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Michelle Mize started Sun Cookery to share the importance of community, friendship, and the Southern tradition of welcoming others with open hearts and homes.

Enduring Ethos

Michelle Mize creates Sun Cookery to encourage Southern hospitality, connections, and a rich tapestry of cultural expression.

Story by Cara Clark

Photos by Sirena Singleton and Ashton Henry

Southern hospitality is deeply ingrained in culture and traditions, embodying a genuine desire to make others feel welcome and at ease. That's one reason Southerners are known for sharing what they have — a slice of cake, a glass of sweet tea, or bright inspiration.

Entertaining and inspiring are inherent in the soul of Michelle Mize, creator of Sun Cookery and a North Carolina Southerner to the bone. When she moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, with husband Darren 15 years ago, Michelle realized her comfort zone was set differently than that of the friends she met in her new realm. While she had her compass set for a return to the South from the outset — the couple recently moved to Charleston, South Carolina — this hostess went with her heart and carried on traditions she had grown up with, welcoming people to her home.

“In the Midwest, I did those things we do in the South,” she says. “We had margarita parties, taco trucks, and steak and wine nights. We did all the things you do to build community. After a decade of that, we realized people (in that region) didn't invite people into their space. Instead of being sad about it, I started to think about why it was different.”

As a dynamo combination of thinker and doer, Michelle needed to know more. It catalyzed casual Q&A sessions with groups of women friends and acquaintances.

“I spent about a year hosting different dinners and asking people about entertaining,” she says. “I came up with all sorts of different answers: ‘Well, I'm really busy.’ ‘It's very exhausting to host.’ ‘I just don't have the right stuff right now.’ ‘My house just doesn't look right.’

“These are all real issues that I can appreciate. I thought, ‘What if I put together the ultimate box with its own personality?’ You would feel like you could create a beautiful space, and it would be easy to have a gathering. It doesn't have to be a 10-person event. You could have your best friends over or invite new neighbors or colleagues. You create a groundswell if you have a strong community and invite people in. I'm passionate about authentic hospitality, original food, and





intentional connections that create thriving communities.”

With the firm belief that community starts in the home, Michelle encourages hosts and hostesses of all ages to open their doors without feeling every detail has to be perfect. The magic is in the moment of coming together, whether over dinner or easy bites and beverages.

With that, she created the first of four boxes, the Foundations Box, which showcases her exuberant enthusiasm, marketing savvy, and charismatic creativity. Each piece of the whole is meticulously curated, expertly assembled, and rich with meaning.

“My goal with Sun Cookery is to encourage people to start hosting again at home,” Michelle says. “The concept of putting everything in a box was based on listening to what women told me was holding them back. And then each box evolved out of a cultural expression of different things that have appealed to me and have always made me feel at home.”

With a magnetic personality that draws people in, making them feel comfortable and welcomed, Michelle is a natural at entertaining. Through her curated boxes, she is giving others the tools to do the same. All the experiences she has collected over time — degrees in entrepreneurship, small business management, and marketing, a Culinary Certificate from Kendall College, and a high-

pressure role in corporate marketing for Fortune 500 companies — have set her up to bring back the lost art of entertaining.

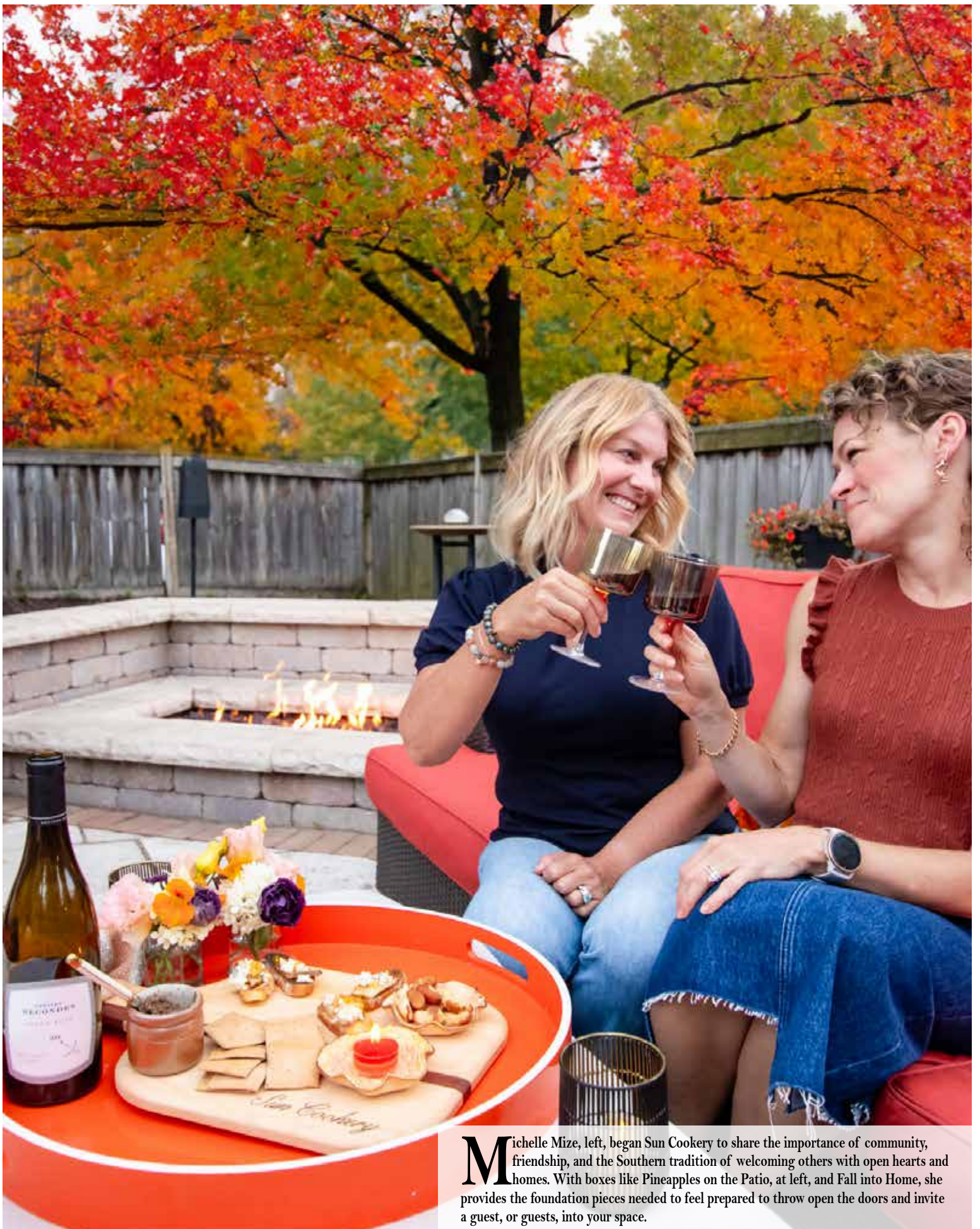
FAMILY AND FELLOWSHIP

“Life is funny,” says Michelle, who grew up in New Orleans, Louisiana; Tampa, Florida; and on the Carolina coastline. “We all have chapters in our life, and as I started to pull the boxes together, I realized I was tapping into core memories. I was looking back to how I felt about what was important.”

When she mocked up the first box, pulling together pieces and textures, she was reminded of her paternal grandmother — not for any piece or pattern — but as a reminiscence of the comforting feelings of nurturing and warmth. Both of her grandmothers made simple but memorable touches in the way they cooked, cared for family, or served that Southern essential — sweet tea.

“They didn’t get out their linens, but I always knew how my Grandma Betty’s table in Concord, North Carolina, would be set and what it felt like at the home of my grandmother, Margaret, who lived on the beach in North Carolina. They had their own style. That was a lot of the inspiration behind that first box, and it evolved from there.”

From the outset, Michelle had four boxes in her head: The Foundations Box, which gave



Michelle Mize, left, began Sun Cookery to share the importance of community, friendship, and the Southern tradition of welcoming others with open hearts and homes. With boxes like Pineapples on the Patio, at left, and Fall into Home, she provides the foundation pieces needed to feel prepared to throw open the doors and invite a guest, or guests, into your space.



The Fall into Home box includes pieces that create a warm ambiance, including a trinket dish made with an impression from her grandmother's doily. Pineapples on the Patio brightens a gathering with wooden dishes and pineapple glasses while The Foundations Box gives placemats, tablecloths, napkins, and napkin rings that can be combined with favorite things for a special gathering.

everyone the essentials, classic pieces in neutral tones to make them effortless to mix and match. Fall into Warmth adds special touches to subtly pull together a party in the cozy spaces of a home. Pineapples on the Patio salutes a Bahamian getaway's easy, breezy feeling. Wrapped in Warmth makes hostess gift giving easy — a box filled with ready-wrapped, thoughtful appreciation — it's easy to grab and go out for a festive gathering.

Inspired by trips to the Bahamian islands of Abacos and Eleuthera, the Pineapples on the Patio box pays tribute to the history of the pineapple as a symbol of hospitality. With bright pops of colors and flavor combined with foundation pieces such as versatile pineapple glasses (or vases or treat holders) and wooden appetizer plates, the idea is to entertain wherever you're comfortable. If the kids have toys strewn about, open an outdoor space to your guests. It's not about preparing a full meal; it's simply coming together.

In her blog, Michelle shares insight about how to add personal pieces to the boxes and the perfect

drink recipes for a seasonal party.

The Fall into Home box feels warm and soulful — and tangerine-colored trinket dishes have a special significance for Michelle. She selected Melissa Reddick of Clay Works in North Carolina to craft the multipurpose handmade bowls, preserving the patterns from her Grandma Betty's crocheted doilies.

"It reminds me of when I was younger and spent summers in the Carolinas with both sets of my grandparents," Michelle reflects. "Those times with your grandparents growing up are really special — you have these tender moments. When I was pulling together the Fall into Home box, I knew something was missing — I'd seen Melissa's stuff and had earmarked her for a concept, but I wasn't sure what. When I realized something was missing, those dishes found their way into the box."

The Wrapped in Warmth box also reflects impressions left by her maternal grandmother, Grandma Margaret. It's a way to help people be



“It doesn’t need to be an over-the-top dinner or cocktail hour, but just those moments when your friend stops by to talk, and you need to open a bottle of wine, put out something salty, and have that deep conversation.”

great guests.

“Y’all don’t show up empty-handed, but also don’t show up with a bottle of wine that you picked up on your way,” Michelle says humorously. “This box helps you feel like you put some thought into it. My Grandma Margaret always had a gift drawer to keep things from when we were out and about and saw something cute. My mom did the same thing. They would say they didn’t know who it was for, but, ‘Oh, we’ll just put it in my gift drawer.’”

During summers with her Grandma Betty, Michelle recalls how it felt to be “wrapped in warmth,” waking to the aroma of frying bacon. Her grandmother would savor a cup of coffee at the breakfast table while writing a list — not her own agenda for the day but with care for others.

“It was usually a list of who we would drop off tomatoes to or who was getting a cake,” Michelle says. “That was how she thought about her day. I’m generalizing, but I feel the world doesn’t wake up anymore and think of others. The first thing we think of is our needs and our calendars. I feel like thinking of others is part of being hospitable. Let’s wake up and think about, ‘What does that neighbor need?’ We’re so laser-focused on our calendars that we’ve forgotten to look out for each other. I want that to be part of what Sun Cookery is saying: ‘Stop by and let’s chat.’”

OPENING THE DOOR

Michelle remembers cooking with her grandmothers when she was young. Already her passion for entertaining was evident. It was a highlight of her day to set the table and add her own personal touches to her grandmother’s dishes and cutlery — a point of humor among family members. Michelle was in her element as she earnestly dashed around the house, finding this or that piece to add to the table.

If hydrangeas were blooming in the yard, she was cutting the blooms and arranging them with “random foliage” in a receptacle of some sort to add decor to the table. Sun Cookery makes so much sense

when Michelle’s past comes into perspective.

“I have all of my old Martha Stewart magazines,” Michelle confesses. “At one point, I’ve cut them all apart and refiled them by good things, home décor, and seasons. These are old — really old. Her early content was so original — that was before Pinterest, and I love that people get inspired and put their riffs on things. But I remember when I first saw Martha Stewart magazines, it was more photo journalistic in nature. That creatively really left a mark on my brain. I knew I had this knack for seeing things and pulling them together — it was a monumental moment when I saw that first Martha Stewart magazine.”

Michelle encourages people to examine what they already have and look for decorative elements and heirlooms in their homes to contribute personal flair to accompany the painstakingly curated pieces in her first four boxes.

“I have always enjoyed the ideation of bringing people together and bringing ideas to life and standing back and watching it,” Michelle says. “I love seeing how people have their take on these boxes that mean so much to me. My next step is creating videos to show people how to shop their house and pull their pieces together with what they have in the boxes. One person plans to pass around a box in her book club, and they’ll see how differently everyone sets them up. Things like that make me so happy.”

