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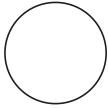
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Wes Shaver's inaugural fest is in Milwaukee, but he aims to bring the fest to Cleveland. He has some star power: Joe Thomas, who owns Hall of Fame Farms, is participating.



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Cleveland launching food-wine fest in Milwaukee featuring HOFer Joe Thomas

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By [Marc Bona, cleveland.com](#)

CLEVELAND, Ohio – A Northeast Ohio native who has been living in Milwaukee for two decades is launching a Great Lakes food and wine fest with hopes to bring it to Cleveland.

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Wes Shaver, a 41-year-old businessman, has some star power lined up for the inaugural Freshwater Food & Wine Festival this month: Joe Thomas, former Wisconsin standout and Cleveland Browns Hall of Famer. Thomas operates [Hall of Fame Farms](#), which specializes in premium Wagyu and Certified Angus beef, pasture-raised and hand-cut premium beef.

Shaver is founder and CEO of the fest, which [cleveland.com](#) understands Sunday, Sept. 19-20, on the lakefront in Milwaukee.

Shaver's background is intriguing.



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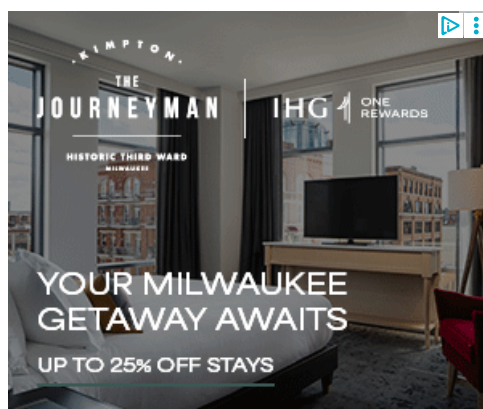
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He moved to Milwaukee in 2003 for college, earning a bachelor's degree in theater and master's in sports management from Cardinal Stritch University.

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His uncle owned [Good Olde Daze](#) bar on State Street in Parma. His grandfather was promoter/operator of Cloverleaf Speedway in Valley View.

"I grew up at Playhouse Square and the racetrack every weekend," he said. "It all ties back to my roots in Cleveland. It's just so funny how my upbringing and my past, from my grandfather and my mom taking me to Playhouse Square to see every show coming to town formed my adult life."

Every summer weekend in Milwaukee you can find a different ethnic and cultural event going on, said Shaver, who is president of that city's Pride Fest. Organizers work together, sharing resources and vendors while collaborating on the lakefront events.

"We're known as the city of festivals," he said.

Last August, he pitched a couple of festival ideas to organizer-operators at Henry Maier Festival Park, and that's how Freshwater Food & Wine Festival was born.

In his wide-ranging promotional career, Shaver also has co-owned restaurants.

"I thought to myself, 'Gosh, all these Midwest cities – Cleveland included – their food scene is blowing up,'" he said.

"I would always come back to Cleveland to research the scene. Michael Symon is my all-time favorite chef. I would come back to Cleveland, and I still do. I explore Ohio City, I go to Tremont, I go downtown. I'm always looking at what's going on in Cleveland because the food scene is so vibrant."



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Symon was unavailable for the Milwaukee fest, Shaver said.

“I was looking for intentional ways to tie Freshwater to my hometown,” said Shaver, who also has a boutique marketing firm that works with restaurants including [Carnevora](#), a steakhouse in Milwaukee. That’s how he learned about Thomas’ Wisconsin-based Hall of Fame Farms.

“I thought, ‘Wow, this is really an exceptional product.’”

“I had this idea: What if I pair up Joe Thomas - it’s a nod to my hometown, he’s an NFL Hall of Famer – and we collaborate with Joe Thomas, world-class athlete and person with a world-class steakhouse.”

Thomas is scheduled to take the main stage for “Hall of Fame & Flame,” a live culinary demonstration and steak masterclass alongside Carnevora Executive Chef Mario Giuliani.

Shaver lauded Thomas, who would be a good fit in either Milwaukee – close to his hometown of Brookfield, Wisconsin – or Cleveland, where he endeared himself to fans over a stellar 11-year career.

“He’s doing an incredible job with it (Hall of Fame Farms), he is such a wonderful guy. Working with him on this has been great.”

Shaver’s overriding goal is to launch Freshwater as an accessible food and drink fest.

It will feature 21 restaurants, primarily fine dining. Seven wine regions across the world will be represented and will include an area for sparkling wine. More than 80 wines will be poured, many of which are small-production and tough to find. Three full cocktail bars will be available, and he has partnered with comedian [Charlie Berens](#), who has a brand of Brandy out.



Three stages will be in play. A main one will have celebrity chefs and kitchen demos while two will be for music: Pearl and pop, a raw bar with sparkling wine and live jazz, and Fox Meadow, a mini outdoor amphitheater with acoustic acts.

“I wanted to create a food and wine event that allows people to choose their own adventure,” he said.

Admission is \$35 and comes with a souvenir acrylic stemless wine glass. Food is all a la carte.

“This is an event that meets people where they are,” said Shaver, who has eyes on adding Cleveland as a location.

“I picked a name that would allow me to do this event on basically any Great Lake. I intentionally called it ‘Freshwater,’ and I didn’t want to give it a Milwaukee-centric name because it would limit the opportunity to bring it to Cleveland,” he said.

“I’m very in touch with Cleveland,” he said. “My intention was this would be the vehicle to help me get back in touch with my hometown.”

After the inaugural fest is in the books, he hopes to make inroads with stakeholders in Cleveland. He’s also eyeing Detroit as a possible venue.

“This style of event, in its format, would be something that would really fit in Cleveland’s cultural DNA in its current state of hospitality and restaurants,” said Shaver, who is hoping to keep the festival in late summer/early fall - September, early October.

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“In Milwaukee we have this saying, ‘There’s always room for you at the table, there’s always room at the bar.’ You can always pull up a bar stool, sit next to a stranger, there’s always room. I kind of like that as the spirit of the event.”

Serendipitously, his favorite movie is [“Major League.”](#) He has seen the 1989 film, about a hapless Cleveland Indians team, countless times and remembers his dad telling him about Bob Uecker and the fact that the movie was filmed in Milwaukee County Stadium.

Shaver also is producing another festival in Milwaukee in 2027 – Rock and Roll Fest. He describes it as a “decades car show” from the 1950s to early 2000s.

“Stages will play the music of the era of the cars,” he said. Think tribute bands playing Beach Boys, The Beatles, Elvis Presley and Roy Orbison for the older cars to vehicles of the 1980s and ‘90s set to the backdrop of Journey and Billy Joel.

“I also envision that one being a great fit for Cleveland,” he said.

First, Shaver has the debut fest in Milwaukee  [cleveland.com](https://www.cleveland.com) al with. But his hometown stays with him.

“I can’t reinforce how much I love Cleveland,” he said.



Marc Bona

As a features writer on cleveland.com's life and culture team, I primarily cover food, restaurants, beer, wine, sports entertainment and sports history. I have written four books, all on sports including "Not...more

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