

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Erika Cline Builds New Chapter of Bleu Chocolàt on St. Croix After a Lifetime in the Culinary Arts

Erika Dupree Cline detailed how childhood baking, Detroit culinary training, national recognition, setbacks from Hurricane Irma, and a return home shaped her path to opening Bleu Chocolàt on St. Croix, where she now produces chocolate using local cacao.

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Erika Dupree Cline stands inside her Bleu Chocolàt shop, continuing the culinary journey that brought her from her grandmother's kitchen to her Christiansted storefront.

Erika Dupree Cline's journey from her grandmother's kitchen to national acclaim, television appearances, and now a chocolate shop in downtown Christiansted spans

decades of discipline, mentorship, setbacks, and reinvention. Her conversation on Live With Laura traced how early lessons, rigorous culinary training, and a career shaped by recognition and loss ultimately led her back to the Caribbean to build the latest chapter of Bleu Chocolàt.

Ms. Cline said her earliest inspiration came from helping her grandmother bake. “I wanted to lick the bowl, and the only way I could lick the bowl was to help her,” she said, recalling the pies and pound cakes they made together. That foundation eventually carried her into formal culinary studies in Detroit, where the standards were exacting. “You never walk into a kitchen without a notepad and a pencil. You needed to make sure that your uniform was on point and you knew your position and not to step out of line.”

Though the expectations were strict, Ms. Cline was determined to learn from the chefs around her. She described arriving hours early to spend time with her mentor, Milos Cihelka, the Detroit chef who became the first person in the United States to earn the Certified Master Chef title in 1981. “I would go two to three hours ahead of time so I could learn and sit there with Chef Milos and hear his stories and cut onions,” she said. “I was a pastry chef, but I’m downstairs cutting onions so I could be with Papa,” she added.

Reflecting on how kitchen culture has changed, Ms. Cline believes new cooks are still developing the habits that once defined the profession. “Our young generation is working on that, but has not reached that top tier,” she said.

Ms. Cline continued advancing after school, ultimately serving as executive pastry chef for the Peabody Hotel, a historic luxury hotel in Memphis. During that time, Ebony Magazine named her one of the top 25 African American chefs in the United States. Shortly afterward, Black Enterprise Magazine recognized her as one of the top five. “I was the only woman,” she said. “That pushed me to a point where I was in a circle of amazing chefs, talented chefs, and I knew I was on the right track.”

Her national reputation brought additional opportunities, including appearances on the Bravo network’s pastry competition Just Desserts and a role as a judge on the Food Network’s Rock N Roll Pastry Challenge.

Bleu Chocolàt originated in 2016 in the British Virgin Islands, but the business—and Ms. Cline’s home—was destroyed during Hurricane Irma the following year. She relocated to Jacksonville, Florida, where she opened Bleu Chocolàt Café. By 2019, the café had earned a place among the city’s top 50 restaurants. After the pandemic forced the café to close, she launched an online bean-to-bar company, eventually returning to the Bleu Chocolàt brand in 2023 with a new storefront on St. Croix.

At the Christiansted shop, Ms. Cline offers a variety of handmade items. “I make my own soaps, my candles,” she said. She also produces Crucian Chocolate bars using cocoa grown on St. Croix. “Most people don’t know that we have cacao growing in our rainforest,” she explained. While production is smaller than on other Caribbean islands known for cocoa, Ms. Cline believes the Virgin Islands has potential. “We’re not as fruitful as Saint Lucia, Grenada, Trinidad, but we have it, and it should be a money-making industry,” she said. “Chocolate is a \$200.6 billion industry, and the Virgin Islands should take a little piece of that.

