

# Michelle Dukes with The Cookie Cutters

**David Crabill:** Welcome to the Forrager podcast where I talk with cottage food entrepreneurs about their strategies for running a food business from home. I'm David Crabill, and today, I'm talking with Michelle Dukes.

[00:00:10] But real quick, I wanted to check, have you created a website for your business yet? And if you have, do you pay for it? A lot of entrepreneurs still think they need to spend money to get a good website and that is simply not true anymore.

[00:00:23] I am a really big fan of Square Online. That's what I use for my fudge business' website, and I created a free tutorial that will walk you through how to set up a totally free website in less than an hour. case you think free also means cheap, it's actually quite the opposite. I think Square Online is hands down the very best website tool for most cottage food businesses. So if you wanna learn more, you can watch my free tutorial by going to [forrager.com/website](http://forrager.com/website).

[00:00:47] Alright. So I have Michelle Dukes on the show today.

[00:00:51] She lives in Penfield, New York and sells jumbo muffins and cookies with her cottage food business, The Cookie Cutters. although Michelle has thousands of Facebook followers and has sold thousands upon thousands of baked goods over the last 13 years, she doesn't run her business to make a large profit or to become a brick and mortar someday.

[00:01:10] Rather, her business is primarily a social and creative outlet for her. And most importantly, she focuses on having fun with it. this episode, you'll hear how her business has changed significantly over the years and what she's learned along the way. with that, let's jump right into this episode.

[00:01:28] Welcome to the show, Michelle. Nice to have you here.

[00:01:32] **Michelle Dukes:** Thank you, David, and welcome to my kitchen.

[00:01:35] **David Crabill:** Michelle, I know you've listened to the podcast a lot. know how it works. Can you take me back to the beginning of this journey?

[00:01:42] **Michelle Dukes:** Oh, so long ago. It'll be 13 years coming up in March. I was 1 of those kids that decorated Christmas cookies at the table long after your siblings had already left. So, I was an art major in school, and so I seem to seek out creative outlets.

[00:02:03] I was always the 1 that would give you cookies for Christmas, and they always told me, oh, they're so beautiful, so delicious. You really should do this as a business. And, would always reply, well, no. I wouldn't wanna do that because then it wouldn't be any fun. It would just be work. In 2009, I found myself unemployed, and 1 of my friends, Marcy, wanted me to decorate cookies for her daughter's wedding in 20 10. So that was my first order, and that's when I realized people would pay me to make cookies.

[00:02:39] Didn't even know it was such a thing, uh, until I started looking into it. And back then, that was really when it all just started, when Sugar Belle started and Lila Loa was starting.

[00:02:50] **Michelle Dukes:** So there was only a little bit of information for me to follow along with at that time.

[00:02:56] **David Crabill:** So yeah. I mean, that's when, a lot of the cookie decorators got started back then. How did you learn when you started decorating?

[00:03:05] **Michelle Dukes:** I was able to find a few, blogs or videos from Sugar Belle, I believe. I remember seeing her, and I just did it. I made it my own because I don't use royal icing.

[00:03:18] I call it buttercream-ish, that was unheard of, but I didn't know I couldn't use it, so I made it work.

[00:03:25] **David Crabill:** And, it looked like you started the business with your daughter.

[00:03:30] Is that correct?

[00:03:31] **Michelle Dukes:** I did. That's why I made it plural, cookie cutters.

[00:03:36] She's kind of a backup. She has more talent than I have, art wise, and so she was a backup for if I had large order, if I needed help, she would help. She kind of grew out of that. She will help me once in a while if I have if I'm

over my head to this day, but not too much. She's a busy woman on her own now.

[00:03:56] **David Crabill:** How old was she at that point in 20 11?

[00:03:59] **Michelle Dukes:** Uh, 20 22.

[00:04:03] **David Crabill:** So she was already an adult by this point.

[00:04:07] **Michelle Dukes:** Yeah.

[00:04:08] **David Crabill:** Now, you started selling and can see from your Facebook page you made a lot of cookies that first year. Did this business take off immediately as soon as you started to sell?

[00:04:21] **Michelle Dukes:** obviously, it did ramp up. It wasn't instantaneous. I had a good circle of friends that was able to work cookies into whatever they did, so that helped. But, yeah, each year was a little bit more, and us cookiers as a personality trait hate to say no. And so it's easy to get over your head.

[00:04:43] **David Crabill:** do you feel like you've learned to say no over time? Or do you still feel like, you know, you're just doing as much and as many markets as you possibly can?

[00:04:56] **Michelle Dukes:** I think with age and wisdom, yes. I do say no to things a little more often. I'm more picky about what I do because I wanna be happy. So if I don't wanna do something that weekend, I won't do that show or know, I make what I wanna make.

[00:05:14] And so, yeah, I do say no more often. And this allows me to take time off that I need even just as self care or wanna do something with the grandsons or, you know, I can say, no. I don't wanna do that, so I'm gonna take that off. Like, after the holidays, the holidays are still quite busy. I And so come January I'm beat. I'm done. And I basically take all of January off. I might have taken February off too this year, but that's okay. If I can do it I just sometimes need that self care.

[00:05:50] **David Crabill:** When do you recall that first time when you felt like you're in over your head with cookies?

[00:05:57] **Michelle Dukes:** I don't remember the year. Probably a good 5 years into it, and it was Christmas. And I was doing Christmas cookies.

[00:06:08] And I had a regular customer, and I was doing her, uh, works Christmas party cookies for all her employees probably 3 other orders. And, I mean, there's many nights that you pull all nighters, but this was an all nighter. And I think the frosting was still wet when I was packaging them and tried to get her, you know, get them to she was she was at my house to pick them up, and I was still packaging cookies? it was a mess, And she was very polite and very understanding about That's when I knew, like, yeah, maybe I put off too much that I could chew.

[00:06:43] **David Crabill:** actually thought you were gonna say 2011 because I saw that cookie madness, as you call it, in 20 11. You made almost 4000 cookies that year.

[00:06:54] You you're telling me you were not over your head in 20 11?

[00:06:58] **Michelle Dukes:** Well, that's not decorated cookies. Yes. I tend to lose my mind, and that's why I call it cookie madness every Christmas. I take a week, and I just make cookies.

[00:07:09] And that's what we give to all our relatives and all our friends for Christmas is a box of assorted cookies. And I think each year, I tried to beat my old count. So each year, it went up from there. yeah, I lose my mind, and I make lots of cookies at Christmas.

[00:07:28] **David Crabill:** So when you started to sell in 20 11, I I don't even know if New York had laws back then. Was that something that you looked into at all?

[00:07:39] **Michelle Dukes:** I did not. so I don't know when New York State started, their cottage food movement. I didn't know, and I just was selling to friends and whoever liked my page. I was doing a lot of things that I shouldn't have been doing. There's a fear associated with it.

[00:07:56] Like, oh, I'm gonna have to be inspected. I, you know, I I can't go through all that, and I'll never pass. And so there's a fear associated with it. And so I I did a lot of things I wasn't supposed to do. But, eventually, I did, uh, do the right thing.

[00:08:11] I think it was 20 18 I finally got my New York State's home processor approval.

[00:08:16] **David Crabill:** Yeah. And by that point, their laws, I think, had just improved. For the longest time, they didn't let you do custom orders. Right? Correct. it was probably a year before that yes, I was trying to do what I supposed to do and do things the Right? way.

[00:08:38] **Michelle Dukes:** And so I did start looking into it. And, yeah, you weren't supposed to take custom orders. There was a lot of regulations, and I'm like, my whole business is custom orders. and at that time, I hate to admit, I was shipping everywhere because I didn't know you shouldn't. So I had customers all over the country.

[00:08:55] **David Crabill:** Well, the custom order thing never made any sense to me. You know, it was like, why does it matter whether it's a custom order or not? But from my understanding, it's because, the law only allowed you to sell from markets.

[00:09:10] Is that right?

[00:09:11] **Michelle Dukes:** Yes. You could only, sell from, farm agricultural outlets. So like a farmer's market. Like, you couldn't go into a craft show, but you could only do agricultural settings is I think the way they I forget how they put it.

[00:09:26] **David Crabill:** Right. was the Ag department in New York that oversaw the law. because they were the ones that managed all that, that was where the restriction on custom orders came in because the custom order would be overseen by the health department and there was no law to allow that at that time. So

[00:09:46] I guess the Ag department has just, made their own rules over time and especially during the pandemic, everything's gotten a lot better, and you could do a lot now with the law. Right?

[00:09:55] **Michelle Dukes:** Yes.

[00:09:57] I feel very comfortable. I realized that I didn't check the website that often. So when I finally heard from somebody, I don't know, in passing, that we could finally branch out and we could sell at any type of, vendor show, craft show, farmer's markets that we could even, you know, we could take orders, and we could even start, selling wholesale that we could put our products into stores and things like that.

[00:10:25] So that was pretty exciting. then I started doing shows.

[00:10:29] **David Crabill:** I know you've done a lot of shows, a lot of market. So where did that start?

[00:10:35] **Michelle Dukes:** I started farmers markets, about 2017, and I use the term farmers market very loosely because it was basically the farmer and me in the middle of a parking lot. I was actually a customer of hers, and so I'd gotten to know her through the years. And when I started thinking of doing all of this, I just well, let me ask her, see how much she would charge me to, uh, set up a table here. And she said, I won't charge you anything. I I want you to make money, so there's no charge. I was like, how can you beat that? I might as well try So that was a perfect opportunity for me get my feet wet and see what I was gonna have to do and just was a good opening for me. wasn't very popular. The funny story is in that plaza, there was a fitness center, and they're not usually looking for cookies or brownies to buy. And most of the farmers' clientele we're over 65. And so sugar isn't necessarily a beneficial thing for them either. So I really, um, had to pull some teeth to try and get some sales in there.

[00:11:47] But, we made some good friends and I had some good regulars, but was tough in that plaza.

[00:11:52] **David Crabill:** that was in 2017 that you started. So we're talking like 6 years here. Were you're just selling, on your own. You weren't selling at an event or anything. Right?

[00:12:03] **Michelle Dukes:** Correct. Yeah.

[00:12:04] **David Crabill:** and you were selling all over the country. So were you on Etsy? Were you advertising online?

[00:12:10] **Michelle Dukes:** No. I'm pretty old school. And even today, all I have is my Facebook page. I just take messages in my Facebook page, and they tell me what they want. And they would PayPal me the order, and I would ship it out to them. And that was just decorated cookies. Yeah. Cutouts.

[00:12:27] **David Crabill:** Yeah. It it's not typical for someone who's been running a business for over a dozen years to not have a website.

[00:12:35] that just because it was overwhelming to you, the technology, or did you make a conscientious decision that you you only wanted a Facebook page?

[00:12:43] **Michelle Dukes:** it was and still is overwhelming for me. I would say, I don't know. Saying I'm I get addicted very easily to social media. At that time, I was on either my personal page or my cookie cutter's page basically 24 7.

[00:13:01] I had it open all the time. I was just always on it. And I just knew that other things would be just too much for me. So, like, a website would be too much. I'm not even on Pinterest. You know? I mean, everyone's like, you gotta join Pinterest. I'm like, I can't. I just can't do it. You'll never see me.

[00:13:18] I won't ever leave the house. I just can't do it. So today, I still just have my Facebook page? and that's enough for me. Yeah.

[00:13:26] **David Crabill:** I I have seen that you're super duper active on Facebook. is that just because you're trying to expand your business or sounds like it's who you are. Right?

[00:13:38] **Michelle Dukes:** I think so. It's My husband says I overshare too much, but, it's just me. and I have the mindset of gonna go where it's gonna go. I try to do the best things that I can and help my business? But I don't, you know, I don't purchase ads. I don't do all the other marketing things. I just figure they'll find me. You know, if they find me, they want something, they'll let me know. And I'm just gonna do what I do and hopefully benefit from it.

[00:14:04] **David Crabill:** Well, you've managed to get over 6000 followers on your Facebook page now. Was that a gradual ramp up, or did you go viral at some point?

[00:14:15] **Michelle Dukes:** No. It was gradual. Actually, a lot of it was early on. I get a few filtering in from my farmers markets and things now, but, yeah, it's a fun following.

[00:14:26] It's all over the country and, a couple of famous people I've seen peek in once in a while, so that's exciting. it's great. I love the interaction.

[00:14:34] **David Crabill:** I noticed you did a lot of decorated cookies before and posted most of your decorated cookies, you know, years ago. And now you do a lot of muffins instead. And so do you think that's why a lot of those followers came in in the beginning because they liked looking at all the fun decorated

[00:14:53] **Michelle Dukes:** the decorated cookies. are a little bit flashier than, uh, muffins. But, the most recent farmer's market that I'm in currently that I started in, 20 22, when I inquired for them, they already had a baker. They already had somebody that did cookies. And me not really wanting to give up, I said, well, I make muffins too.

[00:15:16] She says, oh, well, we don't have anyone that does muffins, so I was in. So I'm like, okay. I'll do muffins now. So because I didn't mind. Baking is baking to me, and I'm fine switching gears.

[00:15:29] And I switched from the first farmer's market because it really died.

[00:15:33] it just fell off. I got so I couldn't, like, give things away. It was, uh, uh, I had overstayed my welcome, so to speak. And even the farmer, she just continued a year later. at that when I was selling everything, I was trying to please everybody.

[00:15:48] I was making drop cookies and cutouts and brownies and pound cakes, and I was doing regular size muffins. it's funny because the regular sized muffins, I'll say it again, I couldn't give them away. They just didn't want them. But the minute I changed them into jumbo muffins, then they sold like hotcakes. So if anything, don't give up.

[00:16:10] Keep trying. Change a little bit. You never know what people want.

[00:16:14] so now I make jumbo gourmet muffins for the farmer's market.

[00:16:18] **David Crabill:** So was that farmer's market the sole reason why you switched? Because it doesn't look like you make many custom decorated cookies at all now.

[00:16:28] **Michelle Dukes:** Yeah. I don't do many now. It's hard to sustain cutouts, uh, highly decorated cutouts. it's very easy to get burned out very quickly. And a lot of the cookie years that I came up with in the beginning, I can count on 1 hand how many are still doing them. They've moved on to either, uh, better things, like still cookie related, but into different areas of it, and some just don't do them at all. started having trouble with my hands because it is tough on your hands.

[00:17:00] It's tough on your body just sitting there piping and, and whatnot. So I kinda just tapered off went to doing the muffins. I still like doing the cutouts,



but I'm happy if I can just put frosting on them and some sprinkles and call it a day.

[00:17:17] **David Crabill:** Well, certainly, there are a lot of bakers that are really successful doing the custom decorated cookies now. but I'd say they're charging the right price for it, you know, and that sort of helps it be sustainable. what were you charging for your custom decorated cookies back then?

[00:17:36] **Michelle Dukes:** I had gone up to 40 dollars a dozen.

[00:17:40] **David Crabill:** Okay. So just over 3 dollars a cookie.

[00:17:44] **Michelle Dukes:** Yeah.

[00:17:44] **David Crabill:** I mean, definitely, I'd say that's probably on the lower end of what, you know, I see. Would you agree with that?

[00:17:51] **Michelle Dukes:** Yes. At the time that I went to 40, that was a high end, probably at least a couple years ago. 3 years ago, But, yes, I do know things have gone up quite a bit, and would be lowered today. Yeah.

[00:18:04] **David Crabill:** it's interesting that you said that when you switched the muffins from regular size to jumbo, all of a sudden started selling like hotcakes. And I've seen the same thing happen in the cookies.

[00:18:16] Right? Like selling regular size drop cookies. haven't seen a lot of people doing super well with that, but the jumbo sized cookies are you have been a huge trend in the last few years. So, that something that you've experimented with as well? I've seen this exact same thing. Yeah. Everything now is the jumbo cookies or the stuffed cookies, cookies the size of your hand. And, I did try 1 stuffed cookie, and it was good, but for me, it's not sustainable. I can't put that much work into it. And I think the area that I'm in isn't going to pay for the work that's needed to put into these gourmet kind of cookies. I do well with drop cookies. I do the drop cookies when I go to different craft shows because the craft shows aren't quite so muffin friendly.

[00:19:05] **Michelle Dukes:** They want cookies. So I do the drop cookies. the thing that I started to do at the farmer's market, because I couldn't do cookies because there was already somebody there that did cookies, I make now bites is what I call them. And they're kind of a layered cookie that I make in a mini muffin tin. So like Brookies would be the obvious thing.

[00:19:26] It's half chocolate chip cookie and half brownie, and that I have to have every week. So these bites seem to be, fun, and they like you know, they can eat them on the go. Like, I put 3 in a little cup and they can walk around the fair or walk around the farmer's market with them. that seems to work. So I get around the cookie restriction, and I kinda make these little bites, I call them. and what is your price point for these muffins or the bites?

[00:19:51] The jumbo muffins are 5 dollars, and I'll do a 4 for 18. And the bites are also 5 dollars, and they're 3 bites in a cup.

[00:20:01] **David Crabill:** So that sounds like some pretty good pricing there. 5 dollars for a muffin, and guess people aren't batting an eye at that price.

[00:20:10] **Michelle Dukes:** Not too much. Of course, you get some that do, and I understand that. I think rightfully so some of the ones that do get pretty involved and I probably should charge more than 5 dollars, but that seems to be a happy price point at the farmers markets.

[00:20:24] And and, that does well. A lot of times, they buy multiples, so they save a little bit. Yeah.

[00:20:28] **David Crabill:** Now I know you just got into wholesale. Right?

[00:20:31] **Michelle Dukes:** I did. Um, I have found a couple of places that I can take a few muffins in. It's been a very gradual uphill climb, so I haven't found the perfect fit for that yet.

[00:20:45] **David Crabill:** Are the stores also selling your muffins for 5 dollars?

[00:20:50] **Michelle Dukes:** The muffins for the retail go to 6 dollars?

[00:20:55] **David Crabill:** So it sounds like you'd like to do more stores, but it's been hard to get into them.

[00:21:01] **Michelle Dukes:** They're willing to let me try.

[00:21:04] So I haven't really had pushback as far as the stores. Uh, It's just getting the right fit, getting the right customers. The thing I worry about is I lose control of my product at that point. You know, I do go in and I will replace, and I'll pick up what's old and put in fresh.

[00:21:21] it's not like a week long. There's days that they don't have muffins. So, like, only the weekends. I will put muffins into the store only on the weekends. I feel I lose some control in it is all. I just gotta find the right fit. Haven't found the right customers.

[00:21:36] **David Crabill:** So even the stores you're in now, you're saying that's not working that well yet?

[00:21:41] **Michelle Dukes:** Correct. Like, I might sell I'll give them a dozen muffins to start with, and they only sold maybe 4. So then I would only give them 6 muffins.

[00:21:52] And it's so it's just a long climb. They did well in the holiday because everybody buys everything. I did a dozen, know, at that point for a couple of weekends. But, yeah, it's just a slow to get people to know you're there. And they're retail, they're not necessarily really repeat customers.

[00:22:10] So, like, it's a furniture store. 1 place is mainly a furniture store, but they have other vendors in this co op kind of thing. And I don't think there's a big repeat customer. So even if you know there's muffins there, they don't necessarily come back for more kind of idea.

[00:22:24] **David Crabill:** I wonder with the wholesale, you're not selling that much maybe because it's just people aren't looking for a muffin when they go to a furniture store.

[00:22:34] I don't know. But I was thinking about your decorated cookies and that if you theme them to different times of the year or whatever is going on at a particular time of the year, those might stand out at the checkout counter or wherever they're being displayed. you might have more success selling them. Maybe. I don't know.

[00:22:55] But it it might be worth testing.

[00:22:57] **Michelle Dukes:** Right. and I said furniture store.

[00:23:00] That's mainly what she opened the store for, but it's a co op. So she already had somebody that does cookies. So she was allowing the muffins. So, yeah, there was already a cookie presence there.

[00:23:11] luckily, I mean, they put them right by the register, so it's

[00:23:14] grab and go Kind of thing. it just really didn't, you know, like, I couldn't I I gave him a dozen and I couldn't sell a dozen.

[00:23:22] Like, I was like, jeez. You know, I can only take them 4 muffins this week, you know, kind of thing. And then the other place that I tried um, she had the same experience that they didn't do well, but during the week having something all the time, but she spotlights a baker on the weekends. So she would just bring in a different baker every weekend to have their things. Well, I did that, and it was alright, but It was just this Christmas, and, like, they're only good. 4 days max, like, just through the weekend is all I would sell But I was sick, and I wasn't able to go and pick up my things until, like, Monday or Tuesday, and they still had the muffins out for sale. And I'm like, thank God nobody bought them because they would be awful.

[00:24:08] So I lost that control. Like, even though I told them, oh, just, you know, through Sunday, I thought the sale was only through Sunday. They'd be, they'll be okay through Sunday, but they never took them down because I wasn't able to come pick them up. I kind of lost that control and I, I want to put out a good product. I don't want any, dings in my reputation.

[00:24:25] So, so I just haven't found the right fit for that yet.

[00:24:28] **David Crabill:** This is kind of, generic wholesale advice, but generally speaking, what I would recommend somebody going into wholesale is you have to focus a lot more on branding um, at that point. And you probably heard me talk about that on the podcast. But, if you don't focus on branding with your packaging and your labels, then you really have to have someone in the store advocating for you. Because obviously, you can advocate for yourself at the markets.

[00:24:56] But there's nobody in the store like the owner who's saying, hey, have you tried these muffins? Then, you know, your branding has to advocate for you.

[00:25:05] **Michelle Dukes:** That's true. You need that eye catcher. Yeah. Because if a customer comes to my table, they're buying a muffin.

[00:25:10] I can talk up my muffins, they'll buy a muffin?

[00:25:15] **David Crabill:** that's actually very surprising for me to hear. What do you say? Or how do you get people to buy a muffin if it's their first time interacting with you?

[00:25:24] **Michelle Dukes:** Um, I tend to bake only what I like. I don't like nuts, so I don't add nuts. You know, that kind of thing.

[00:25:32] I only bake what I like. So if I have leftovers, I'm eating So I put part of me into these muffins, and I can sit there stand there and tell you exactly what's in there. My peach cobbler muffins, I only make them during peach season. I only make them with that man's peaches because I buy them at the farmer's market, and I only make them during, you know, during peach season.

[00:25:56] After that, I don't make them. So they know it's a special thing.

[00:26:00] I make a cinnamon roll. Oh, it's got a gooey cinnamon center just like a cinnamon roll. It's got white chocolate chips in it. Yeah. These are really good.

[00:26:08] So if you come, you're buying a muffin.

[00:26:11] **David Crabill:** So you had told me before we started this interview that your business isn't super profit focused or profit driven. you tell me a little bit about what's behind that? Because I know you sell quite a lot.

[00:26:25] **Michelle Dukes:** I don't know if I have a good answer for that. Part of it maybe is I don't wanna think that I'm lazy, but I think part of it's laziness.

[00:26:35] Like, I want to do the baking. I want to be at the head of my table at farmer's markets. I say hi to everybody. that's the fun part for me. It kinda goes back to the beginning.

[00:26:47] Like, I don't want this to be work. I want it to be fun. And I have fun on my Facebook. I mean, do I keep track of stuff? Sure.

[00:26:54] I keep track of everything, but I'm happy if I make more than I spent at the grocery store for supplies. makes me happy. It puts mad money in my pocket. Am I getting rich to buy a new car? No.

[00:27:10] But I'm taking care of what needs to be taken care of, you know, so that's seems to be enough for me right now.

[00:27:15] **David Crabill:** I think you kinda touched on it there, but Like, what what's your why?

[00:27:19] Why do you do the business, and why you keep, you know, expanding it or changing it or adapting as you need to?

[00:27:25] **Michelle Dukes:** I think it's just I wanna have fun doing it. I wanna have fun. I want the fulfillment rather than the monetary. I'm outgoing at least with with strangers.

[00:27:37] I don't sell anything, I'm still having fun talking to everybody that comes to the shows kind of thing. At the farmer's market, I walk around and talk to all the other vendors. You know? know, I leave my table. I go it's a social thing for me.

[00:27:50] want it to? be more fun rather than, oh my god. I gotta make muffins today or, oh, I gotta do more cookies. You know? Can I take the day off? No.

[00:27:59] So I don't want it to be work kind of thing.

[00:28:02] **David Crabill:** So you're obviously a people person. You you do it for the social interaction. I'm thinking about the pandemic, you know, not as much social interaction. Was that a challenging time for your business?

[00:28:13] **Michelle Dukes:** it it was. It was pretty much nonexistent. I do know some bakers that profited through it that did Well Um, I was the type that I shut down.

[00:28:23] I didn't think anybody would want something from someone else's home. So I, I basically just stopped. I didn't do anything during the pandemic.

[00:28:31] **David Crabill:** Well, I did see Cookie Madness 2020 was pretty successful.

[00:28:36] **Michelle Dukes:** yeah. You gotta do cookie madness.

[00:28:40] **David Crabill:** Where did that come from? You know, you call it Cookie Madness. It's like an event. when does it start?

[00:28:45] When does it end? Like, how did this all this concept come up?

[00:28:48] **Michelle Dukes:** I have no idea. It just happened 1 year. And I I literally go crazy, and I decided to call it Cookie Madness. I name it the year

that I do it, and it's basically a week long worth of baking cookies. It's usually the week just before Christmas, and I make, thousands of cookies.

[00:29:10] I have fun with my Facebook when I start making this list of cookies that I wanna make, it's all drop cookies. I'll make 1 maybe 1 cutout so they have something pretty in the box. otherwise, they're all different drop cookies. And I start going through all my cookbooks, and I have my favorites, and then I wanna try new stuff. So I make a list of what I wanna make, and it turns out to be like 30 kinds of cookies.

[00:29:37] And I'm like, yeah, That's not realistic. And so I then I have to try to eliminate, and I get my husband and my daughter involved. Like, what should I cut out? What should I keep? So I try to narrow it down.

[00:29:49] I think I've gone down to, like, 12 kinds of cookies, and then I just make thousands of cookies. And, yes, I do count each 1 that I make.

[00:30:00] **David Crabill:** Well, it sounds like the creative aspect of this is important to you too. Right? You said at the beginning that you were an art major in college, I think.

[00:30:08] So so is that part of what drives you in this business as well?

[00:30:12] **Michelle Dukes:** Yes. Yes. I realized that my personality does need some type of artistic outlet.

[00:30:20] My previous job was at a country club, and I was, clerical. I was the receptionist, so I got to talk to people. That was good. And then my job in the office was to do their monthly newsletter. So that was creative for me formatting the newsletter and getting pictures and writing the articles and that kind of thing.

[00:30:40] So I guess no matter what I do, I tend gravitate towards that creative aspect. So, baking seemed a good fit.

[00:30:48] **David Crabill:** you know, you did the custom decorated sugar cookies for a long time. Obviously, that's creative. You switched over to mostly muffins now. Do you feel like that still kinda satisfies that creative need?

[00:31:02] **Michelle Dukes:** It does because I don't do anything simple. Like, I make peach cobbler muffin that I only make during peach season with fresh farm fresh peaches. And that I'm known for.

[00:31:16] They do come for those peach muffins. And I might, like, pick 2 recipes that I find and well, I don't wanna do that. I wanna add that to it, and let's combine these 2 recipes and make this different. And what kind of chips can I add to it? You know?

[00:31:32] mixing things up is pretty creative. And and if it has streusel on it, all the better.

[00:31:38] **David Crabill:** as you think back on when you did a lot of custom decorated cookies, were there any kind of designs that were your favorites or anything that you've made or baked that really stands out to

[00:31:52] **Michelle Dukes:** I always got a kick out of my regulars that wanted cookies on a regular basis. I felt I was being an a small part of their celebrations. Like, I I have a couple of families that I did their bridal shower cookies, and then I did their wedding cookies, and then I got to do baby shower cookies, and then I got to do birthday party cookies.

[00:32:15] So is a fun thing for me to see. I know the least favorite cookies that I did back in the day were these La La Loopsie dolls. That was some rage. I had never heard of them, but they were insane. I would charge a hundred dollars a dozen if I ever did them again.

[00:32:36] It was so many colors. They were hand cut. it was crazy. But some of the favorite ones, I liked doing minis. I was known as the mini queen and minis, I consider to be about an inch size cookie, and I loved doing those.

[00:32:52] They were just like this little mini piece of artwork, and my niche in this is that I frosted both sides of them. And so I figured more sugar the better. So those were always fun. I always love doing the minis.

[00:33:04] **David Crabill:** just thinking about, you know, you're you're a very social person, and, you know, you do this in large part for the social interaction. But of course, when you run a business like this, on the flip side of it, you gotta be stuck in your kitchen for a lot of the time too. Has that been a challenge at all?

[00:33:22] **Michelle Dukes:** It has.

[00:33:24] the beginning, not as much was just me and I had the free time. I mean, you know, my husband worked and I was unemployed and so I was home and so it was easier. These days, I am a grandmother of 2 grandsons, and I am a



full time grandma while my daughter's at work. So they make it quite a bit more challenging. So I have dedicated days that she has to work around during farmer's market season like last year for the farmer's market, I made muffins from the time I got up to the time I went to bed.

[00:33:59] It was all? muffins and packaging to be ready for the market in the morning.

[00:34:03] **David Crabill:** How old are your grandsons?

[00:34:06] **Michelle Dukes:** A 9 year old And a 2 year old. happily, the 9 year old is a little more self sufficient, but the 2 year old is a little more demanding.

[00:34:15] **David Crabill:** And are you taking care of the 2 year old every day of the week?

[00:34:19] **Michelle Dukes:** Uh, 5 days a week.

[00:34:21] **David Crabill:** Wow. So you're just as busy as any stay at home parent.

[00:34:25] **Michelle Dukes:** Yes. Yes. I am. Yes. I am.

[00:34:29] And at the time, I never knew how they ever did it. Well, you know, when I was doing cookies by myself, you know, friends and you hear of people, 3 kids, and they're still doing all these cookies. I'm like, I don't know how they do it. I wouldn't be able to do it with

[00:34:43] **David Crabill:** I mean, has your your business sort of, like, pulled back quite a bit with little baby in the house?

[00:34:50] **Michelle Dukes:** I'll let you know this year because last year, I didn't have them as much I was able to uh, work my schedule.

[00:34:58] like I said, every Monday, I would bake from sunup to sundown. My markets are on Tuesday and Wednesdays. They're both evening markets. So it worked into the schedule. I didn't have them as much last year.

[00:35:11] This year, I have them, like I said, 5 days a week 40 hours a week, be going to markets with me. So, I'll let you know this year.

[00:35:22] **David Crabill:** Is there ever part of you that just thinks, you know, I'm a happy grandma, busy, like, I don't need to have a business on top of this?

[00:35:30] **Michelle Dukes:** No. I kinda need the business. You know, they are our lives and but they go home.

[00:35:36] You know, I get to send them home. I need to still have this?

[00:35:39] this outlet in my life. I just have to remember I'm not as young as I used to be.

[00:35:45] **David Crabill:** So how often do you do the markets? what does your season or year look like?

[00:35:52] **Michelle Dukes:** Yeah. I'm in New York, we have pretty long winters, our market season is only from June to And I do the 2 markets a week, Tuesday and Wednesday evenings. I wish it was longer. I wish they'd start a little earlier, but people come for the produce, and there just isn't any produce before June. So

[00:36:13] **David Crabill:** So then do the bulk of your sales in a year just revolve around those months?

[00:36:20] **Michelle Dukes:** Yes. Yeah. there's a few I'll do a few shows before that. I'll start maybe in another month or so and start doing a few shows maybe once a month or something like that. There's a couple of big shows that I'll do during the summer, big festivals that Just takes up my weekend.

[00:36:36] It really doesn't even interfere with the markets because they're during the week. So it works pretty well.

[00:36:42] **David Crabill:** Just scrolling through your Facebook feed, it looked like you've done a lot of non farmers markets. Like, a lot of shows, a lot of festivals.

[00:36:51] these things that you do every year? Seems like you do a lot.

[00:36:54] **Michelle Dukes:** I go to my hometown and I always did this they have a chalk sidewalk chalk festival, and I started that in um, like around 20 18. That was before I was approved. And so I think that was not an agricultural setting, so I probably shouldn't have been there, but because it was hometown And you knew everybody, they did, you know, they didn't seem to mind. so I

did that probably off the books for a few years, but now I can do it, quote unquote legally. So that festival I did every year and that was just for fun. I was successful at it so it made me keep coming back. And then just this holiday season in 20 22 is when I really started doing the holiday markets know, through October, November, and December. I was new.

[00:37:42] This was something new for me and just trying to find different markets in the area and just going every weekend and, again, just having fun.

[00:37:49] **David Crabill:** And so during farmer's market season, are you doing, like, 1 market a week, 2 markets a week?

[00:37:57] **Michelle Dukes:** markets a week, Tuesday and Wednesdays, surrounding towns. One's about a half hour for me, so they're they're all pretty local, but 2 a week?

[00:38:06] **David Crabill:** about how much are you selling on a weekly

[00:38:10] **Michelle Dukes:** I make basis? 5 different varieties of muffins, and I probably make between 20 30 of each kind. Do I have leftovers?

[00:38:24] Sure. And and luckily, muffins freeze really well. But that seems to be a pretty good number, and that will usually hold me for the 2 days, the 2 markets. I have been known to really sell out the first day and have to make more that night for the next day's market, but that's a good thing.

[00:38:41] **David Crabill:** So you're taking your leftovers and you do freeze them to sell later. you're just busy the day beforehand? Like, do you have a dough day and a bake day, or is it all just all in 1 day?

[00:38:54] **Michelle Dukes:** It's all in 1 day. From the time I get up to the time I go to bed, it's all muffins. I want them to be as fresh as possible, and so there's not a whole lot of things I can do ahead of time if I want them as fresh as possible. Now the cookie bites, yes. I usually will do them the day before.

[00:39:14] So, like, say on Sunday, I'll do the bites, and then um, all day Monday, I do muffins.

[00:39:19] **David Crabill:** And with the markets, are you selling mostly to regular customers? Are a lot of customers new?

[00:39:29] **Michelle Dukes:** I have a lot of regulars, The markets that I'm in have room for growth. they are continually trying to get more and more people in, more vendors, that helps to bring more people in. I do have my regulars, but yes, I do I still see newbies coming, so that's always fun.

[00:39:48] **David Crabill:** Do you do samples at markets?

[00:39:51] **Michelle Dukes:** I don't.

[00:39:53] it depends. If I have something really outlandish that I don't know what people will think, then I may have some samples. But on a regular basis, no, I don't. I will do some samples at, like, some of the more holiday craft shows to do cookies. I'll give samples of some of the cookies.

[00:40:10] **David Crabill:** I know you've been doing markets for years and you've done a lot of shows, a lot of markets.

[00:40:17] What does your booth look like these days that, you know, maybe you've learned things over time in order to sell more or, you know, what how has that changed over time?

[00:40:28] **Michelle Dukes:** My tent has gotten better, much better. You need a really good tent. I've had fun making banners. You might have see because I'm in this new market for the last couple of years. I switched to muffins.

[00:40:42] And so Facebook page has a split personality now. Half of it is the cookie cutters. And for the market, I'm now become the personality of making muffins and more. So, you know, I have fun doing the banners. again, it's the creative thing peeks in.

[00:40:59] I really like decorating my table. don't like to do the same thing over and over. So, like, my tablecloth changes every week. I do Christmas in July, so I do Christmas flavors and Christmas decorations. I'm an entertainer at home.

[00:41:13] Like I like to have people over. And so I have a lot of display dishes and display trays and things go on sale and I buy it not knowing what I'm going to do with it. So I like to work all that in. So I would would have like 3 tier plates that I put everything on and, you know, tried to make it nice and appealing as I could. That was even when I began.

[00:41:36] Now I have these 3 tier wooden shelves. They look really professional. So, it's got a bakery feel kind of to it, I think. And so those are fun. I have them on both sides of my table and just filled with muffins.

[00:41:54] every week looks different. I like to do a different thing every week.

[00:41:57] **David Crabill:** So you focus so much on muffins now, your business name is still the cookie cutters. Do you wish you had chosen a name that was more generic?

[00:42:08] **Michelle Dukes:** At the time, no. Uh, That was perfect. I still like the cookie cutters.

[00:42:14] It's kind of the mother. It's what's on all my, paperwork. It's my legal business. It's what's on my labels, things like that. But I have a banner making muffins and more for the farmer's market.

[00:42:26] So they know I make muffins and not cookies.

[00:42:30] **David Crabill:** So it it doesn't bother you that your your business name doesn't necessarily reflect what you're doing now.

[00:42:37] **Michelle Dukes:** For now, no. I mean, who knows what I'll do, what will come up next, or what I'll decide to change. I I don't know. I feel if I change it, like, I like having those 6000 people on my page.

[00:42:50] And if I change it, I feel like I'd be starting all over again. So I kinda just kind of mix the 2 on my 1 page.

[00:42:58] **David Crabill:** part of the reason why I asked is because I feel like people get really worked up about their business name.

[00:43:04] Right? and, you know, just want it to be perfect, you know, don't want it to put them in a corner. you have any advice for that type of person?

[00:43:13] **Michelle Dukes:** I know people like that, and, yes, I I lamented quite a while trying to find the cookie cutters. Do I have people that think I sell cookie cutters? Absolutely.

[00:43:24] Even to this day. But I have to explain sometimes it's because I cut cookies. So I'm the cookie cutter. But it is an important thing. But again, I go back to the fun part of it.

[00:43:37] Just be fun, So you do that your customer knows what you do. just have fun.

[00:43:42] **David Crabill:** Yeah. I saw that you actually have made cookie cutters before. Right?

[00:43:47] **Michelle Dukes:** I did. That was fun.

[00:43:52] It was an a custom order and they wanted particular things and I couldn't find it was for owls and I couldn't find the right shape of cutter that I wanted. So I said, okay. I'll make them. And luckily at that point uh, Sugar Belle, had a tutorial out making them from foil tin cookie sheets. it was a fun project. It was a fun project. Did I do it very often after that? No. But it served its purpose and it came out good. It was a fun thing to do. Well, now they have printers to do all that.

[00:44:26] **David Crabill:** I know that for at least a long time there, you're pretty active in the cookie decorating community. You went to Cookie Con. Correct?

[00:44:36] **Michelle Dukes:** Yep. I've been to 3 cookie cons. I didn't go to the very, very first 1.

[00:44:42] Technically, the very first 1 was a very small personal kind of gathering, not like anything like it is now. And then I went to the second 1, which is the first time it really was a big I think there were 500 at that point. But I will say that was the best time that I've had was that year. It was the best cookie con. And if you ask anyone that was there, they will agree that it was the best cookie count of all of them.

[00:45:08] was fun to meet everybody that you started to do this. This was in 2014, so it relatively was still really new. I like to say we have a really good neighborhood this cookie neighborhood that I'm in, it's really great. So, yeah, I've been to 3 cookie cons. Each time is fun, but that first 1 was really

[00:45:28] **David Crabill:** Do you feel like you sort of pulled away from the community at all now that you focused on muffins?

[00:45:35] **Michelle Dukes:** I have. I feel it's still a good community. The Cookiers can really do good things out there but it has changed. It's huge. I feel it's a little oversaturated. It's just I don't know anybody anymore. Yes. I didn't keep up with it. My core cookier friends, I'm still friends with them. They're my best friends to this day who I came up with.

[00:45:59] I we like to say we're the OGs. There's just so many people now. And, yeah, I've I've lost track of people. I can't keep up with these days.

[00:46:08] **David Crabill:** said cookiers can do good things. I don't know if you're referring to some of the charitable work that sometimes goes into that, but I I know you've done some.

[00:46:18] Can you share a little bit about that?

[00:46:20] **Michelle Dukes:** Yeah. I do mean the good things that they can do some good things and put good things out into this world. We would always rally around whoever needed some help if they were going through a health scare, if they'd lost everything in in a natural disaster, anything. We would rally. We would have benefits. We would have auctions, you know, we we'd create a dozen cookies and do auctions.

[00:46:45] I would say the biggest charitable thing that I am so proud that I was able to be a part of was the Go Bo Foundation. it's still a current foundation. It was about a young boy who had a particular type of cancer And he just was wise beyond his years and his philosophy before he passed away was to just put good things out into that world and if you could help your neighbor then you help your neighbor. it was a friend a cookier friend of ours lived in the same area as Beau uh, this is in Wisconsin, They don't have them anymore, but she started a cookie bake sale to benefit the Gobo Foundation.

[00:47:26] And sadly, he passed away. I don't know what year offhand now, but he passed away just before this bake sale, this huge bake sale. And she just put a word out to all of us to donate cookies, decorate whatever you want, and send them to her. And she organized this huge bake sale and it got bigger and bigger every year. She was getting cookiers from around the world sending her cookies.

[00:47:51] I think she was able to get a cookier from every state to donate cookies, and it turned into from a 1 day bake sale to a 3 day weekend festival. I mean, it just it grew and A simple cookie raised thousands and thousands and thousands of dollars for this foundation, I'm proud I was able to be a part of that.

[00:48:14] **David Crabill:** So you obviously have been doing this for a long time, have quite a bit of skill. Have you done any decorating classes or anything like that?

[00:48:25] **Michelle Dukes:** I had a feeling you would ask that.

[00:48:29] I have not. I haven't delved into that yet. Again, you get everybody saying you should do that. You should do that. I do know there's a lot of cookiers in my area that do that, so I don't find it too important that I do.

[00:48:43] Do I think I'd have fun doing it? Yes. 1 of the drawbacks is, I mentioned earlier, I don't use royal icing. I don't like royal icing. I don't want to make royal icing.

[00:48:55] so my cookies are uh, buttercream ish frosting. My cookies are sour cream sugar cookie. They're not a hard strict cutout cookie. They're my grandmother's recipe that we make every Christmas for holiday cookies, so it's a nostalgic thing for me. But with a buttercream ish frosting it doesn't really harden too quickly.

[00:49:17] It will harden, it will crust over, but it doesn't harden like royal icing, So I'm afraid if I did a class with my frosting, it would just be a mess. Like, I think, I mean, they would have to take home wet cookies. I haven't figured it out yet. Will I do them? I might do a class here and there in the future.

[00:49:34] **David Crabill:** I must say I'm pretty surprised that you haven't done that just considering how much of a people person you are, how how socially oriented you are, and it just seems like you'd have a blast doing

[00:49:46] **Michelle Dukes:** think I would. I did say I'm outgoing, but I do feel I'm kind introvert. Like, I have my insecurities and, like, gee, could I stand up there and, give a class? Kind of the it intimidates me, I guess, is what I wanna say.

[00:50:02] Do I think I would have fun? Absolutely. But there's that intimidation factor that's that's still in my head.

[00:50:09] **David Crabill:** And I actually feel like it's the opposite of what you said where, you know, you do a unique cookie, which is um, something different. You know?



[00:50:18] Instead of it being, like, what you're afraid of, I could see it being an actual differentiation for you in your area.

[00:50:26] **Michelle Dukes:** yeah. Because people bring it up to me, and it's been in my head for a couple of years. But there's a lot that do it around here. I do fear the over saturation aspect of cookiers.

[00:50:39] **David Crabill:** what I would say to that is, you know, you're looking at just decorating classes, and I'm sure there's plenty of them. But with any business, yours included, people aren't really buying the decorating classes. Right? They're buying you.

[00:50:55] And nobody in your area can replicate you and your personality, and you will attract certain people to your classes that maybe wouldn't be exactly as good of a fit for other classes. So, I mean, I honestly feel like there is probably plenty of space in the market. And obviously, you can't know till you try, but um, you have something to offer that nobody else does because of your personality and, you know, who you will naturally attract to your classes.

[00:51:25] **Michelle Dukes:** Well, I appreciate that. That's a that's a different way of looking at it. We may see that in the future.

[00:51:32] **David Crabill:** I can't let you go before I ask you about your T shirts. Yeah. Probably the most, cookie and muffin t shirts I've ever seen.

[00:51:41] **Michelle Dukes:** I love my t shirts, and I love that you notice them because I I do. I try to make I take a picture of whatever shirt I'm wearing that week at the farmers markets, all the shows. Amazon. It's wonderful.

[00:51:55] You can you can find anything at Amazon.

[00:51:58] like I said, I like to have fun and it's attention.

[00:52:02] You know, the kids like it. The parents always you know, someone always comments on the t shirt I'm wearing, and it's just fun.

[00:52:09] **David Crabill:** Well, as you think back on this pretty long journey, do you have any advice for someone who's just getting started today?

[00:52:17] **Michelle Dukes:** I would say do it. if you like baking, just do it. it's a good outlet, I'll repeat it.

[00:52:25] It's all about having fun and making your heart full. I'm at the age or there I'm going through a midlife crisis. I don't need the drama, you know? So everything I do, I want it to make me happy. I wanna be proud of what I do.

[00:52:39] So, yeah, do it. And I think the cottage food, I think that's a great place to start. It's a good way to get your feet wet. It gives you guidelines to get started. So if you want it as a hobby, it's good.

[00:52:52] But if you want it to push you into a higher form, then you can do that. You can move into commercial, you know, that kind of thing. But I think it's a good starting place. You can't predict anything at all, so don't try, But be willing to change.

[00:53:09] Try to find what works for you. you know, what works for 1 person won't work for you and vice versa. So just try and find what works for you and just have fun with it.

[00:53:17] the support system, I I meant to say too, is

[00:53:20] you need a support system. My husband's great through all of this. he goes to all the, the shows with me. We consider it our quality time sitting there at a show together and he does all the manual labor lugging the tables and the chairs and all and whatnot.

[00:53:35] he doesn't wanna admit it, but he has fun during them too.

[00:53:40] **David Crabill:** What do you feel like has surprised you in your business?

[00:53:44] **Michelle Dukes:** I would say the connections that I've made. Like, I never would have envisioned the cookie community the way that it is the customers that I have um, because it's not just baking for me.

[00:53:56] So I would say it's that the connections that I've made.

[00:54:00] **David Crabill:** Well, just thinking about your journey, you've done a lot over the last 12, 13 years.

[00:54:08] As you look ahead, what are your goals? Where do you see this going?

[00:54:12] **Michelle Dukes:** I'm going to have fun bringing my grandson to the farmers markets. I need to be more picky about the shows that I'm doing, I feel there's duds out there, and I gotta be better at picking the better shows. And I think my next pivot is I might get my toe wet making bread. There's a hole in the farmer's markets that I'm in. No 1 does bread and everybody wants bread. So I may try some simple recipes just to see if I like it, like doing it, and if they sell. So that might be the next thing.

[00:54:47] I'll still do the muffins and the cookies, but I might add some loaves of bread in there.

[00:54:52] **David Crabill:** I'd say summing up what you've shared here you're probably gonna focus on the most is meeting people and having fun.

[00:55:02] **Michelle Dukes:** I would agree. Yes.

[00:55:05] **David Crabill:** Well, thank you so much for sharing all that with us today.

[00:55:10] Now if somebody would like to learn more about you uh, how could they find you, or where can they reach out?

[00:55:15] **Michelle Dukes:** Find me on Facebook. Again, I'm old school, so I'm just on Facebook, and it's under the cookie cutters. I can you can message me there.

[00:55:25] **David Crabill:** Great. Well, thank you so much for coming on the show and sharing with us today.

[00:55:29] **Michelle Dukes:** thanks for having me, David. It's been really fun doing this today.

[00:55:37] **David Crabill:** That wraps up another episode of the Forrager podcast.

[00:55:40] For more information about this episode, go to [forrager.com/podcast/110](http://forrager.com/podcast/110).

[00:55:46] And if you are enjoying this podcast, please take a quick moment right now and leave me a review on Apple Podcasts. It doesn't have to be a long review, but it's truly the best way to support this show and will help others like you find this podcast.

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[00:56:09] Thanks for listening, and I'll see you in the next episode.