

Michelle Chesser with Home Sweet Home Bakery

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 Chesser.

But before I begin, I wanted to thank the sponsor of this episode, the Cottage Foodie. The founder, Matt Rosen, was recently on the show and shared that he was inspired to start the Cottage foodie to help other bakers fulfill their dreams.

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Alright, so I have Michelle on the show today. She lives in Millersville, Missouri, and sells cinnamon rolls and other baked goods with her home food business, Home Sweet Home Bakery. Michelle started her cottage bakery 16 years ago when she was living in a mobile home trailer and homeschooling her four young kids. She started very small and steadily grew her business until it became so successful that she had to intentionally scale back multiple times.

She now has a commercial kitchen built into her home and sells many thousands of baked goods each year, but she does more than that. She also has a separate, very popular lemonade business in the summertime.

A weekly catering gig and a coaching business where she helps other food entrepreneurs build their bakeries. She is well known online as the home Sweet Home Baker, and now has over 180,000 followers on Instagram, and yet she says that she still has time to binge Netflix with her husband. I'm still not quite sure how that's possible, but rest assured this is an episode you won't wanna miss.

And with that, let's jump right in.

Welcome to the show, Michelle. Nice to have you here.

[00:02:16] **Michelle Chesser:** Thank you for having me, David. I'm thrilled to be here.

[00:02:20] **David Crabill:** Well, Michelle, you've been doing this for a very long time. Take me back.

[00:02:26] **Michelle Chesser:** It's been 16 years since I started my home bakery. I started with my four children when they were small. We lived in a two bedroom trailer and I thought, well, how can I teach my children a good work ethic? We started growing vegetables in our garden and selling them at the farmer's market, and then we added baked goods and the rest is history.

[00:02:49] **David Crabill:** So, yeah, I know you started this bake goods business. What year was that?

[00:02:54] **Michelle Chesser:** 2009.

[00:02:57] **David Crabill:** And what did you start with? What did you start selling?

[00:03:01] **Michelle Chesser:** That was back in the day when cupcakes were really trending. I'm sure you can remember when cupcakes were all the rage. And so I jumped on that train and we brought cupcakes to the market. Sold out. We made \$85. I thought that I was rich. I was thrilled. And so we started doing that. The market was on a Tuesday afternoon and we started selling the cupcakes as long as the weather cooperated.

We couldn't do it in the summer because the icing would melt. And little by little we would go longer through the year during the markets until we were going the entire season. We added cookies. And once we added cinnamon rolls. It was like, okay, we found our signature item and they took off, and then things just went from there.

[00:03:52] **David Crabill:** Now, you said you were living in a mobile home at the time, so you started this business. From a mobile home kitchen.

[00:03:59] **Michelle Chesser:** Yes, we moved out to the country in 2005 and wanted some land. We have five acres so our children would have space to

room. We homeschooled and it was a, two bedroom single wide, and it was, we were planning on living in it for two to three years and we wound up living there 10 years and the kitchen had about three feet of counter space, but we made it work.

I mean, We would set up tables in the living room and put our baked goods on them. Actually we were able to build this home that we live in now with the money from the home bakery. I had no idea it would ever pan out that way, but it worked out. My husband and my children built this house on our property and we love it.

[00:04:49] **David Crabill:** That is really an amazing story and I know there's a lot of baker's out there who feel like, you know, they don't have enough kitchen space or their house isn't big enough. But I don't think there's been quite anyone on the podcast who's had such humble beginnings as starting their business in a little mobile home trailer.

So, I mean, it couldn't have been easy, you know, you said you made it work, but did you feel stressed? Did you feel like quitting at some point? You know, like it just sounds like it must have been very hard.

[00:05:21] **Michelle Chesser:** Yes, I'm a very organized person. I don't like clutter. So we didn't have a pantry. We didn't have a place for, you know, a mixer on our counter. We didn't have a place for our ingredients in any of our cabinets. And so we had to figure that out. My husband built me a little shelf that we put behind our recliner in the living room so I could put ingredients on.

We are one of those people who had our extra freezer on the front porch because we couldn't fit one in the house. And yes, it was challenging every February I would get I guess cabin fever because you were in the house all winter and there was really no place you could go without someone being there.

And it was hard, but I learned to be content. In fact, I would pray a lot that the Lord would give me contentment because I, even though it was a small place. There are people that live in much worse circumstances. So we had a roof over our heads. We had plenty to eat, we had heat, we had air conditioning.

But yes, when we moved into this house, I still feel so much gratitude for this house and for what I have here. it does not get taken for granted at all.

[00:06:37] **David Crabill:** You mentioned your kids a few times already, and it sounds like they're a pretty integral part of this.

[00:06:45] **Michelle Chesser:** Yes, I have two boys and two girls. When I started the bakery, they were 6, 6, 7, and eight. And as they got older, they could do more and more. My boys hated the bakery. They did not want to work in the bakery at all, but they had to because this is what we did and the girls loved it. So as soon as my older son, Brandon, was able to get a real job when he turned 15 and he was hired by a landscaper.

He was gone. He was working all the time. And Drew had to still help us. But my daughters, their twins, they really helped me. And when they were 16, they did go to Chick-fil-A. I told 'em I wasn't gonna force them to stay here and work for me. And they did go to Chick-fil-A, but both of them came back and worked in the bakery after they were married.

[00:07:40] **David Crabill:** Yeah, and I saw some social media posts about Drew. Can you share a little bit about him?

[00:07:45] **Michelle Chesser:** Drew is our child with special needs. He actually has a chromosome deletion. He has 18 Q minus. He is 26. And although he is extremely smart, he cannot live by himself. He kind of lives in his own little world most of the time, he can be quite independent, but definitely needs help and guidance.

So he will live with us for the rest of his life. and he is definitely a challenge, but also a blessing. He helps out a lot. Right now we had a lot of flood damage over the weekend, so he's out, cleaning up the yard, and getting the gravel back in the driveway.

[00:08:25] **David Crabill:** There are just so many. Things you've already mentioned that I feel like a lot of people would consider roadblocks, you know, living in a mobile home or having four young kids, and then one of which is very special needs, like, it sounds like there are so many things that could have prevented you from starting a business of the first place.

So what, what do you think was inside of you that caused you to move forward with it?

[00:08:50] **Michelle Chesser:** I am quite determined. Ask my husband. I think I drove him crazy, but I didn't start my bakery like I'm gonna build a baking empire. It was just a small slow growth. So when we started the home bakery, we would go, you know, to the market once a week.

That was it. We didn't have orders, we didn't have catering, we didn't. Have popups or anything like that. It was very slow because I, you know, I did, I had four young children and it just slowly grew. And we had obstacles, but I also, like, no one is gonna tell me I can't do something. Like I'm gonna do it and I'm gonna figure it out. I'm very self-motivated, which I think you have to be in this business because you are going to have burnout.

You're going to have terrible obstacles. But now that I've been doing this for 16 years, you expect them. The first time I had an obstacle, I was like, oh my goodness, I have to quit because I can't do this. And then I've, I've learned that you're gonna have obstacles all the time, and you just have to be committed or just keep going. Because I'm in this for the long haul. I love it even through all the struggles. I love it.

[00:09:59] **David Crabill:** Well, 16 years into this, you can imagine that you've faced a number of probably very large obstacles. What are some of the ones that stand out to you?

[00:10:08] **Michelle Chesser:** Markets are hard. And you have to be committed to them. And one time we were about to leave for market, it was a Thursday morning and we had a freak thunderstorm power went out while I was baking things and a tree fell over the driveway and I just said, that's it, I'm done. I was gross. I couldn't take a shower because we didn't have water.

My cinnamon rolls were in the oven, half baked that, you know, you had spent all week getting ready for. And then there was a tree over the driveway, which my husband wasn't home to use the chainsaw to get it off. And I remember going, I'm done. And then five minutes later I remember thinking, alright Michelle.

This is an issue. Let's find a solution. And we figured it out. I put a hat on my head, I covered up my hair. The cinnamon rolls kept baking. We just [00:11:00] didn't open the oven. They worked out, and all of us, me and all the children went out and worked to get that tree off the driveway. Other times that obstacles I've had are when you don't make any money, when you price something wrong and

you lose money when you mess up and you have to give a customer a full refund, even though you worked so hard on it.

All of these things happen to every home baker and what people think is this only happens to me. This only happens because I messed up. Absolutely not. They happen to every home Baker. Are you in it for the long run or are you in it until something bad happens and you mess up? You have to be in it for the long run to have a successful home bakery.

And just recently my freezer went out. I had 60 pounds of cinnamon rolls in there because I froze them. And I woke up and I saw that the door was cracked and I saw the water on the floor and I just started crying. And I'm not a crier. I know that sounds funny. I'm not a crier.

And I just thought, oh my goodness. And you, you, you cry five minutes, 10 minutes, and then you pick yourself up and you go, okay, so what's the solution? How am I gonna fix this?

[00:12:20] **David Crabill:** So that that freezer is being thawed out, like what did that represent in terms of a loss to your business?

[00:12:27] **Michelle Chesser:** That was about 12 to \$1,500. So I actually called our insurance agent and she said no. If it had been an act of God as in a storm, that would be covered. But because I left it open, it's not covered. And I understand because I can see a baker saying, oh, my stuff didn't sell.

I'm just gonna leave the freezer open so I get paid for this thousands of dollars worth of stuff. I understand that. But it was, it was hard. If it had been in the beginning of my business, it would've hurt horribly. you can't take huge hits at the beginning of the, at your business because you don't have the money.

But now that I have a cushion built in, it's okay. It's okay. I can handle it, it's no fun. And it hurts. But that's another reason I'm really, I really stress to home Baker is not to go into debt. Because if you're in debt and you've put everything on a credit card and then something like this happens, it's really gonna hurt your bottom line.

[00:13:35] **David Crabill:** So you said that your business started very slowly, obviously very humbly. It was a slow growth process. and I just wanna step forward. Fast forward to today, what does your business look like today?

[00:13:49] **Michelle Chesser:** Right now, we have a commercial kitchen in our home, next to our regular kitchen. When we built our house, there was an extra room between the regular house and the garage. There was supposed to be a screened in porch, and my husband said, well, I'm gonna start it up just in case. And we did.

And so when the opportunity came for us to bake for a coffee shop, we were easily able to make that a commercial kitchen. right now. I do popups in our local town every few weeks. I'm still doing markets. I do holiday events and I just stopped baking for three coffee shops. I was doing the wholesale business for over eight years and just two weeks ago was the last time I did that.

[00:14:37] **David Crabill:** You, you said something I don't think anyone's ever said on the podcast before, which was that it wasn't too hard to add a commercial kitchen to our home.

[00:14:47] **Michelle Chesser:** I know that does sound crazy, doesn't it? Okay, so we had this extra room and my husband said, I'll set it up because he built our house. He's a carpenter. He used to build houses for a living, and in order to have a commercial kitchen, what we needed was a three basin sink, a hand washing sink. Walls we could wipe off. This is funny. A trash can, a broom, nothing else really. And we had to have our water tested.

That's it. A health inspector comes once a year.

She just came last week. It's \$120 for me to have my permit all year. Honestly, Missouri is pretty easy. They test our water because we're on a, well, that's the only thing that makes me nervous.

But she just texted me and said it passed, so we're good. For another year,

[00:15:33] **David Crabill:** You said you built the kitchen to do the wholesale, and you did that for eight years and you just are just stopping now. How much wholesale have you been doing?

[00:15:43] **Michelle Chesser:** it was 120 to 150 pans of cinnamon rolls every week. But for the first six years of my wholesale, I baked all of the treats for a local coffee shop. So anything that they sold in their coffee shop, that was, baked goods came from me. I did the cinnamon rolls, gooey butter cake, brownies, bars, cookies, quiche, all of it, Danish, everything.

So when my children were home, they were delivering on their way to town in the morning, or my husband would deliver. And it was almost every day. I was baking almost every day, including weekends . And it got to be too much. So I just stopped every day and just started doing the cinnamon rolls because I can freeze my cinnamon rolls and send them up there.

And then they kind of warm them up and put icing on 'em. and they're perfect. So that's what I was doing for the last two to three years. And then I just stopped it altogether. They were expanding, the coffee shop was expanding and they asked me to double my production. And although I could have doubled it, I chose for my sake and for my family's sake to kind of take that as a sign to say, okay, I'm gonna go back to just retail.

I loved the coffee shop. There were no hard feelings, but it was time. It really was time. David.

[00:17:13] **David Crabill:** I saw some social media posts talking about the importance of family to you and the importance of making time for your family. At the same time, I've also seen that you do a lot? You know, you not only run this business, you also help other entrepreneurs and it looked like you make meals every Tuesday for a large group of people and I just was kind of wondering like, how do you make time for your family with all of that going on?

[00:17:40] **Michelle Chesser:** I can get it, it's so funny. I can run around like a chicken with its head cut off. Like once I'm doing something, there's like no stopping me. I like baking here, throwing some laundry in here, and cooking here. I've cooked for a lot of people. For as long I've been as I've been married. My husband's family is very big.

And in order to stay in that family, you have to learn to cook for a lot of people. So I've been married to him for 30 years and to cook for 20 to 30 people, honestly is not hard for me. It would've been 30 years ago, but now I could do it in my sleep. It's not a big deal. and then we have the bakery, which I have got down to a science two.

And I know on my social media, you know, I'm showing what I'm doing, but I'm also not showing you when I'm sitting on the couch, I'm not showing you when I'm, sitting in bed reading a book. I do take a lot of downtime. I just don't show that because, Nobody wants to see me sitting in bed reading a book.

a lot of people say, oh my goodness, you're so busy. And I'm like, well, actually, my husband and I just got done watching the entire six seasons of lost. And that was a huge commitment. So we do have downtime in the evenings, but it's purposeful. And I write out my list of things to do every day and I just try to get them done.

[00:19:00] **David Crabill:** Well, it sounds like you're an incredibly productive person. Have you found things that have made you more productive with your time?

Michelle Chessser: Yes, so I call myself old school because I love to just make lists in my notebook and a planner. you know, my daughter-in-law, she's, every time she has something to do, she puts it in her phone and I'm like, I, I'd like it on the piece of paper. So I just write out my, on Sundays, this is what I do on Sundays, I plan my week, I plan out my menu for the week, what we're gonna have for dinner.

I plan out everything that's gonna get done every day. And then I plan out my grocery list. So I know on Monday, I just got back from the Grocery store. That's a check. got that done, got my tires rotated. And then it's not a baking day for me. Monday is not a baking day. And I know that sounds crazy, but it makes it so much easier to get the baking done when you take a day. To get your errands done.

I've done it without doing that. I've baked every single day and it's a miserable existence. my husband told me, I remember this, he said, Michelle, you don't have to chase every dollar. And it just hit me like, oh my goodness, that's what I'm doing, because I'm so motivated, I'm so determined I have a drive.

But he is like, you don't have to chase every dollar. Just because you can doesn't mean you should.

[00:20:24] **David Crabill:** Is your husband supportive of the business?

[00:20:28] **Michelle Chessser:** I am so full of ideas and I know every baker listening to this is like, yes. Like our brains never shut off. We are always thinking of things to do. We're always creative, our brains are just going, going, going. My husband's brain is not like that. He has a job. He goes to work, he delivers fuel,

and then he comes home and he leaves his job there and his brain, can work on the yard or drive the tractor or whatever.

My brain is always going and he doesn't get that. So he didn't understand what was wrong. So he's probably like, what is wrong with you? You never stop with your ideas. And so at the beginning it was just something I did. And then my, when my bakery business got so big and it turned into a monster, that's when things got tough.

Like my bakery was ahead of everything. It became overwhelming, took over my life, which meant it took over my family's life. And it was a year or two of that where finally I had to be slapped across the face and for someone to say, Michelle, enough is enough. And that's when I started pulling back from this and pulling back from this.

And. I'm so thankful that the Lord showed me what I was doing wrong because it would've just been hurting my family. It was hurting my marriage, and those two things are more important than my bakery business. Now that we've come on the other side of that and I have balance, I have a wonderful home and bakery balance .

My husband is like all for the bakery because he sees it now as something positive instead of something that's taking his wife away from him and the family.

[00:22:19] **David Crabill:** You're very open on social media and that's, that's really good. About you and you were open enough to share that you made your daughters cry at one point when things got very stressful for you. I was just wondering if you could expand on that a little bit.

[00:22:36] **Michelle Chesser:** goodness. This happened probably 12 or 13 years ago. I came home from the market and my daughter, she had not made dinner I thought she had.

Okay. I'm telling myself, this is hard for me to say. and I remember. Just picking at her like, why didn't you do this? Why didn't you do that? and I didn't think twice about it. And then I went outside and she was out there crying and I just remember thinking, what have I done? Like, what Michelle, what is wrong with you?

And it was a real wake up call for me. You know, we all have those times in our parenting that we're like, what was I thinking? Like, what is wrong with me? And that was one of them. You know, We're not perfect people. We. Learn from our mistakes and our failures, you know? and my daughters and I now have a beautiful, wonderful relationship.

And, you know, they don't even remember, like, I'll ask them and I'm like, do you remember the time when you got in trouble for going down to the creek before church and getting all muddy? And they're like, no. You know, They don't remember some of those times where me or me or Andy may have lost our temper.

But yeah, that really was a wake up call for me. And I say a lot of this stuff to other home bakers because I want them to see that they're not alone, [00:24:00] that they're not. The only ones that mess up and sometimes we lose it. But the way that I've got that under control is to not take on so much.

When you're stressed out and you're overwhelmed and you have so much on your plate, you're gonna lose it and it is not worth it for that extra 50 to a hundred dollars a week that you might be putting on your plate.

[00:24:27] **David Crabill:** Well, it sounds like, you know, you, just got to the point where you had way too much demand for what you could handle. And I know you said that the cinnamon rolls when you landed on those, that was a big turning point for your business. Were there other points along the way that you felt like were turning points where your business just went up to another level?

[00:24:52] **Michelle Chessner:** Yes. When we added the coffee shops, we added a local coffee shop. It was the first one in the area. I was the exclusive baker for it. That really took my business to another level with the publicity that I got because of that, then I got so many more orders and so much more more people knew about me.

so that was one thing. And then we ate the cinnamon rolls. That's a huge thing for us. We are known in our county for our cinnamon rolls. And then just being at markets for the last 16 years, we're a staple at the markets. People have watched my children grow up at markets, from being as tall as my hip to now they're all taller than me and they've seen my children grow.

My children have. Children now I have grandchildren at the market and so that's a real big deal for people and they love, love seeing it. And that's actually really fun for us too. We love meeting people in the community and we've made some really good friends from meeting people at the markets.

[00:26:04] **David Crabill:** I mean, You're talking about infusing yourself kind of into your marketing. You know that you are an integral part of the business, and I see you do that on social media as well. Would you say that's, that was intentional? Because a lot of times people want to have their products and their business be kind of separate and stay behind the scenes. like when they're posting on social media, they don't want to post themselves on social media.

They just want it to be all about the product.

[00:26:32] **Michelle Chesser:** This is something I'm really passionate about, and I had to learn this myself. When you're a home baker, what you're doing is you're posting your product. Of course, that's what you're posting because you're a baker and you want people to see your cakes and your cookies, and your cupcakes and your breads. But when people do not know, like, and trust you, they will buy from you. This was a big learning curve for me. I learned that people bought from me because they felt like they knew me. They saw me with my children on social media, or they saw me when I accidentally made a mistake in my bakery.

And I posted it on social media. They saw when I was being silly with my husband on social media. And so they not only liked my baked goods, they liked me, and so they wanted to buy from me. And I tell this to homemakers all the time. I know you don't wanna show your face.

I know that it's uncomfortable for you, and you don't have to do it all the time, but make sure that people know you. And that doesn't mean you need to post a family picture and just give your whole family history. That means every now and then you sprinkle in a little bit about yourself. You sprinkle in maybe that you're a self-taught baker and you learn to bake from checking out books at the library you sprinkle in that you and your children made a mess in the kitchen today.

It was a disaster, but you learned something new. You sprinkle in. How you took your children to the market with you, and everybody was grumpy, but you did it anyway. And then you came home and ate cereal for dinner. So you sprinkle in

all these things and that builds trust with people because they feel like, oh, she's just like me.

Oh, her children are driving her crazy today too. She's just like me. Oh, she's having cereal for dinner. She's just like me. And when you build that trust, that's when people will buy from you.

[00:28:29] **David Crabill:** So one of the things about being that vulnerable, of course, you'll attract a lot of fans and raving fans, but you also kind of open yourself up or expose yourself to criticism or hate, you know, this is on social media, right? Have you, have you faced any of that?

[00:28:48] **Michelle Chessier:** Oh yeah. Now. I'll say, I have a Facebook page and an Instagram page. My Facebook page, home Sweet Home Bakery is for my local customers. Most people in this town don't even know I have an Instagram. My Facebook page is local people that buy from me. My baked goods are all nice. I don't think I've ever had a negative comment on there But on my Instagram, your Instagram, it's strangers. You know, They don't know you. but I learned that the only time I get something negative is when a post or a reel goes viral. Most of the time, your followers are not gonna make a negative comment. But when a post goes viral, it goes out to everybody in the world and their brother.

And so these people who have never seen you before in their lives, you come across their feed and they see you and I was making a joke about the baking police once, how they're not real, but we're still scared of them. And people just laid into me like, why are you afraid of the baking police?

What are you doing wrong? Why should you be afraid? If you're doing everything right, then maybe you shouldn't be, you know, be afraid. What are you hiding? Or I showed a 360 of my commercial kitchen and I didn't even know this. I, and if you come to my bakery, David, it is super clean.

But I had a filter On my video. Video. And it looked like the freezer door was brown and it's not. and I have tried to bleach that thing. It's as clean as can be, but it looked a little bit stained and so many people were like, you're disgusting. Your kitchen is disgusting. Maybe you shouldn't be baking outta that.

And I was so taken aback because I'm like, what and it really hurt, like really hurt and it got to be where I didn't even wanna check my comments. But after a few months, I realized it was only the trolls. That's the only people that made negative comments. And if you would go to their bio, it was usually people with zero posts, zero followers.

That really, you know, I guess they don't have anything else to do, but me and my husband just laugh. Now it's kind of funny when I get a negative, I'm like, Andy, listen to this.

[00:31:07] **David Crabill:** Yeah, well we should have prefaced this with the fact that you have a lot of exposure now. You now have over 183,000 followers on Instagram, so you know, you have clearly gone viral many times and you just. Have an enormous social media presence, and it sounds like this is something you never would've expected when you started this.

What, what do you think has worked, in terms of building up your social following?

[00:31:35] **Michelle Chesser:** My goal for my social media when I sat down to think about it, was I want to help other home bakers and I want to share with them the good, the bad, and the ugly. And I wanna share with them my advice, because I've been there, done that, and done it in a humorous and real way. One thing I'm not is polished and put together, and studio worthy and most people aren't.

So I want to share that I am, I'm real. I want to share with others that they don't have to have it all together with a beautiful kitchen and a perfect family to make things work. You don't have to go out and sell a thousand dollars every week to have a home bakery. I want to be real and vulnerable, like you said, I do share some things, personal things because that makes me relatable to people and I wanna show them that, oh my goodness, if I can do this, you can do this.

My story and my journey is not gonna look like yours. I don't have four toddlers at home anymore. but I've done things, I've pushed through things and um, not everyone needs to have a bakery business where they're, you know, making millions. So if you wanna make a hundred dollars a week, a hundred dollars a week is a car payment for the month or something, and a, or a great eating out budget.

I just want everyone to know that it's not, you don't have to look like everyone else. Set yourself apart from everyone else and have fun.

[00:33:18] **David Crabill:** Do you feel like there are specific things that you do on Instagram that work well like things that help with the algorithm?

[00:33:28] **Michelle Chesser:** I. Hate the Instagram algorithm. I think we would all agree with that. It doesn't make any sense, but what I found is the more vulnerable I am, the more my post will go viral. Now, that's not a hundred percent true because sometimes I am and it doesn't. Or sometimes I'll just have something that I'm like, this is the dumbest post I've ever made, and it'll go viral.

But what I tell other home bakers that are trying to grow on Instagram is you have to set yourself apart. So what makes you different from every other home baker out there? mine is humor. Been there, done that, and I've done this for 16 years. What's yours is yours that your. baking with six kids at home.

You're showing how to do this with six kids at home. You're baking with organic ingredients, you're gluten-free. All of these things can set you apart that you're, you live in the middle of nowhere or that you live in a big city. Find three things that set you apart and really dig into those and then grow your social media from there.

Another mine, one of mine was family. We're you know, I'm big into showing my family and doing this with my family. I think that's been something good too.

[00:34:49] **David Crabill:** Well, you obviously help a lot of other bakers now. What do you typically tell someone who is just starting out on their journey?

[00:34:59] **Michelle Chesser:** It depends if you have little children. I always say. Think twice. Think really hard about this because when I have one of my grandkids over here, I can't bake for anything. It's just too much. But I say, how do you want your business to look? Why do you wanna have a home bakery? Are you looking to make a couple hundred dollars a month or are you looking to make thousands of dollars a month?

That's gonna be a big deal on how you go forward. Do you want to bake every week? Do you want to bake once a month? What can we find that's gonna help you? I tell people to write it down on paper. Write down your goals on paper and look at them. Once you have your goals down, your specific goals, not just, I

wanna have a home bakery, but I want to have a home bakery and this is why, and this is what I wanna do with it, then write down.

The steps you need to take to get there. if you're gonna make a thousand dollars a month, then I always say you have to sell \$2,000 a month because with all the expenses and things that happen and how are you gonna get there? You have to ride it all out and have it in front of you, or you're just gonna be flying by the seat of your pants, and that is no way to run a business.

[00:36:14] **David Crabill:** That's a really good point. 'cause a lot of times people will say, you know, this X, Y, Z is what you should do when you start a business, but every business is completely unique to the individual. And your answer there was. Was right on point with that, which is that there's not necessarily a certain thing that everyone should do.

It really depends on the baker and where they are and what they want.

[00:36:39] **Michelle Chesser:** Right, because a lot of people want to go to the farmer's market. Well, if you wanna do a farmer's market, you're gonna be lifting tables and canopies. And if you are, like me, I had four children. I didn't really lift tables and canopies because my children did it for me. And if you don't have someone there to help you, you have to think about that.

Can you go to the Farmer's Market? Lift all your tables, lift all your totes, lift your canopies. You pack it in, pack it up, you know, take it down and then take it home. Can you do that? If you can't, then you might wanna choose another way to go, like a porch popup or a uh, something at your house. You have to think about what you physically can do, what you can do if you have children, what you can do if you're an empty nester.

All those things come into play. And If you want to grow your home bakery, you do have to be consistent because you have to show people that they can trust you.

And when you're, they only see you at the market. they think you're gonna be there and you don't show up. And you know, because little Susie threw up. That consistency makes people think you're not dependable.

Consistency is huge and you know that it's huge, But There are times where you have to let it go.

like I remember one market I just didn't go to. because I mentally couldn't do it, and I remember one of the farmers asking me the next week, Hey Michelle, where were you last week?

And I said, I had too much time with my kids. I just couldn't do it. Like, there was too much mentally there were like, my kids were, were just too much for me and I couldn't get it together. And I remember thinking, that's okay. It is okay that I did not go to the market this week. Sometimes we put too much pressure on ourselves and I have done that, but.

Throughout the years, I've learned you can't do that. You're not perfect. You're not a robot, you're not Walmart.

[00:38:41] **David Crabill:** You've talked a lot about your children and how they worked all the way up into high school. I feel like a lot of parents want their kids to be a part of the business, but sometimes that's challenging. Like, how did you get them to be as involved in the business as they were?

[00:39:00] **Michelle Chesser:** Andy and I are very much like I said, we're old school and when we had our children, it was a big deal for us to do everything together. and I asked my children as they're older now, I said, did you feel like you just had to work all the time?

Did you feel like your life was a life of drudgery because you had a lot of responsibility? And they all said, no, we didn't know any better. So our motto was work hard, play hard. So yes, they had chores, they had to work in the family business, but they also got to play a lot and, you know, take off for hours during the day and run around with their cousins who live around here too. So. From the time they were about three or four, we would give them little jobs, like, set the table or put the books away. So they didn't know any different, they didn't know that that's not normally how it is. And so once they got older, it was a no-brainer that they would just be working. And we also, and I know this is probably controversial, if we did not buy them things. when they turned a certain age,

they were expected to buy things. on their own. They all bought their own cars, their own insurance. If they wanted a cell phone, they purchased that. Any clothes they wanted, they purchased because we could find them at yard sales. And because of that, they were very motivated to work.

They were very motivated to go out there and find creative ways to make money because they knew they weren't, you know, we weren't gonna pay for them if they wanted to go to Chick-fil-A or anything like that. And it wasn't because we didn't want to, we also couldn't afford it. We didn't have a lot of money when they were growing up.

So I think it worked out great because now they're all, they have a great work ethic. They all are very appreciative for what they have, and they look back on it fondly. So that makes my mother's heart happy. But I know this is not normal. I know that a lot of people don't do that, and that's okay, but that's what worked for our family.

[00:41:08] **David Crabill:** One thing I know your kids were pretty involved in was the lemonade stand and can you just share a little bit about that? 'cause it's like an entire other business that you have.

[00:41:18] **Michelle Chesser:** Okay, this is, I love this. This is great. So my daughters, we went to a craft fair. We used to do craft fairs and there was a person there selling fresh squeeze lemonade. And they lived about an hour and a half from us. And I was watching them and I'm looking like, oh, that is the coolest little business. So after watching them all weekend, and we actually got to know them, I said, would you mind if my daughters did that business here?

And he said, absolutely not. Go ahead. So we didn't ask him for his recipes or how he did his business. We're like, we're gonna figure this out.

So we spent that winter taste testing how to make fresh squeezed lemonade and flavoring it. And my two daughters named their business twice as nice lemonade because they're identical twins started going to markets with me and selling fresh squeezed lemonade. They started selling maybe 30, 40, 50 cups at a market.

When they stopped, they were selling about 300 cups at a market. And when they left home, Katie got married and then Beth went to Alaska. I didn't want the lemonade business to end. So I took it over in case when they came back they wanted to do it, um, again, but neither one of them wanted to do it.

And now we are selling four to 500 cups of lemonade at a market. And it's what I do in the summer because I can take a break from baking and it's part of that baking balance. And so it's perfect for me in the summer because it's so hot in

the summer. And baking is just not always the best. So I get like a three month break from real, real busy baking.

And it's a way for me that I can keep going to markets 'cause they're my favorite place to be and still make some money. So I love it.

[00:43:11] **David Crabill:** Four to 500 cups per market is a legit business. I mean, What, what did you have to do to get that set up? Because that's not typically something that would fall under the cottage food realm.

[00:43:23] **Michelle Chesser:** No. In fact we cannot, most people cannot do it. And because you're cutting fresh fruit and because of that it's not allowed under most cottage food laws. Now it is allowed here because in Missouri, or in Cape Girardeau County where I live, they allow you to do it as long as you have a dish washing station set up at your booth, which is pretty much just three totes.

One with wash water, one with rinse water, and one with bleach water, and a hand washing station, which is just a cooler with a spigot, and you have soap and paper towels. And they allow us to do that at our market. And it is, it's a legit business. It's physically hard, but we have so much fun doing it. We've had so much family jump in and help us. So many cousins that have helped the girls through the years. And my goal is for my grandchildren to take it over. You know, Lord willing, they will, but who knows? It doesn't sound like it would go with a home bakery, but that's what the girls did next to me for years and um, it's been wonderful.

[00:44:27] **David Crabill:** You said it's a lot of work and you could obviously buy your way into lemonade, but I know you're squeezing these lemons all on the spot. Right? So what, I just wanna know what your production looks like. I

[00:44:42] **Michelle Chesser:** So Thursday market, we only need two people to help do it, so I'll talk about Saturday market. Saturday market is in downtown Cape Girardeau on the Mississippi River. It starts in May, and we can make 120 cups of lemonade an hour. That's the most we can put out. And I'm usually the squeezer. So I can go through 4, 5, 600 squeeze lemons in four hours.

And then we have someone that fills the cups with ice and the sugar water and the flavoring. And then we have someone who takes the money and is our runner and has to run and get more sugar water, or take out the trash, the lemons, rinds,

or, map up our spills or get the other cooler of ice we call the runner is to me, we, we say, if you wanna be the runner, just expect us to yell at you for four hours and be like, hours.

But we're fun. We're fun, we're like, get more water, get this, get that. It's such a fun, fast-paced experience. I actually do have a course on how to have the lemonade business, we do really well with the lemonade. It's really fun.

[00:45:49] **David Crabill:** Yeah. So I know you have a course on the Lemonade business and you have a number of courses on things we've talked about. Can you share a little bit more about that? 'cause I know that's like an entire other business that you also have and you work on somehow. Somehow you have time for it.

I don't know how you have time for it, but somehow you make the time for it.

[00:46:10] **Michelle Chesser:** Yeah, so this is a crazy story. I just, I've always liked teaching other home bakers in our town. There would be people that would reach out to me and say, Michelle, can you just sit with me at the coffee shop and help me? I wanna get started baking bread, or I wanna start coming to markets.

Of course. And that started happening more and more and more. And I thought, my goodness, if the people in our town wanna learn, then surely there are people out there who want to learn how to have a home bakery. And so I always wanted to go online, but I didn't know how. I'm terrible with technology and I'm clueless.

So I prayed a lot about it. And there is a girl in our town who I had been connected with through another friend, and she does what I was looking for. She does the websites and shows you how to build courses and I messaged her, it all worked out. I said, is this something you could do for me? And she's like, absolutely.

Let's talk. After I got back from vacation, while she was on vacation, my Instagram went viral and it blew up and it was all like this perfect storm. And she got me set up. She taught me so much and she taught me how to do the courses and things online. And she was just what I needed. So most people can do that stuff themselves.

I cannot. So, right now my favorite thing that I have online is my Baker's Library. It's something that I do for other home bakers. We have a q and a once a month

and we have a guest speaker once a month. It's inexpensive. You can um, come in and ask questions. I have short videos on there.

I have recipes and guides there. And it's an inexpensive way, for me to motivate and encourage home bakers every month,

[00:47:57] **David Crabill:** So is this something that you, like you mentioned you had stopped doing wholesale. Like are you planning on focusing more of your efforts on the informational business as you move forward?

[00:48:10] **Michelle Chesser:** That would probably be what in my brain would be the smart thing to do. But I also love baking so much. Because I stopped the wholesale, I can now concentrate more on doing some baking pop ups every few weeks throughout the year except in the summer. So I think I will, I will do that. I don't have to sell, you know, \$3,000 at a popup.

I don't wanna go back to that. That's so much work for me. If I can do just a small popup every few weeks, that's what I wanna do. And then the holidays have much bigger ones. And um, yeah, I do want to put more effort into my online stuff, but I'm not ready to give up baking just yet.

I really enjoy it.

[00:49:02] **David Crabill:** So you've talked a lot about having a lot of help from family members. Have you had employees or, or brought on other people other than family?

[00:49:13] **Michelle Chesser:** Yes, I've had employees. We actually used to live where we live out in the country. We had a lot of family lives out here too. Cousins and second cousins, and they helped me, but they're all gone now. So I have hired other friends of mine from the market. I've hired their children or friends of mine.

And right now I have a friend of mine who helps me once a week. A lot of times home bakers will think I don't have enough money to hire someone. And that's true. You might not when you first start, but once you get to where you are overwhelmed and you can't. Handle all the work that you're getting, hiring someone maybe just for two to three hours a week or maybe two to three hours twice a week, will do wonders for you.

I had a niece that used to come over after school twice a week and she would do folding boxes or wrapping cookies, and I would tell her, Emily, I'm done with my work for the day. I'm gonna go do this. You're on your, you know, I would give her a list of things to do and I could go do some housework or, or maybe just sit and not do anything.

Having her do that was a life saver. And I, you know, you can say, well, I can't afford it. And I tell a lot of people, well, you may not think you can afford it, but you can get so much more done with one other person, even if they just work for two to three hours a week.

[00:50:40] **David Crabill:** What do you think prevented you from saying, I, I know the wholesale account asked you to double your production and just bring on more help to produce more of them. Of cinnamon rolls, you know, instead of letting it go entirely.

' cause you said you're a very ambitious person.

[00:51:00] **Michelle Chesser:** I could, but eight years was enough for me. wholesale is a tricky business. You are working for less. So the wholesale was great for me. Like we had talked before, it put my bakery on another level and it got my name out there to a lot of people that never would've seen it. But one of the things with wholesale and doing cinnamon rolls is before I put them in the freezer, they have to cool. So usually I will get them done around two or three and I have to wait for them to cool. So then I'll go make dinner and I have to come back to the bakery around six or seven or eight in the evening and get them in the freezer.

So that would've been another two days maybe, of doing that every night. And I just didn't want that.

[00:51:48] **David Crabill:** You know, you said you'd done this wholesale business for eight years and were producing 150 pounds of cinnamon rolls a month, and I think I saw on social media that you just got a commercial oven last year. Is that correct?

[00:52:05] **Michelle Chesser:** Yes, that's right.

[00:52:07] **David Crabill:** So this entire time, were you using just a regular oven?

[00:52:13] **Michelle Chessser:** Yes. that was, people always say, did you just have one oven? Yes, we do have um, a double oven in our regular kitchen. But only one of them worked and we would use that sometimes, but most of the time it was just one oven. And that was why we would be in the bakery so long. We would have so much just like kind of waiting to go into the oven and it was just like, oh my goodness, this is taking forever.

So we got the commercial oven and it was a game changer for the cinnamon rolls. And I'm like, well now that I'm not doing wholesale anymore, I do, I need it. I'm like, oh my goodness. Yes. 'cause I still make cinnamon rolls 'cause I'm still selling them retail. And I just baked 300 cookies there yesterday and it was wonderful.

Like it was the best. And we bought it. We bought it from some friends who also bought it from us, so we got a really good deal on it.

[00:53:09] **David Crabill:** I feel like most people would have invested in a commercial oven years earlier. What do you think held you back?

[00:53:18] **Michelle Chessser:** I did not have a clue about commercial ovens. I had looked them up so many times, you know, they're three, four, 5,000. And I'm like, okay, so if I spend four or 5,000 on this commercial oven, what if it breaks? What if I don't like it? What if it doesn't do what I want? I was very scared of that because that's a lot of money and so I just could never commit. and believe me, I had looked, I had gone to a local restaurant to ask about them, but I just couldn't commit because it was so much money and I was just because I didn't have a lot of knowledge on commercial ovens, it was not something I ever wanted to invest in.

So when the opportunity came for us to get this one, that was a super good price. We were like, well, it's a, it's a no brainer. And thankfully it did take five hours to clean, but it was so worth it.

[00:54:14] **David Crabill:** Do you feel like there's anything else that you feel like, oh, I should have done that sooner?

[00:54:21] **Michelle Chessser:** The baking rack that I got, I guess it's called a baker's rack. Some people call 'em trams that hold the half sheet cookie sheets. I don't know why I didn't get one earlier. And it's funny because even though I have

a commercial bakery, I still think of myself as just a kitchen, a regular home baker.

Like I just have this kitchen and I bake in it. So buying big commercial things was just not something I really thought a lot about. So buying that Baker's rack was. Huge. Like I thought if I would've known that I would love this so much, I would've bought it 10 years ago because I used to just put my baking trays out on the counter and then we would run on a counter space.

And that Baker's Rack is just, I love it.

I love it so much.

[00:55:11] **David Crabill:** You mentioned it a couple times. Already, but your faith in God, I know, is a very important aspect of everything that you do. Can you just share a little bit about how that's led you in your journey?

[00:55:25] **Michelle Chesser:** Yes, it's hard because when we have our bakeries, sometimes we wanna put our trust in our bakeries or trust in the money that we're getting, but I. My faith is in the Lord, and that is where I need to rest. So I see when I go off track, like I, I shared about my bakery becoming a monster. I started putting my faith in myself in my bakery, in my income, and I lost track and it hurt everybody.

And so the way things are now, I wait on the Lord, I could tell you so many stories, but when I, my, my bakery became a monster and I didn't know what to do. I just started praying and I said, Lord, I don't know what to do about this. You know, I've already been, I'm at markets, I'm in the coffee shops, I'm taking orders.

I don't know what to do. And I waited on the Lord for a year and I was so afraid to approach the coffee shop and tell them I wanted to pull back and not do everything. I just wanted to make the cinnamon rolls and I didn't know how to approach them. And I waited a year and one day I was sitting in the coffee shop and the owner said to me, out of the blue, he said, Michelle, is this too much for you?

Like, this can't be profitable for you to be doing all this wholesale. Do you wanna just do the cinnamon rolls? And I was sitting there and I felt like going, oh, that's what I've been wanting. And it fell in my lap. And I was like, thank you, Lord. And I said, yeah, I think that would be great. And he goes, well, let's make it happen.

And I waited for a year for an answer. The Lord clearly gave me an answer. And it really increased my faith. and no, I'm not perfect. And yes, sometimes I fall back on my own understanding, but I do have a strong faith in the Lord and um, really want to lean into him and trust in him only, which is very hard

[00:57:29] **David Crabill:** Well, it's an incredible journey. You know, 16 years and still going strong. As you look ahead, what are your plans for the future?

[00:57:39] **Michelle Chessser:** right now. I always, I always tell other home bakers, once you have it all figured out, things are gonna change. So right now I'm very happy with how things are. I have a great home bakery balance, but we have another grandchild on the way due in September. You know, We don't know when there'll be another one on the way, or, my husband and I both have aging parents that are getting to where they're gonna need help eventually. So, you know, I know it's cliché to call them seasons of life, but we'll be in a new season of life soon. So when we get to where things need to change, I will look back or look at what's going on and say, okay, this is gonna change here, or this is gonna change here.

I might have to pull back on here. I might have to add this here. We'll see. I'm gonna keep doing what I'm doing now. Lemonade in the summer, popups teaching online. And then when things change and seasons change, we'll just modify and adjust.

[00:58:39] **David Crabill:** Well, thank you so much, Michelle, for coming on the show now. If somebody would like to learn more about you, where can they find you or how can they reach out?

[00:58:50] **Michelle Chessser:** My website is homesweethomebaker.com, and I'm also on Instagram [@home_sweet_home_baker](https://www.instagram.com/home_sweet_home_baker), with an underscore under every word, so that that's how they can find me.

[00:59:04] **David Crabill:** Well, thank you so much for coming on the show and sharing with us today.

[00:59:08] **Michelle Chessser:** Thank you. It was so much fun. Thanks so much for having me.

[00:59:14] **David Crabill:** That wraps up another episode of the Forrager podcast.

For more information about this episode, go to forrager.com/podcast/140.

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