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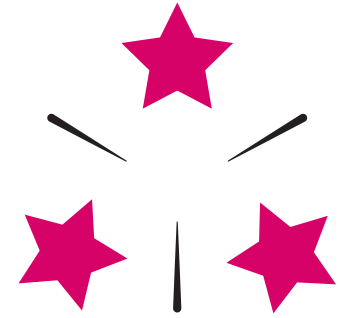
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# Your Passport to Community Fun

## VALLEY FORGE TOURISM AND CONVENTION BOARD



Aja Cramer



By Kathy Hunt

Many communities boast of having something for every taste and occasion, but few deliver on that claim as well as Montgomery County. Famous, historic sites; museums, galleries, and one-of-a-kind shops; live music venues, theaters, and festivals; sports complexes, golf courses, and hiking trails; wineries, distilleries, breweries, and countless cafes and restaurants — the list goes on and on. With so much on offer, one could easily miss out on some of the fun. This is where the **Valley Forge Tourism and Convention Board (VFTCB)** steps in. Founded by the Montgomery County Commissioners in 1963, the nonprofit sales and marketing organization makes “inspiring the world to fall in love with Montgomery County, PA” its mission and spreads the word about the abundant entertainment options on offer in the community.

As times change, the VFTCB has evolved with them. Today, the organization possesses a strong social media presence on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and LinkedIn with over 200,000 total followers across all social platforms. It sends out bimonthly newsletters and keeps an updated list of county-wide events on its website [www.valleyforge.org](http://www.valleyforge.org). Simply click on its events page, scroll down to “This Weekend,” and you’ll find a full rundown of activities taking place each week in Montgomery County.

PHOTOS BY STYLISH IMAGES



## Digital passports for savings and fun

For convenience and speed in the digital age, the Valley Forge Tourism and Convention Board has created several online offerings to help visitors discover attractions, lodging, dining options and discounts. First-time travelers to the region will appreciate the Visit Valley Forge app. Available for both Android and Apple phones, the app helps users find hotels, maps, events, and more. Visit Valley Forge includes free digital guides of area attractions, outdoor and family-friendly activities, daily itineraries, and tour information. From the app, users can also search for nearby hotels, restaurants by cuisine, and coupons.

Anyone attending a local convention, meeting, or sporting event can sign up to receive exclusive mobile discount passes from local restaurants, shops, and attractions through the digital Show Your Badge. Those who register for Show Your Badge receive emailed and texted savings passes to such businesses as Norristown's Five Saints Distilling, Lochel's Bakery in Hatboro, Black Powder Tavern in Devon, and Oaks' American Treasure Tour Museum. To redeem the discounts, simply display the passes at the designated locations.

In 2022, through the mobile tech startup Bandwango, the Valley Forge Tourism and Convention Board launched three digital passports — Montco Makers Passport, Montco History Pass, and #MakeItMontco Family Fun Savings Passport. As with Show Your Badge, there's no fee or app involved. People sign up online to receive texts and email containing their digital passports.

"We have really started to focus on experience passes through our digital passports," said Aja Cramer, VFTCB membership sales manager. "They are somewhat gamified to entice you to explore more places in the county and experience the fun things that residents in particular have in their own backyards."

The Montco Makers Passport encourages folks to try out wine, beer, and spirits from roughly 22 local producers. Upon arriving at a participating Montgomery County vineyard, brewery, or distillery, guests take out their phones and check in at that location. Anyone who checks in at 15 different drinking establishments receives a free Montco Makers pint glass and the satisfaction of having imbibed some of the best beverages made in the county.

With the Montco History Pass, history lovers can step back in time. The pass leads them on a self-guided tour through 17 historical sites, including the 18th century Georgian-style Pottsgrove Manor in Pottstown, 19th century Hope Lodge and Mather Mill in Fort Washington, and the renowned, 3,500-acre Valley Forge National Historic Park. The park is where General

George Washington and the Continental Army camped during the bitter winter of 1777-78.

"We are so lucky to have Valley Forge National Park in our backyard. It's an internationally recognized park that draws people from all over the world," Cramer said.

As with the Montco Makers Passport, the more historic places visited and more check-ins made, the more likely visitors will take home a souvenir from their journeys. With the Montco History Pass, intrepid travelers accrue points to earn such prizes as a Montco History Pass sticker, mug, and tote bag.

The #MakeItMontco Family Fun Savings Passport allows out-of-towners and locals to enjoy discounted, family-friendly destinations such as the Elmwood Park Zoo, LEGOLAND Discovery Center Philadelphia, and the shop at Crazy Aaron's. Deals on local hotels may also be obtained through the passport.

Whether traveling for business or pleasure or planning a busy staycation, sign up for one, or all of, these digital offerings. You'll be on the path to exciting adventures and savings in the Valley Forge region.

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## COVER STORY

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# Forming a community for local businesses

With the abundance of sites and savings available at the click of a button, it's easy to see how tourists benefit from the VFTCB. But what about the advantages for its 520 business members? Those are equally plentiful.

After filling out a membership application and paying an annual due of \$300, businesses have access to all the resources and support that the VFTCB provides.

"We have a very dedicated sales team that is both creative and aggressive in their approach," Cramer said. "We really rally behind our businesses and get as much funding as we can to support them and any special events."

The VFTCB features its members in such tourism-focused publications as the *Montco Arts Guide*, the culinary-focused *Crave Montco*, and the official *Visitors guide to Valley Forge and Montgomery County*. A new visitors guide comes out in May 2023.

In addition to promoting its members in print and online publications, through social media, and on such travel websites as Expedia and Tripadvisor, the VFTCB runs advertising spots on Philadelphia and other Mid-Atlantic television stations and on iHeartRadio, the broadcast, podcast and radio streaming platform owned by iHeartMedia. These ads drive traffic to the Valley Forge website, where people can research and plan their time in Montgomery County.

Cramer noted that, in 2022, the website had 1.3 million views. In recent years, the board has also seen an uptick in visitors from New York City and Washington D.C., which Cramer attributed to people yearning to take a break from city life and explore the suburbs and outdoors a bit more.

The VFTCB not only promotes its members but also creates connections between them.

"Being that COVID is officially behind us in the rearview mirror, we have finally got back into hosting our networking events," Cramer said.



Tumoor Haye



Sweta Patel

"We've introduced a new member network that we're really proud of called Montco Meetups. We have been hosting these meetups about once a month, trying to hold them all over the county. We've held them in Ardmore, Pottstown, and Collegeville and we plan to do Skippack. We're connecting with communities again and showing them that we are here to support them," she said.

Tumoor Haye, general manager of Redstone American Grill in Plymouth Meeting, spoke about the support on offer from the VFTCB. "The scope of what they do is massive," Haye said. "We have been able to attend talks, meet-and-greets, and many of the activities that the VFTCB hosts. They always have something going on, which has really helped us expand outside of our four walls. The VFTCB is there for whatever support you may need. They make sure that anything you want to be involved in is available to you. Their team is with you every step of the way."

Haye added that Redstone American Grill had been looking for a way to reach a larger dining audience and increase its patronage and that belonging to the VFTCB has resulted in this. The restaurant has entered its fourth year of membership and participation in the organization's events.

Sweta Patel, a co-owner of Vitality Bowls in King of Prussia, said, "Their monthly meetups are a huge plus for networking — knowing more people and businesses and, eventually, some [lead] into collaborations. I can't be thankful enough for them. Also, [we are] generating new leads through their internal portal exclusively for members. It's a great way to do your marketing or brand awareness through social media and be part of community events."

As a new member of VFTCB, Patel encouraged others to join the organization, too. "Without a doubt, spend \$300, and you will see amazing results in no time," she said. "When there are events in the area, being a member, you have the privilege to be recommended first. And we surely do see this as a great benefit to us, especially for the unique items we offer in our Health-il-cious Menu."

Along with monthly member meetups, the VFTCB throws an annual travel luncheon. This year, members will gather at the Commonwealth National Golf Club in Horsham.

"We invite all of our members to come and celebrate all things travel and tourism, give them a pat on the back, and get everyone excited about all the successes that we experienced in 2022," Cramer said. "We also give them some insight into what we have planned for the rest of the year."



## What's on tap for 2023?

On July 1, the VFTCB will kick off its Crave Montco month.

"Restaurants were hit so incredibly hard by the pandemic; our worlds were turned upside down," Cramer said. "Now that everything is kind of getting back to normal, we really want to draw attention to the local dining scene and give people a reason to come out and experience all these great restaurants. We ask each participating food- and beverage-based member to come up with a special craving — what makes them special, what makes them stand out. We promote that throughout the county all month long on local news and radio stations and social media and show them the love that we feel for them," she said.

She noted that the VFTCB is a bit unique in that the dining establishments, not the VFTCB, decide how they will participate in Crave Montco month. They may feature a special discount or a dish or cocktail that the chef creates for the event. Crave Montco runs from July 1 through July 31.

From September 20 to October 1, 2023, the Arts Montco Week and Montco Jazz Fest will take place throughout the county. As part of the third annual Arts Montco Week, approximately 15 local artists will open the doors to their studios on the Montgomery County Studio Tour. Held on September 23 and September 24, the Montgomery County Studio Tour gives art fans the rare chance to visit artists in their workspaces. At each studio they can chat with the artists and acquire spectacular paintings, sculptures, pottery, textiles, jewelry, and other artwork. Classes, workshops, and demonstrations are likewise held during Montco Arts Week. So, too, are special exhibits, talks, and discussions at galleries, community centers, and colleges.

*"We're connecting with communities and showing them that we are here to support them."*

*- Aja Cramer*



Similar to the arts festival, the second annual Montco Jazz Fest highlights local performers in a variety of Montgomery County venues, including Glenside's Keswick Theater, Pottstown's Rivet: Canteen and Assembly, and King of Prussia's V Lounge at Eddie V's Prime Seafood.

"We're doing something a little different this year and focusing on women in jazz, which will be quite a fun highlight," Cramer said. "There will be nightly jazz and jazz brunches all across the county. The event draws attention to the diverse culture that we have and to that fact that, outside of Jazz Fest, local restaurants that you wouldn't normally think of have live jazz on a regular basis."

Details about these events will be posted in the coming months at [www.valleyforge.com](http://www.valleyforge.com).

## A deep, impactful commitment to the community

VFTCB's commitment to Montgomery County runs deep and wide. For eight years, it has partnered with the Montco Anti-Hunger Network (MAHN) to ease an issue faced throughout the United States — food insecurity. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing cost of living, more families and individuals now struggle to pay for food. In 2021 alone, more than ten percent of the U.S. population faced food insecurity. To help alleviate hunger in Montgomery County, the VFTCB runs an annual fall food drive. Known as "Freedom from Hunger," the drive benefits MAHN and its 47 county-wide food pantries.

In March 2023, the VFTCB held its first springtime Freedom from Hunger fundraiser.

"This year, we've ramped up our relationship with MAHN," Cramer said. "Now more than ever, local families are experiencing food insecurity. With inflation, the dollar doesn't stretch that far, and the need for assistance is bigger than ever. Anything that we can do to be a part of the solution, we will always support the community in any way," Cramer said.

Throughout the month of March, the VFTCB collected monetary donations on its website. The goal was to secure enough financial funding to purchase 30,000 pounds of food and supplies.

"We thank all of our partners and members for being able to help us reach our goal and support the community in this way," Cramer said.

The VFTCB was also a supporter of MAHN's COVID-19 Response program, which, according to MAHN's website, served 84,873 individuals from March 2020 to February 2021.

For information about attractions, events, and deals in Montgomery County or to become a member of the Valley Forge Tourism and Convention Board, visit the organization online at [www.valleyforge.org](http://www.valleyforge.org).

### Montco MeetUp

