

# America gets cooking at The Chopping Block

Michelle Hespe catches up with Shelley Young, founder and CEO of The Chopping Block in Chicago and one of five *gia* Global Honorees for 2018

There are three major components to The Chopping Block, and although they sit under the same umbrella, they are like three separate businesses. There's the cooking classes, the private events and the retail sector. However, first and foremost, says Shelley Young, Founder and CEO of Chicago's The Chopping Block, the company is a cooking school, and its mission of "Getting this country cooking" has been the driving force behind the brand since it all began, 21 years ago. But as the judges and expert jury of the IHA Global Innovation Awards (*gia*) pointed out, "The Chopping Block brings the classroom into a retail store, and this is a truly inspiring and innovative approach to cooking, teaching, and retail."

Shelley agrees with this sentiment,

adding: "We use the square footage of our premises to create revenue beyond just retail. We carry great stuff, and if those pieces make someone happy in the kitchen or improve their results and/or their efficiency, then that's great. But we have no interest in selling something to someone, just to sell it."

From a retail perspective, The Chopping Block has gradually and organically evolved, moving with the times, and today the design and product mix is more focused and narrow than it was two decades ago.

"We have always had a well-edited product mix, but our stores today reflect a more curated visual experience," explains Shelley. "We also once had a broad mix of food offerings, but now that is narrow. You can buy exotic ingre-

dients anywhere these days, so we don't need to carry them anymore. In the beginning, we only carried what we felt was the best product in every category, but we now carry different price points in some key items. Part of the reasoning behind that decision is that there are better products at different price points out there worth acknowledging."

There's no doubt about it, Shelley has put in the hard yards over the last two decades, and she has always done it her own way. Ultimately, she has never let go of her vision or mission, and she's simply not interested in trends or what other people are doing.

"It's not that I don't care, or that I live in a cave," she laughs. "And I offer all due respect to the many talented people out there. But how can you truly do



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something new if you are just copying what everyone else is doing? I like to follow my instincts. I like to look for opportunities in places where things aren't working. I've made a million mistakes, some of which I wish I could take back, but I have learned from them, and hopefully the universe knows that!"

One thing Shelley has done extremely well (and it's a lesson to us all), is to listen to the people around her. For example, Shelley has always relied on a publicist to get word of her business out.

"I've had a publicist since the day we opened, and that was one of the best moves I have made," Shelley says. "I'm a natural storyteller, and I wove a great story in the early days that really worked in the media channels. I thank my publicist Ellen Malloy for this. But one day she came to me and said: 'You have to do this yourself Shelley. Old

media is dead, and social media is the new wave, and you need to get ahead of it."

At the same time, another staff member, Andrea Miller, who at that time had worked alongside Shelley for seven years, told her that she wanted to take on the challenge and work with the emerging wave of technology and social media.

"She had experience in journalism and television production along with a culinary degree, she knew our business, and she was ready for the challenge," says Shelley with pride. "Andrea keeps myself and the company up to date with what is happening in social media and technology, in relation to marketing. She spearheaded our new website and the platform technology that it is built upon, and we're very proud of that."

Andrea loves her role at The Chop-

ping Block, and after sixteen years working with Shelley, they make a formidable team. "We are incredibly active on social media and have been since the beginning," Andrea says. "A large portion of my job is monitoring the conversation around The Chopping Block on different sites (Facebook, Instagram, Yelp, TripAdvisor, etc.), and we actively respond to each interaction and review and try hard to engage our audience on the platform of their choice. A large part of our application for *gia* was about the content we create in-house for home cooks. From how to cook videos to free downloadable resources like Knife Skills 101 and A Home Cook's Guide to Butchery."

Andrea and the team are constantly creating information to educate people on how to cook, even if they aren't in close proximity to the company's schools in Chicago. "This initiative has helped our mission of 'Getting the country to cook!'" says Andrea.

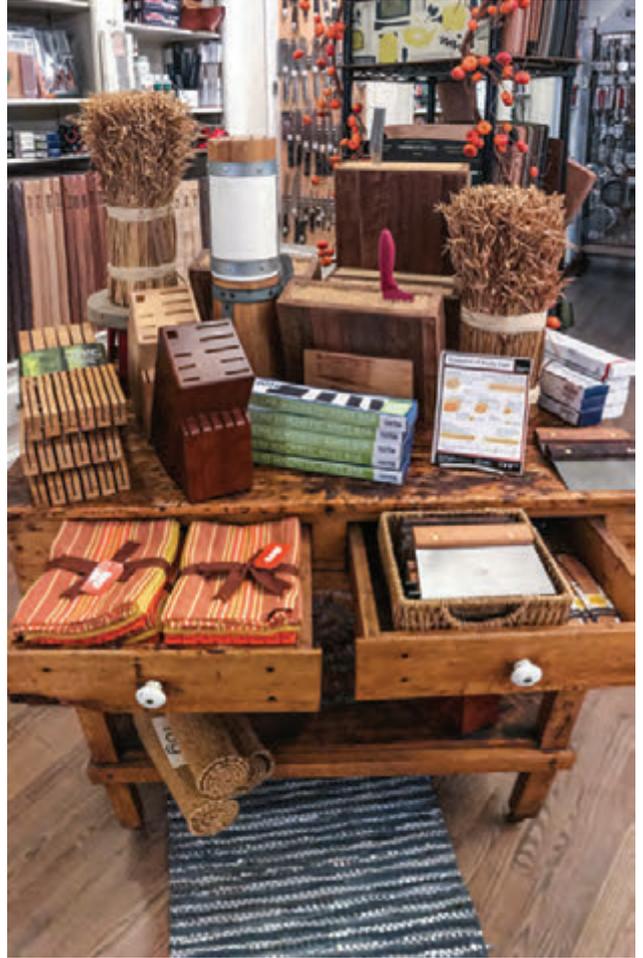
Shelley decided to enter *gia* as she believes in entering an award every year or two. She finds it helps her and her staff to evaluate what they are doing well, and what they could improve upon. Simply entering *gia* helped her to step outside her own bubble and to look in upon what they were doing and where they were going. "Getting involved in the *gia* program helped us to refine our message, our direction for the future, and to connect with industry peers," says Shelley, adding with a laugh: "It can be a grueling process, but it's worth it whether you win or lose. Winning though, is obviously better!"

Elaborating on this point, Shelley and Andrea point out that when you are so close to something, it's hard to see things objectively. "When you give yourself some distance, which happens during the application process of *gia*, you're able to sit back and go: 'Wow'. We were actually able to see that what is happening in the business is cool, and unique," says Shelley.

During the gala night at the IHA *gia* awards (dubbed the *Oscars* of the housewares industry) with the spotlight firm-



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ly on her team, Shelley walked up on to the stage with Director of Operations and Buyer, Liz Songer, to accept their award, which cemented them as one of the top five retailers in the world this year. Notably, Liz has worked for the Chopping Block for 15 years.

"It was an incredible experience – sharing that moment with Liz felt like a real acknowledgement of her hard work over many years," says Shelley. And although Andrea, who was integral in the application process, was not at the event, Liz and Shelley were texting, keeping her in the loop as the evening came to a well-deserved crescendo.

"Not only was it a genuine acknowledgement of my key team members and all of their hard work, and a special acknowledgement from our industry, this award helps our employees as a whole to connect with the fact that we are doing things well," Shelley says.

One thing is for sure, things aren't slowing down in Shelley's world, and she now has something else building steady momentum – she recently built a cooking innovation center in the countryside of Michigan. It's essentially a barn for experimentation, a place where Shelley can find answers to some questions that have arisen over the many years in her field.

"The barn is where I am working on filming, writing, recipes and product research and development, as well as exploring personal interests," she explains. "I am in a steep learning curve right now, developing and refining cooking techniques and skills. I am researching and playing with technology and how that supports education/cooking and communication. After 17 years of professional cooking and 21 years of teaching home cooks I have also developed a knack of understanding what

people want to know when it comes to cooking."

Shelley's passion for discovery is a massive driving force behind her success, and ultimately, like many long-term business owners, she has been aiming to do this for years – step away from the day-to-day running of the business so that she can focus on innovation. "In simple terms, I am reflecting on everything I have learned in the last forty years of cooking, and over the last 21 years since The Chopping Block was created. I'm looking for opportunities that support our mission of "Getting this Country Cooking" she says.

Additional information on the *gia* program is available at [www.housewares.org/show/gia-retail](http://www.housewares.org/show/gia-retail).

*For more information on the next International Home + Housewares Show, taking place in Chicago on March 2-5, 2019, please visit [www.housewares.org](http://www.housewares.org).*