "People think it's all about selling your business, but you quickly learn it's all about friendships and fellowship."



Leigh Cort, Founder and President of the Women's Food Alliance, leads a meeting of the organization's Leadership team.



Photo by Maggie FitzRoy

The Women's Food Alliance Leadership Team meets in September at the Three Stories Inn in St. Augustine.

Founded by Leigh Cort in 2013 with eight members, WFA now has 170 members from throughout the First Coast. They all have careers that are in some way related to the food and hospitality industries and enjoy the networking opportunities they get from attending monthly gatherings at area restaurants.

The leadership team also meets separately once a month and the September gathering gave them an opportunity to know Milton better, tour her inn, and enjoy catered hors d'oeuvres, drinks, and desserts as they socialized.

One of the members at the meeting owned a Cuban restaurant, another was a branding and marketing consultant. One owned a bakery in Jacksonville, another was a sales representative for a

produce company, and one owned several Tropical Smoothie restaurants with her husband.

They also hail from different areas of the country. Cort began her career in New York City. Kelly Mabry, owner of the Tropical Smoothies, grew up in Fruit Cove. Maryrose LaCavera started her Peace Pie ice cream sandwich business at the Jersey Shore. Chelsy Johnson, who's in restaurant operations, grew up in Iowa.

"Women's Food Alliance allows you to get out of your comfort zone and see what other women are doing in our industry," Cort said. "There is a warmth and trust and comfort among members. We all bring our own magic to the organization."