
unWRAPPED
Holiday Guide

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Inspired by Amy's travels through France and England, Amy's Interiors Collection celebrates her love of European antiques and traditional design. Each piece is handcrafted in Texas by skilled local artisans. Every detail can be customized, including the wood, stain, color, fabric, finish, and size. The result is timeless, classic furniture thoughtfully made for your home.



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Amy's Interiors is a full-service residential interior design firm founded by Jackson native Amy Smith Atkins and based in Dallas, Texas. Serving clients nationwide, the firm is known for creating timeless, collected interiors that feel personal and refined.

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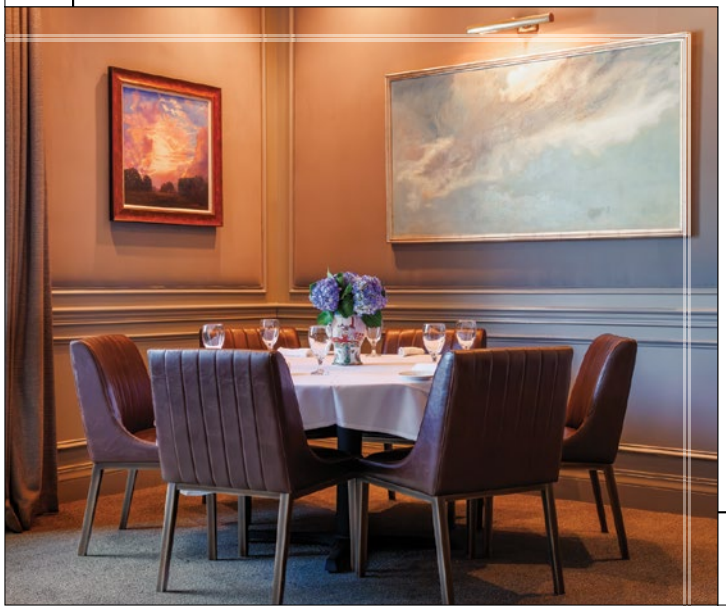
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The SWEETEST Season

Celebrate Christmas with an assortment of rich, decadent fudge perfect for serving, sharing, and giving.

Fudge has a way of turning the simplest ingredients into a wonderfully nostalgic, classic dessert. From old-fashioned silky chocolate to swirls of salted caramel, peppermint, and crispy rocky road, fudge invites endless creativity.

FEW HOLIDAY TREATS EVOKE THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS QUITE LIKE A BEAUTIFUL ASSORTMENT OF HOMEMADE FUDGE. Every Christmas, my grandmother would arrive with a fabulous silver tray filled with different varieties—dark chocolate fudge, pecan and caramel fudge, peppermint fudge, and plenty of other assorted candies. There were bourbon balls, cocoons, pralines, and pieces of divinity.

Fudge was always my favorite, with its silky texture, deep, dark chocolate flavor, and perhaps a sprinkling of cocoa or confectioners' sugar. A generous platter of assorted fudge makes holiday entertaining feel especially warm and inviting, and you know a whole lot of love went into each piece.

These treasured sweets are just as lovely tucked into holiday tins or boxes and lovingly wrapped in wax paper, making them perfect for gift-giving.

Try combining contrasting colors and flavors for a stunning little happy to share, or choose one variety to become your signature recipe—and share the recipe as well! Fudge will keep for several weeks when tightly wrapped and refrigerated or stored in the freezer, making it perfect for preparing ahead of time.

Your friends and family will love these tiny bites of indulgence during the happiest time of the year. Merry Christmas, y'all! M

CANDY CANE *Fudge*

3 cups semisweet chocolate chips
1 (14-ounce) can sweetened condensed milk
¼ cup butter
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
Pinch salt
½ cup chopped peppermint candy
Sparkling sugar, for dusting (optional)

Line an 8-inch square pan with aluminum foil or parchment paper, leaving a 2-inch overhang. Spray with nonstick cooking spray and set aside. Place a heatproof bowl over a saucepan of barely simmering water. Add chocolate chips, condensed milk, butter, vanilla, and salt. Stir gently until chocolate is melted and mixture is smooth. Immediately pour mixture into prepared pan. Using an offset spatula, smooth top. Sprinkle with chopped peppermint candy and sparkling sugar, if desired. Refrigerate for 2 hours, or until firm. Cut into small squares and serve.
Yield: 12 pieces

writer **EMILY BLACK** | *photographer* **RORY DOYLE**

MY GRANDMOTHER "JO" MADE THIS *very rich and creamy* FUDGE EVERY CHRISTMAS.

IT ALWAYS ARRIVED ON A VERY LARGE SILVER PLATTER ALONG WITH DIVINITY, BOURBON BALLS, COCOONS, AND PRALINES.



CLASSIC CHRISTMAS *Fudge*

2 cups dark chocolate chips
1 cup roughly chopped pecans
1 cup marshmallow creme
2¼ cups sugar
1 stick butter
1 (14-ounce) can sweetened condensed milk
Pinch salt
1½ teaspoons pure vanilla extract

In a large bowl, stir chocolate chips, pecans, and marshmallow creme together. Set aside. In a heavy-bottomed saucepan, combine sugar, butter, condensed milk, and salt over low heat. Bring mixture to a slow boil, stirring occasionally, until syrupy and mixture reaches soft-ball stage, 235 degrees on a candy thermometer. Remove pan from heat and whisk in vanilla. Immediately pour sugar mixture over chocolate chip mixture. Stir quickly until chocolate is melted and mixture is smooth. Pour fudge into prepared pan. Swirl and smooth top with a spatula. Cover with foil and refrigerate for several hours, or until firm. Cut into small pieces and serve on a beautiful silver tray.
Yield: 3 pounds



ROCKY ROAD *Fudge*

2 cups semisweet chocolate chips
1 (14-ounce) can sweetened condensed milk
¼ cup butter
2 cups miniature marshmallows
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
1 cup salted peanuts

Line an 8-inch square pan with parchment paper. Set aside. In a large heatproof bowl set over a saucepan of simmering water, combine chocolate chips, condensed milk, and butter. Cook over low heat, stirring occasionally, until butter and chocolate are melted and mixture is smooth. Remove from heat. Add marshmallows, vanilla, and peanuts, stirring until well combined. Spoon mixture into prepared pan. Using a spatula, press fudge gently to remove any air pockets. Cover tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerate until firm. Using parchment paper as handles, lift fudge from pan. Cut into small squares and serve. Store refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 2 weeks.
Yield: 36 pieces





TIRAMISU OREO *Fudge*

5 ounces Tiramisu Oreo cookies
1 (14-ounce) can sweetened condensed milk
1½ cups dark chocolate chips
1½ cups white chocolate chips
1 tablespoon salted butter
2 teaspoons vanilla bean paste or extract

Line an 8-inch square pan with parchment paper, leaving a 2-inch overhang. Spray with nonstick cooking spray and set aside. Using a sharp knife, roughly chop cookies into small pieces. Reserve half in a small bowl for topping. Finely chop remaining pieces. Using a double boiler or heatproof bowl set over a saucepan of simmering water, combine condensed milk, dark chocolate chips, white chocolate chips, butter, and vanilla. Cook, stirring, until chocolate is melted and mixture is smooth, about 5 minutes. Remove from heat and fold in finely chopped cookies. Immediately transfer mixture to prepared pan. Using an offset spatula, smooth into an even layer. Top with reserved coarsely chopped cookies, pressing pieces lightly into surface with back of a spoon. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 2 hours, or until firm. Using parchment paper as handles, lift fudge from pan and transfer to a cutting board. Cut into squares and serve.
Yield: 16 pieces



KENTUCKY BOURBON PECAN *Fudge*

1 (14-ounce) can sweetened condensed milk
2 cups semisweet or dark chocolate chips
½ cup Kentucky bourbon
1 cup chopped pecans
½ cup toasted pecan halves

Line an 8-inch square baking dish with foil and spray with nonstick cooking spray. Set aside. In a heavy-bottomed saucepan, heat condensed milk and chocolate chips over low to medium heat, stirring occasionally, until chocolate is completely melted and mixture is smooth. Add bourbon and stir quickly until fully incorporated. Remove from heat. Add chopped pecans and mix thoroughly. Pour fudge into prepared pan and smooth top with a spatula. Arrange 1 pecan half on each approximately 1-inch square. Cover with foil and let stand for several hours, or until firm. Cut into squares and serve.
Yield: 18 pieces

RED VELVET *Fudge*

1 cup semisweet chocolate chips
3 tablespoons red food coloring
3 cups sugar
¾ cup butter
⅔ cup half-and-half
1 (12-ounce) bag white chocolate chips
1 (8-ounce) jar marshmallow creme
1 teaspoon vanilla

Line a 9-inch square pan with parchment paper. Set aside. In a heatproof bowl, combine semisweet chocolate chips and food coloring. Set aside. In a large, heavy saucepan, melt butter, then add sugar and half-and-half over low heat. Stir until combined. Remove from heat. Immediately add marshmallow creme. Once fully incporated, add white chocolate chips and vanilla. Stir until smooth and well combined. Spoon half of white chocolate mixture into bowl containing semisweet chocolate chips and food coloring. Stir until chocolate is completely melted and mixture is smooth. Working quickly, drop alternating portions of red fudge mixture and white fudge mixture into prepared pan. Using an offset spatula, smooth and swirl top. Cover with foil and refrigerate until firm. Remove from pan, and cut into squares.
Yield: 30 pieces







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ABERDEEN Christmas Open House

ABERDEENMSMAINST.COM

November 1, 1 - 5 p.m. | Downtown Aberdeen

Celebrate the season at Aberdeen Main Street's Christmas Open House, a beloved hometown tradition filled with holiday shopping and Christmas cheer. Discover new merchandise, seasonal specials and door prizes while reconnecting with old friends and making new ones. Spend the afternoon shopping local and welcoming Christmas to Aberdeen's historic downtown.

LOUISVILLE Jingle Bell Jubilee Christmas Open House

FACEBOOK.COM/WINSTONCOUNTYCHAMBER

November 5 & 6 | Downtown Louisville

Shop for everyone on your Christmas list in downtown Louisville! Register for door prizes and enjoy holiday refreshments in all our shops. Shoppers will receive a complimentary Louisville shopping bag to fill up with lots of beautiful gifts from our unique stores.

COLUMBIA Holiday Open House

VISITCOLUMBIAMS.COM

November 6, 10 a.m. - 9 p.m. & November 7, 10 a.m. - 3 p.m. | Historic Main Street District

Experience the magic of Columbia's Holiday Open House! Stroll through the "City of Charm," discovering unique shops along the historic Main Street District and beyond. It's the perfect way to jump-start your holiday shopping and lift your festive spirit!

COLUMBUS Christmas Open House & Wassail Fest

COLUMBUSMAINSTREET.COM

November 6, 10 a.m. - 7 p.m., November 7, 10 a.m. - 4 p.m, November 8, 1 - 4 p.m., & December 4, 5 - 8 p.m. Downtown Columbus

In November, retail businesses showcase holiday items. Door prizes, discounts, food samplings, even a visit with Miz Claus while you explore our downtown. In December during Wassail Fest, lots of shopping, Ugly Sweater Showdown, pictures with Santa and Miz Claus, and much more!

SENATOBIA Christmas Open House

SENATOBIAMAINSTREET.COM

November 7 & 8, 10 a.m. - 3 p.m. | Tate County

It's the most wonderful shopping weekend of the year! Enjoy festive deals, unique gifts, holiday treats, and Christmas cheer while shopping local throughout Tate County!

LAUREL Holiday Open House, Tree Lighting & Cookie Stroll, Kiwanis Club Pancake Day, and Sertoma Club Christmas Parade

LAURELMAINSTREET.COM

November 8, 12 - 5 p.m., December 4, 5 - 8 p.m., & December 6, 6 a.m. - 2 p.m. | Downtown Laurel

It's Christmas in downtown Laurel! Kick off the season with the Holiday Open House on Sunday, Nov. 8, 12 - 5 p.m. Then welcome Santa to town at the City of Laurel Tree Lighting & Cookie Stroll on Friday, Dec. 4, 5 - 8 p.m., complete with free cookies and after-hours shopping. Stay through the weekend for Kiwanis Club Pancake Day, 6 a.m. - 2 p.m., and the Sertoma Club Christmas Parade, 10 a.m. on Saturday, Dec. 6!

HERNANDO Christmas Open House

HERNANDOMS.ORG

November 8, 1 - 5 p.m. | Downtown Hernando

Experience the magic of our Hernando Christmas Open House in downtown Hernando! Stroll through charming shops decked in festive décor, enjoy seasonal treats, holiday music, and exclusive deals. Discover unique gifts, support local businesses, and soak up the joyful spirit. Don't miss the holiday magic! It's the perfect way to celebrate the season!

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INDIANOLA Making Spirits Bright

November 12, 5 - 7 p.m. | Indianola, MS

Celebrate the season at Making Spirits Bright in Indianola! More than 20 local stores will welcome shoppers with special deals, festive fun and something for everyone. Come sip and shop with your friends, family and neighbors while discovering thoughtful gifts and supporting the businesses that make our community shine brightly. Don't miss the holiday magic! It's the perfect way to celebrate the season!

DOWNTOWNHATTIESBURG.COM

HATTIESBURG Holiday Open House

November 14, 9 a.m. - 9 p.m. | Downtown Hattiesburg

Kick off the holiday season in downtown Hattiesburg during Holiday Open House on Saturday, November 14! Sip, shop, and savor downtown as local businesses welcome you with festive experiences, seasonal specials, and plenty of holiday cheer. Gather your friends and family and make downtown Hattiesburg part of your holiday traditions!

CLEVELAND 50 Nights of Lights Kickoff: Annual Tree Lighting & Open House Weekend

50NIGHTSOFLIGHTS.COM

November 14 & 15, 6 p.m. | Downtown Cleveland's Greenstrip

Celebrate the season in downtown Cleveland during Open House Weekend, November 14–15. Shop local, enjoy festive activities, and gather for the 11th Annual Tree Lighting at 6 p.m. Saturday, when more than one million lights illuminate downtown and launch the beloved 50 Nights of Lights tradition.

STARKVILLEHOLIDAYBAZAAR.COM

STARKVILLE 55th Annual Holiday Bazaar presented by BankPlus

November 18 & 19, 10 a.m. - 7 p.m. | Downtown Starkville

Join us for Starkville's annual Holiday Bazaar November 18-19th at the Mill at MSU. Shop 80+ vendors and find specialty & handmade holiday gifts this Christmas season. The event is $10 for admission and runs 10 a.m. - 7 p.m. each day.

VICKSBURGMAINSTREET.COM

VICKSBURG 30th Annual Old Fashioned Christmas Open House

November 29, 1- 5 p.m. | Downtown Vicksburg

Kick off the holidays at our 30th Annual Old Fashioned Christmas Open House in downtown Vicksburg! Enjoy live Christmas music, a visit from Santa, and free poinsettias for the first 100 shoppers who bring a receipt showing a downtown purchase of $25 or more. One poinsettia per person, while supplies last.

OCEAN SPRINGS Ocean Springs Holiday Open House (featuring Snow Day)

December 4 & 5, 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. & December 5, 2 - 6 p.m. | Downtown Ocean Springs

Ocean Springs Holiday Open House featuring Snow Day returns December 4 & 5! Participating businesses throughout Ocean Springs will offer holiday specials, festive music, sweet treats and more from 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. both days. On December 5, enjoy Snow Day from 2 - 6 p.m. with family fun, holiday activities, and plenty of snow!

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That's a Wrap!

FROM CHOOSING THE RIGHT PAPER TO MASTERING THE PERFECT BOW, DISCOVER THE SECRETS TO BEAUTIFULLY PRESENTED HOLIDAY GIFTS.



There is something special about receiving a beautifully wrapped gift. Before the ribbon is untied or the paper is torn away, the presentation itself creates a sense of anticipation. A thoughtfully wrapped package can make even the simplest gift feel extraordinary—and during the holidays, a stack of pretty packages becomes part of the décor itself.

Beautiful gift wrapping does not have to be complicated. With quality materials, a few tried-and-true techniques and a little creativity, anyone can turn holiday packages into gifts that are almost too pretty to open.

Start with Good Paper

The foundation of any beautifully wrapped gift is the paper itself. Lesley Childress, owner of Creative Gifts in Jackson, says shoppers should consider more than just a pretty pattern when selecting wrapping paper.

"I would say the appearance, the weight of the paper, and the ease of wrapping with it. If it's too thin, it will tear easily and can look inexpensive. Around 60 to 80-GSM is good for everyday, and 80 to 100+ GSM feels more luxurious."

Paper that is too thin can tear at the corners, while paper that is overly heavy can be difficult to fold and crease. Opacity matters, too, particularly when wrapping a box with printing or a bold design that might show through.

When choosing several papers for gifts under the tree, Childress recommends thinking in terms of coordination rather than matching. **"YOU SHOULD CHOOSE A COORDINATED PALETTE, NOT A MATCHING SET."** Start with one dominant color and one or two supporting colors, then vary the scale of the patterns. Tiny checks or dots can complement a stripe, plaid, or small floral, while a larger toile, botanical, or statement print adds interest. A solid paper can help tie everything together.

This approach creates a collected, layered look beneath the tree without making every package appear identical.

writer MELANIE M. WARD | *photographer* MELANIE THORTIS



Master the Perfect Bow

Ribbon is often what transforms a nicely wrapped package into a showstopper, and Childress says one of the easiest ways to improve your bow is to think of wrapping the ribbon around the package and tying the bow as two separate steps.

After wrapping the ribbon around the box, cross the ends and make one tight knot. Form the first loop about three inches long, and pinch its base firmly between your thumb and finger. Bring the other ribbon over the front of the loop, around the back, and through the opening to create the second loop.

Then comes an important detail: Pull the loops rather than the tails to tighten the bow. Keep your thumb over the center knot as you adjust the loops until they are even, then fluff the bow, arrange the tails, and make your final cuts.

"The key is to keep the center pinched the entire time."

For beginners, wired ribbon is particularly forgiving because it holds its shape and can be manipulated after the bow is tied. For a more luxurious look, Childress favors velvet and silk.

Knowing how much ribbon to cut can also prevent frustration. Childress recommends measuring around the package before making a cut. For a standard bow tied on top, calculate twice the package's height, width, and length, then add approximately 24 to 30 inches for the tails.

AND WHEN IN DOUBT, GO A LITTLE BIGGER WITH THE BOW. A generous bow often makes a simple package feel much more polished.



RIBBON IS OFTEN WHAT TRANSFORMS A NICELY WRAPPED PACKAGE INTO A SHOWSTOPPER.

A GENEROUS BOW MAKES A SIMPLE PACKAGE FEEL MUCH MORE POLISHED.











STEPS to Mastering the Perfect Bow





Think Beyond the Box



Oddly shaped gifts can challenge even experienced wrappers, but Childress offers a simple rule: **"DON'T FIGHT THE SHAPE, CHANGE THE PACKAGING."**

Whenever possible, place an irregularly shaped item inside a box before wrapping it. Not only does this make the package easier to handle, but it also creates a cleaner, more substantial-looking gift.

For items that simply will not fit neatly into a box, a gift bag can be just as beautiful when it is thoughtfully finished. Bottles, balls, stuffed animals, and other difficult shapes can be placed in a gift bag with tissue or in a clear cellophane bag filled with shred and finished with a substantial ribbon or bow.

The trick is to make the alternative packaging look intentional rather than like a last-minute solution. Coordinating tissue, a full bow, and a pretty tag can turn even the simplest gift bag into something special.

Go Big

OVERSIZED PRESENTS REQUIRE A LITTLE MORE PLANNING—AND SOMETIMES A BIT OF INGENUITY.

If standard wrapping paper is not wide enough, Childress recommends turning the gift vertically rather than horizontally. Cut enough paper to cover the majority of the box, but do not tape it immediately. Measure the exposed sides first, and cut separate pieces of paper to cover those areas. Once the side pieces are in place, secure the larger sheet over the box.

To disguise the patched areas, "I will always say to tie your ribbon on the sides you had to patch."

Childress has put the technique to the test herself. One of the largest gifts she has wrapped was a grill still inside its box. Because the box was wider than the wrapping paper, she carefully measured the package to make sure she had enough paper to wrap around it, then patched the uncovered sides.

For some truly oversized gifts—a bicycle, piece of furniture, or an outdoor toy—the best solution may be to skip the paper altogether. An enormous bow, greenery, and an oversized gift tag can provide plenty of Christmas magic.



Add the Finishing Touch

The smallest details often make the biggest impression. A sprig of cedar, magnolia, or rosemary tucked beneath the ribbon adds texture and a natural holiday touch. Or consider a tiny ornament, jingle bell, candy cane, or handwritten gift tag.

Childress has a clear favorite when it comes to embellishments: "Greenery is my favorite!"

This Christmas, she is seeing a return to rich, traditional colors, including navy, burgundy, forest green, chocolate brown, and cream, along with velvet ribbon, tonal papers, and small-scale patterns. The combination feels classic and sophisticated without being overly formal.

An expensive-looking package does not necessarily require expensive materials, either. Simple paper paired with beautiful ribbon can be striking. Make the bow larger than you initially think it should be, layer two coordinating ribbons, add a simple gift tag, and take the time to make folds crisp and seams inconspicuous.

Some of the most common wrapping mistakes, Childress says, come down to rushing: failing to measure paper before cutting, creating messy corners, leaving the main seam visible on top, using too much tape, or making bows too small.

Perhaps the best approach is knowing when to stop.

"A BEAUTIFUL PACKAGE NEEDS ONE THING TO CATCH YOUR EYE, NOT FIVE. If the paper has a gorgeous pattern, use a pretty, simple ribbon. If the ribbon is spectacular, let the paper be quiet. Also, build the bow before you tighten it and fluff from the inside out."

Ultimately, beautiful gift wrapping is less about perfection than intention. A crisp fold, a carefully tied ribbon, and a thoughtful finishing touch tell the recipient that the gift was chosen—and presented—with care. After all, during the holidays, sometimes what is on the outside of the box can be part of the gift, too. M

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and **Sal & Mookies,** 200 District Blvd. E, Jackson,
3in1giftcard.com

2



2
Roberto Coin 18K yellow gold "Love in Verona" twist diamond bangle; $9,950;
Corinth Jewelers,
2500 S. Harper Rd., Corinth,
662.286.0133 or corinthjewelers.com

3



3
Holiday Duo, featuring Flathau's favorites, or classic Cheese Straws (16-ounce) tins, $24.95 each;
Flathau's Fine Foods,
209 W. 2nd Ave., Petal,
601.582.9629 or flathausfinefoods.com

4
House blend seasoning, $10;
Koestler Prime,
1000 Highland Colony Pkwy., Ridgeland,
601.957.3753 or koestlerprime.com

4



5



5
Ruby Ring, $17,500;
Van Atkins,
129 W. Bankhead St., New Albany;
124 Courthouse Sq., Oxford;
and 124 W. Main St., Tupelo,
vanatkins.com

6

Margot Game Table,
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817.995.6671 or amys-interiors.com

7

iPhone 18 Pro features a 6.3-inch ProMotion display, 48MP Fusion main camera with variable aperture, big leap in battery life, and A20 Pro chip, on us with select plans;
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9

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(in-person only, limit 5 per customer);
TASTE Italian Kitchen,
208 Lincoln Green St., Starkville,
and 970 Highland Colony Pkwy., Ridgeland,
tasteitaliankitchen.com

10

Bracelets by enewton (available in pearl, gold, silver, and colors), prices vary;
Heart of the South,
131 Gateway Dr., Brandon,
601.825.1248 or heartofthesouth.com



6



8



7



9

10















11
Gift card, available in varying denominations;
Renaissance at Colony Park,
1000 Highland Colony Pkwy., Ridgeland,
renaissanceatcolonypark.com

12
Back 70, Cloud W26 sneaker in pois gold forest, $179.96;
Southern Accents,
5685 Dale Dr., Marion,
601.482.5200 or southernaccentsms.com

13
Two-quart tea kettle in mocha check by MacKenzie-Childs, $179.95;
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128 S. Industrial Rd., The District in Jackson, The Village at Madison, and Oxford,
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14
Seiko Luxe 1968 Heritage Diver's Watch, $1,800;
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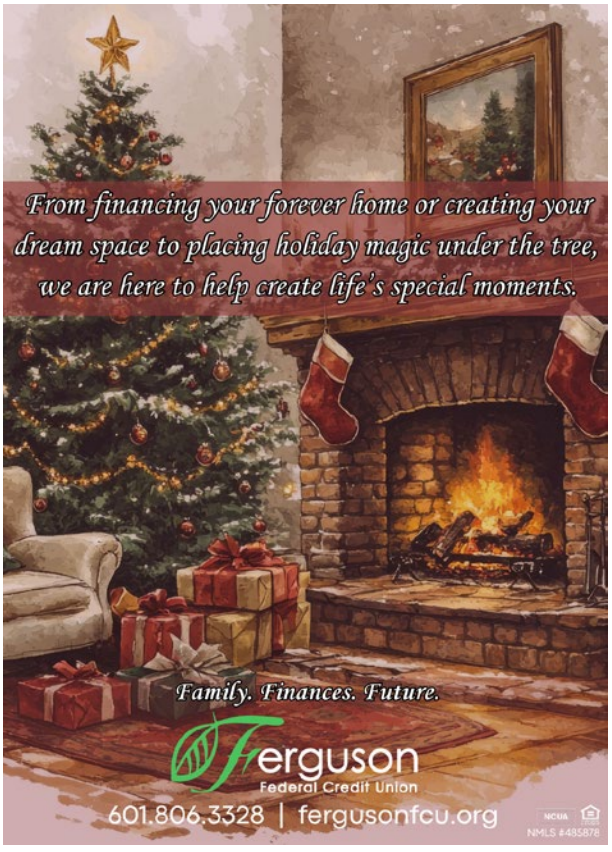


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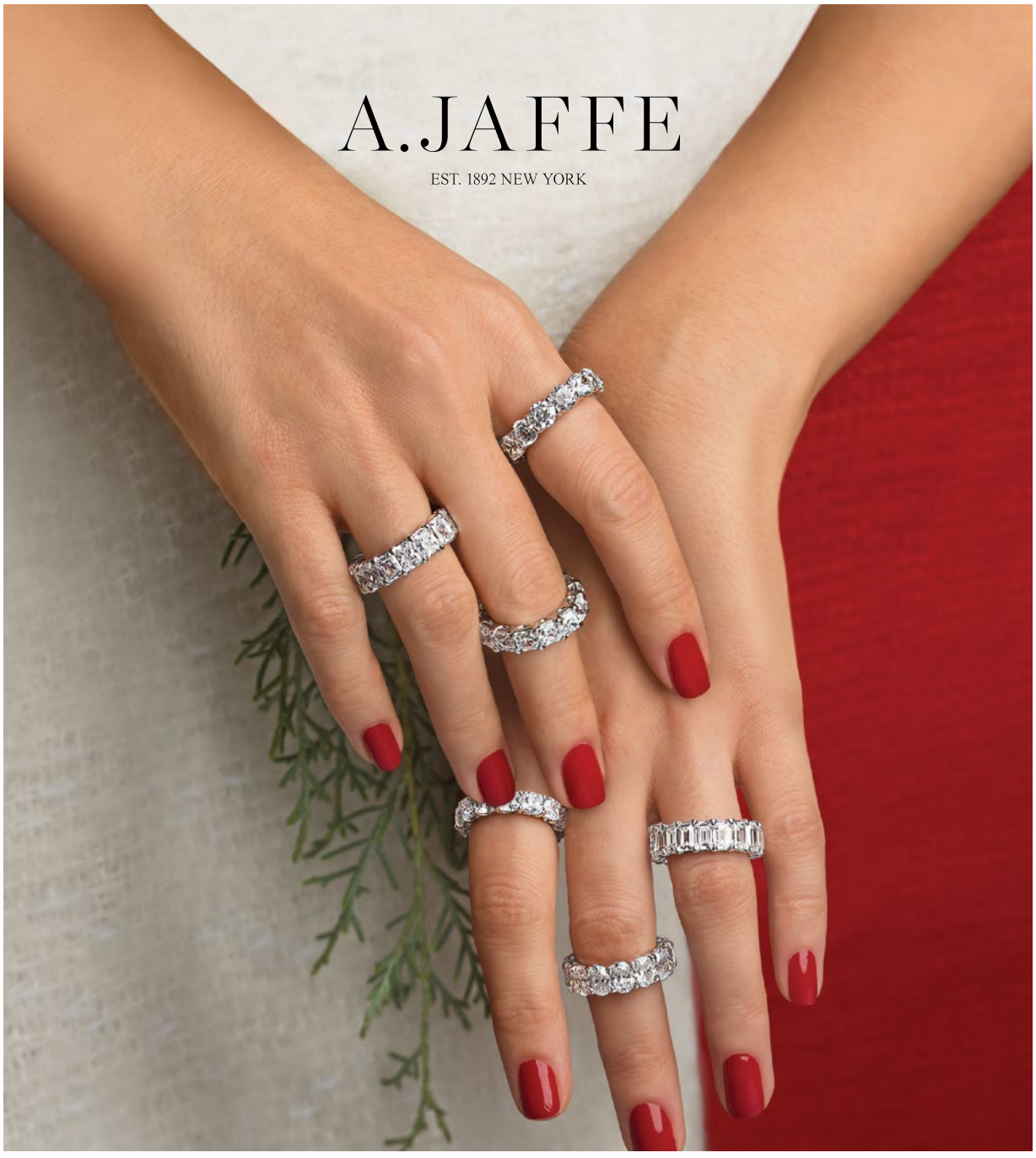

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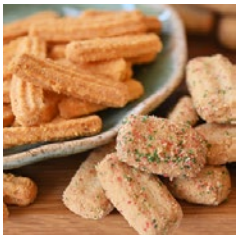


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November

NOVEMBER 1

ABERDEEN: Christmas Open House from 1 to 5 p.m.

NOVEMBER 5

LOUISVILLE: Downtown Louisville

NOVEMBER 6

COLUMBIA: Holiday Open House from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.

COLUMBUS: Downtown Christmas Open House from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.

LOUISVILLE: Downtown Louisville

NOVEMBER 7

BROOKHAVEN: Christmas Open House from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

COLUMBIA: Holiday Open House from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

COLUMBUS: Downtown Christmas Open House from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

SENATOBIA: Christmas Open House from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

NOVEMBER 8

COLUMBUS: Downtown Christmas Open House from 1 to 4 p.m.

HERNANDO: Christmas Open House from 1-5 p.m.

LAUREL: Holiday Open House from 12 to 5 p.m.

SENATOBIA: Christmas Open House from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

NOVEMBER 12

INDIANOLA: Making Spirits Bright from 5 to 7 p.m.

NOVEMBER 14

CLEVELAND: Downtown Open House

HATTIESBURG: Holiday Open House from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m.

NOVEMBER 15

CLEVELAND: Downtown Open House

NOVEMBER 18

STARKVILLE: Holiday Bazaar from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.

NOVEMBER 19

STARKVILLE: Holiday Bazaar from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.

NOVEMBER 29

VICKSBURG: Old Fashioned Christmas Open House from 1-5 p.m.

December

DECEMBER 4

COLUMBUS: Downtown Christmas Open House from 5 to 8 p.m.

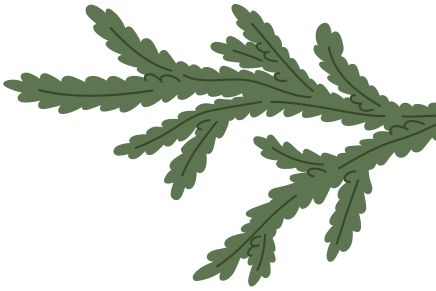
OCEAN SPRINGS: Holiday Open House from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

DECEMBER 5

OCEAN SPRINGS: Holiday Open House from 2 to 6 p.m.

DECEMBER 12

GREENWOOD: Holiday shopping from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.





when giving becomes receiving

I learned while growing up that part of being thankful for all our blessings at Thanksgiving was also remembering those around us who were struggling to make ends meet as the season of giving approached. I have wonderful memories of spending Christmas Eve with our relatives in Mississippi, but the awareness of those less fortunate always remained with me.

In 1982, when my family and I were living in the Washington, D.C., area, we decided to have my husband dress up as Santa for our oldest son's fifth birthday party in December. Instead of giving him gifts, we asked those attending to bring toys for Toys for Tots, while our son opened his own gifts from us.

Since there were no computers or cell phones back then, I called a local formalwear shop, asked if they knew where we could rent a Santa costume, and explained why.

"You say you're donating the toys people bring to Toys for Tots?" asked the man who answered.

"Yes," I replied.

"Give me your number, and I'll call you back." When he did, he said, "I just spoke to the Santa who lights the national Christmas tree, and he's happy to come to your party to collect the toys."

When Santa *and* Mrs. Claus arrived, they looked like they'd stepped out of a storybook. Dressed in his Jolly Ol' Elf suit, with his white fluffy beard and infectious disposition, Santa greeted everyone and showed them his large compass watch, which, he said, helped him navigate around the world on Christmas Eve. The children were awestruck. Mrs. Claus wore a Christmas bonnet atop her silver hair. Gold spectacles framed her radiant blue eyes. Her red dress was covered with a Christmas apron, as if she'd just baked cookies in her North Pole kitchen. Both effervesced with joy and kindness that made the evening magical. As each child sat on Santa's knee for pictures, he thanked them for helping him by bringing gifts to less fortunate children and said he would never forget how special they were.

A few days later, Santa called me to say he had delivered our toys to Children's National Hospital in D.C., where he'd given many of them to children in the terminally ill unit. One little boy, he said, was still holding a teddy bear we'd donated when he passed. My heart has been invested in Toys for Tots ever since.

Over the years, Toys for Tots has evolved to meet many of our country's needs. They now provide toys, books, and educational materials to children on reservations to help them overcome poverty. During Katrina and the devastating floods in western North Carolina, when many were displaced from their homes, Toys for Tots coordinators requested items, such as hair dryers, games, and backpacks, for at-risk children up to age 14 living in shelters. They also request comfort items for children living in foster care to take with them when they switch homes.

Since 1982, I have tried to host Toys for Tots parties whenever I could in mid-November or early December. Each year, I've reached out to our regional coordinator to see what the greatest needs were. Friends attending my parties have graciously and generously met those requests, knowing they're remembering children who might otherwise be forgotten during the Christmas season. The personnel at the local Fire and Rescue Station who collect the toys always smile whenever we bring our boxes of donations for the Marines to pick up around the middle of December. It's truly a win-win situation, a heartwarming time for all involved, and a beautiful way to launch the holiday season.

I've learned over the years that when volunteers come together—whatever the cause—to bring light into the lives of others, I've met the nicest people, whose hearts are in the right place. **AND THERE'S NOTHING QUITE LIKE THE REWARDING FEELING YOU RECEIVE WHEN YOU GIVE LOVE, HOPE, AND JOY TO THESE DESERVING CHILDREN WHO NEED IT MOST.** M

[Visit toysfortots.org to donate, find a local donation site, or learn more.]

writer **CATHEY FREI** | *illustrator* **SAM BEIBERS**

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