

Episode Title: Samantha Fore's Extraordinary Journey

Episode Summary: In this week's episode, Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of *Southern Living Magazine*, chats with Lexington, Kentucky-based chef Samantha Fore about her culinary journey and founding the thriving restaurant pop-up Tuk Tuk Sri Lankan Bites in 2016. The pair also discuss Samantha's unique and personal twists on deviled eggs and fried chicken, as well as which country music hero will always eat for free at Tuk Tuk.

SAMANTHA FORE: Being Southern is a life for me. It is how I carry myself. It is how I want to lead. For a long time, I had this little mantr, and it's just like, "Work hard and be nice to people." And that has been my mantra since April of 2016. And if it's taken me this far and the South has carried me this far, I don't think I need to change anything. I just need to be a little bit more Southern.

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *Welcome to Biscuits and Jam from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of Southern Living Magazine. My guest this week is a first-generation Sri Lankan-American from Kentucky who has found her calling by turning traditional Southern foods like deviled eggs and fried chicken into something all her own. And along the way, she tells me that other South Asian chefs who have planted their roots in the Southern US have given her a family she didn't know she needed.*

SAMANTHA FORE: We are all home in the South, all of the immigrants, we are all home. And so for us to embrace that as minorities, especially a time like now, it feels like a radical act and I'm kind of okay with that because we need something to spur some sort of positive change

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *In 2016, Samantha Fore founded her pop-up restaurant Tuk Tuk Sri Lankan Bites in Lexington, Kentucky, after brunch service in her own home became the talk of the town. Though Tuk Tuk is one of the few representations of Sri Lankan cuisine in the South, Samantha has quickly developed a loyal following, with her pop-up dinners selling out all over the country and her recipes showing up on the cover of magazines. She was also named one of Southern Living's Cooks of the Year for 2020.*

On today's program, Samantha shares her personal journey, why Lexington is one of the South's culinary hotspots, and which country music superstar will always eat at Tuk Tuk for free. All that and more right now on Biscuits and Jam.

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins - Fiddler's Barn on Epidemic Sound)

SID EVANS: Well, Samantha Fore, welcome to Biscuits and Jam.

SAMANTHA FORE: I am so excited. Thanks for having me.

SID EVANS: So you are a first-generation Sri Lankan American who grew up in North Carolina just outside of Charlotte.

SAMANTHA FORE: Born in Kentucky, raised in North Carolina.

SID EVANS: So there's a question that I always ask in these interviews. And, today I'm just going to start with it. Who was the cook in your family?

SAMANTHA FORE: My mother by far, absolutely my mother. Because when you come over from halfway around the world, it's not like there's, you know, folks coming with you to help you cook or to help you run the house; you're in a new country on your own. And so she learned how to cook after she got here, which is really impressive because she's quite possibly one of the best cooks I've ever known. She's phenomenal.

SID EVANS: So tell me when you think of your mom's cooking, what are some of the dishes that really come to mind?

SAMANTHA FORE: My mom has brunch on lock, like it's epic. So when everyone is home, she will make these massive spreads. It'll either be hoppers, which are these fermented rice flour pancakes, string hoppers, which are these little extruded rice noodle pillows, or kiribath, which is a coconut milk rice, super dense. And so she'll do one of those three with a ton of different curries and sambols. And so it's like, you can find your favorite parts of every bite, I think. And so it's just like a Choose Your Own Adventure sort of brunch. It's always a good time.

SID EVANS: Wow. She's not messing around is she?

SAMANTHA FORE: No. She, did everything on two burners. For years and years and years, she would cook for 40 people on two burners and never complain. So—

SID EVANS: So Sam, what did the holidays look like for you guys?

SAMANTHA FORE: We didn't have the same frame of reference other people have for holidays. So ours are just like an amalgamation of good people gathering. At Thanksgiving we have three different families that would get together. One was Iranian-Japanese, the other was Sri Lankan, and then there was us, and we would get together with all our friends in the neighborhoods, switch it between Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina, do a different house every year. And like the night before Thanksgiving would be when everything awesome showed up. So you'd be getting like ghormeh sabzi next to coconut sambol next to this like amazing patik rice. And the more I think about it, the more I realized how special it was, because it was just such a huge reflection of where everyone came from and just how much we all had to learn, to learn about each other's foods. And so once you get to the Thanksgiving table, there might be a little, you know, Sri Lankan or Persian or Japanese accent to it, you know, just to make it a little bit more fun, a little bit more exciting.

SID EVANS: Well, so, they came over in the seventies, right?

SAMANTHA FORE: 1972.

SID EVANS: So your mom starts really cooking, and getting quite good at that.

SAMANTHA FORE: Just Imagine going from Sri Lanka to Ohio. It just doesn't compute, but she made it work.

SID EVANS: Well, so I have a very basic question for you, which is where did she shop? I mean, how did she find the ingredients to do the cooking that she wanted to do?

SAMANTHA FORE: So this is the story of all the immigrant and first-gen folks is they would bring them home in cans, and then that would be one way before everything got as strict as it is. She would go to the farmer's market and get what she could that was fresh. She basically said, like at the beginning it was a lot of lentils, a lot of chicken, it was ingredients that they could get their hands on. But now as spice availability is expanding and opportunities for different cuisines are out there, it's getting easier to find the ingredients that she used to use and she still uses. So it's improved significantly, but I think the most vast improvements have been in the last 10 years.

SID EVANS: Sam, I know you've been to Sri Lanka a number of times. Tell me a little bit about where they came from, exactly what town or what region, and paint a picture of that for me.

SAMANTHA FORE: So my mom's family is from a little town outside of Negombo called Divulapitiya, and it is near the beach. There are rubber plantations, there are coconut plantations. And my family on my mother's side was in coconut processing and doing stuff for the local township. My dad's family was in a little part of Colombo called Manningtown for a bit, but then they moved to the mountains of Kandy. So I've got the beach and the mountains. It's pretty good combination.

SID EVANS: And so when you go over there for a visit, what are some of the things that you're going to see on the table at a mealtime?

SAMANTHA FORE: This is what's hard is because with Corona and aging and everything, and like I've lost some of my Sri Lankan anchors. And it used to be these huge spreads of every kind of like they, they sell string hoppers and, and pittu, which is like the steamed rice flour, coconut beautiful starchy thing, and so you can get those on the street side. And then my aunt would make all these, all my favorite curries, like the garlic coconut curry and this whitefish curry that was epic. And you know, this time when I go back—I think I'm going back next year—it's weird because I don't have them anymore between, between COVID and everything. Like, I've lost some of my very deepest food influencers in the past two years. And so, I don't know, like, I, I wish I knew. It used to be these epic, you know, first meals, no matter what time you

got in, if it was three o'clock in the morning, you were going to have a full meal before you tried to pass out. Food is very important in our family.

SID EVANS: Well, that's a trip that I know you were looking forward to.

SAMANTHA FORE: It's been awhile, it's been awhile. Yeah. But it's beautiful, you know, it's, it's, there's a part of it that is home. Even though I didn't grow up there, there is a big part of it that feels comfortable to me. It's like the smell of the market hits me and I'm home, the smell of, you know, the fruit stands. I love driving down the streets in like the little towns and just getting random fruit and cashews off the side of the road. Come on, like, you can't get fresher than that.

SID EVANS: No, uh-uh. It's like boiled peanuts in South Carolina, you know, you gotta pull over even if you've passed that stand.

SAMANTHA FORE: You know, I pull over for boiled peanuts too. Are you kidding me? Like, I don't miss that.

(Music fades in and out)

SID EVANS: So Sam, talk to me about Sri Lankan cuisine and what makes it different from Indian cuisine? What are some of the spices or techniques that make it a little bit different.

SAMANTHA FORE: I like to describe it as like a really fun love child of Indian and Thai cuisines, because it has some of the best tenets of it between the spices of, you know, south Indian cuisine, where you've got the big flavors of coriander, cumin, chili peppers, black pepper. And then you have the coconut milk, the sour, the lime. So I kind of think of it as like their Mediterranean kid, if that makes sense, because it's an island, you know, it's the size of West Virginia. It has incredible biodiversity considering all of those things. But, um, with all of the influences between the trade, the colonization, and the natural migration of ingredients between Africa, Asia, and America, it really kind of developed its own identity because you have influences from the English, influences from the Portuguese, influences from the Dutch, influences from the natives, and that doesn't even cover it all. And so I'm really kind of excited about my next trip, because I want to discover more. I feel like, you know, here in America, there aren't a lot of bastions of Sri Lankan cuisine, but my knowledge is also limited. So I want to learn as much as I can.

SID EVANS: Well, so Sam, you grew up in the South, right? You grew up with biscuits and corn bread and—

SAMANTHA FORE: —barbecue and fried chicken and fried okra—fried okra was my jam.

SID EVANS: Right. All that good stuff. And I had this incredible dish that you made the other night with okra and curried beets that was wonderful. And you've really kind of blended Sri Lankan food with

Southern food. I mean, that's been something that you've kind of made your own. Talk to me about that a little bit.

SAMANTHA FORE: I mean, I've been kind of studying more and more as I've gotten further into this whole cooking thing that I kind of accidentally fell into. And the more I learn about the migration of ingredients, the more I learn how I can wield them in my kind of way. And so I try to have, a frame of reference—like everyone knows that okra is delightful and delicious in itself. It just is, especially when it's farm picked, especially when it's fresh. I love it. And then beets are usually a hard sell, but if you can get a beet to not taste earthy, you can generally sell people on it. And so I'm looking at these ingredients and we have similar crops going into Sri Lanka and the northern parts of the country. So it's not like it's completely foreign. I think with all of these, like diaspora travels, everything's kind of made its way everywhere. And so by the time it got here through the African diaspora, you could kind of trace-cooking methods and ideas for it, but we just kind of put our own spin on it with spices, with tempering, with a ton of aromatics—you want to impart and build as much flavor as you can. And I feel like that might be one of the biggest tenets of Sri Lankan cuisine is that the flavors are big, even when it's something simple, something simply prepared, it has to be big.

SID EVANS: Yeah. Yeah. well, Sam, we've talked a lot on this show about—what's so funny?

SAMANTHA FORE: I mean, you and I have talked a lot, Sid. I spent five days in a row in Alabama and then I came back here and I was like, “Where’s Sid?” I need somebody to go out on a lunch with me. Like, come on.

SID EVANS: We can do this anytime. So we've talked a lot about all the cultural influences that are changing Southern food. And you hear a lot about that happening in big cities like Houston and Atlanta, but it's also happening in Lexington, Kentucky, which doesn't get as much attention. And I'm wondering what are some of the food discoveries that you've made in Lexington that you're excited about?

SAMANTHA FORE: This is why I can't leave Lexington is cause I low-key, like absolutely love the food scene here, they're my favorites. There's an epic burrito joint run by Laura Ramirez, and she makes all of her tortillas from scratch. You can hear the giant tortilla machine in the background when you walk in, she makes my absolute favorite nopales that I've ever had. They're amazing, and so I love her little shop. There's a new dosa place that's actually quite good. We've got Sav's for West African cuisine. And Sav is actually extremely fascinating because he got an entire town hooked on peanut goat, which is not an easy task, peanut goat and greens fufu. Like you're coming into Lexington and you're like, wait, I can get these things?

SID EVANS: And his place is called—

SAMANTHA FORE: Sav's. Uh, I think it Sav's Grill and Chill now because he has the ice cream stuff, but it's Sav's Grill and he was on campus forever. And then he finally got into his own building and he's been, you know, growing and thriving, but he's fascinating. And we've got so many folks from all over the place

here that just kind of want their food point of view to be heard. And so you've got, you know, a little okonomiyaki food truck right now. You've got Daughters' Southern that's doing amazing Southern food out of a truck. And you've still got Quita Michel's spots. You've got all your little countryside spots. You've got your weird Midwestern diner feeling places. You have the Pharmacy Diner, which is a good place to get a milkshake and told off. So Wheeler's might be my favorite little like "Lexington" secret. It's the worst kept secret; its where all the basketball coaches go and, you know, we all end up there in the morning for a pancake the size of the hubcap, but there's something about it. You know, it's like a diner environment where they're just like, "Okay, if you're leaving your kid unattended, we're going to give him coffee and a kitten, let's go." And I'm like, "Okay, I'm into this vibe, let's do this."

SID EVANS: Sounds like you're in Lexington for a reason.

SAMANTHA FORE: This is home. It's peaceful here. You know, it's an easier sort of lifestyle than I had. I spent 11 years in Boston before this and I was always so stressed out, and this is like a very good way to get balanced. Kentucky has been very kind to me. I don't think this concept would have worked outside of Kentucky really. I just don't. People here were willing to take me on and adopt me. And so now, now I'm sitting here talking to you.

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins - Fiddler's Barn on Epidemic Sound)

Voice Over from SID EVANS: I'll be back with Samantha Fore after the break.

BREAK

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins - Fiddler's Barn on Epidemic Sound)

Voice Over from SID EVANS: Welcome back to Biscuits and Jam from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, and I'm talking with chef Samantha Fore, who is bringing her unique take on Sri Lankan cuisine to Lexington, Kentucky, not to mention the whole country.

SID EVANS: So Sam, you have completely re-imagined how to have a successful career as a chef.

SAMANTHA FORE: It's still early now. don't jinx me now.

SID EVANS: Okay. Well, you've done some really exciting and interesting things and you're having a lot of fun. Tell me a little bit about your journey with Tuk Tuk Sri Lankan Bites.

SAMANTHA FORE: I mean, we're talking about the hospitality industry and being hospitable and being open and being welcomed, which is, you know, a huge part of Sri Lankan culture of how we live. It's a huge part of Southern culture and how we live. I started my business to get people out of my house. And

so we would have these brunches and so I'd invite nine or 10 people. And then by the end of it, 40 or 40 or so people would be outside my door and so it got to the point that it was getting overwhelming.

And I had talked to a buddy of mine who was bartending. He was like, we can't get food trucks on the north side to save our lives. And I'm like, what? That didn't make sense to me because I feel like drunk people are a perfect captive audience for a food truck. And so I did the math, I looked at a truck. I didn't want to do a truck because it was expensive. It was a big commitment. I looked at a brick and mortar. I didn't want to do a brick and mortar because I didn't know if it would work. And then I looked at a three-sided pop-up canopy tent, like the ones that you see in a tailgate lot.

SID EVANS: I'm very familiar with those.

SAMANTHA FORE: Oh yeah, that is my restaurant. I bought my restaurant at Walmart. I bought it for 80 bucks. The first day I did all the math and everything came out to, like with food cost and licensing and equipment, the first night was going to cost me \$572 to put on a Tuk Tuk event. I said, "You know what? I've been thinking about this for a long time. I'm going to just see if it works. \$572 is not a big loss. I'm not losing a quarter million. If this flops, at least I learned something and I didn't go broke doing it." I paid off my business the first night. It was insane. And I thought it was a fluke. I really did. I thought it was absolutely a fluke. And then we went out and we did it again. And we went on and we did it again. And I was like, something's not right. Like, these people are crazy. There's no way that they can enjoy like lentil fritters this much. But it was something different. And I had offerings for vegans. I had offerings for gluten-free folks. I had independent fryers and I had a great relationship with the places we'd pop up. Well, and then all of a sudden people started showing up. So John T. Edge shows up, I don't know who he is. And I say, "I'm not open. I'm sorry, I'll be open later." He's like, "I'm not going to be here later." I'm like, "Well, sucks for you." Real smart. Googled him later, realized that was stupid.

And then we started getting attention with Top Chef Kentucky happening and then Padma Lakshmi was like, "Okay, I really want Sri Lankan food." Before she showed up is when everything got crazy. Like the lines started to be two hours long. And Edward Lee had called early on and said that I could cook at his actual restaurant, which had never happened to me before. And I was so scared. And yet his staff carried me through it and I've been learning ever since. I wasn't built in this world. I was built in my mother's kitchen. I know how to assembly-line things. I know how to cook for hours on end. I know how to test for flavors. I know how to, to smell for how it's supposed to taste. It's that ingrained into my senses, but to translate that into a commercial kitchen environment, it's not the easiest thing to do, especially when the commercial kitchen environment has its own set of characters.

And so sometimes it's an uphill battle; it has not been easy. But then there are days where like you get through to a member of the diaspora who hasn't had their favorite food in awhile, engineering students, someone who went over there, you know, 20 years ago and was craving one bite that they had and it took them back. And that's the reward: the first bite where they're trying to figure out what's going on. That is my favorite moment. I love to watch people take their first bite of my food because it's a familiar vehicle for a lot of different tastes. And so I'll have a deviled egg, and you would think, you know, capers,

paprika, mayonnaise, that sort of thing. I don't do that with mine. I do chili pepper, onion, garlic coconut curry, you know, and it's a totally different flavor. It looks the same, but it's totally a different journey. It's based on one of my favorite breakfast bites. And so once people get that taste, they're like, wait a minute, this tastes like my string hopper curry. I'm like, yeah, that's what it is. It's, I'm using these components from very, very traditional things to transform them into classics. I have fun creating things all the time now. I have the best job.

SID EVANS: And so you're traveling all over the country and you've been going to some of the best restaurants in the country. And you were just at Bottega, which is Frank and Pardis Stitt's restaurant in Birmingham. I was lucky enough to be there.

SAMANTHA FORE: I'm never going to forget that night. I'm never going to forget that because it's like, you go from a Walmart tent and then it's raining outside and there's this big, beautiful tent outside the front of a Bottega and nobody's getting wet and I'm like, "Wait a minute. I don't have to get a bucket?" I kept on asking, "You guys know I cook in a tent, right? Like, are you sure you want me running amok in your kitchen?" taste through spices with Frank Stitt, like come on. At what point did I think that that was ever going to be a thing? Every twist and turn on this journey has been absolutely insane and wonderful, and I'm still learning from it. So as long as I'm still learning from it, I'm just going to keep on doing what I'm doing.

SID EVANS: So Sam, there's a dish that you have become kind of known for. And it's not the one that you think I'm going to ask about. I want to ask you about your fried chicken; you've told me that it is something that has kind of followed you around a bit

SAMANTHA FORE: That fried chicken, it was the watershed moment, like that fried chicken changed everything.

SID EVANS: Tell me about it.

SAMANTHA FORE: Just one bite of the fried chicken, everyone flipped out. And so I have this habit of asking dear friends, you know, "What do you want to see? What do you want to like?" And so that's how the rib came about. That's how the curry fried chicken came about. And I was just like, "Okay, I have had a lot of different kinds of fried chicken." I was making wings. I was doing dipped wings. I was like, "No, I want a really, really good piece of fried chicken, but I want it to taste like something I know from the get-go. I want it to be unmistakably mine." I lived about two minutes from a bar at the time, and I would run batches over as I fried them. We went through 16 different batches of brine to come up with the brine and about 12 or 14 different dredges. And I just kept on testing until I found the one that I liked. I wanted something that would stay crispy for 15 minutes or more because I knew people were standing outside and having their food get cold. Like, I had all these interesting little parameters that don't make any sense in the real world, but make sense to me.

So the thing about my fried chicken is that you have that beautiful buttermilk softening and acidifying a little bit here and there and adding some fattiness to it. I put everything in my brine that I would put into a chicken curry, everything, and now I have it standardized down to like a blend. So it's even easier, but I used to just do it all from scratch—toast everything up, grind everything down, make this huge, flavorful slurry of buttermilk and spices and just douse them for a couple hours. And now, you know, when you bite into it, there's something about it that just carries that cumin and coriander through, a little bit of lemongrass on the back end as well. But the thing that sets it apart is that I put lime juice on it after I take it out of the fryer. So I put lime juice, curry leaves, and a little salt. And there's something about that combination where it becomes a composed bite and that's the moment where it's just like, okay, I got this down. And so now whenever I do fried chicken, it's a madhouse. So I just started selling the fried chicken spice. 'Cause I can't keep up. I made it foolproof. Like I want to make everything foolproof because I am not without mistakes. I make mistakes all the time. So I want something that is idiot proof for the moments that I'm not on my game.

SID EVANS: You're making me really hungry.

SAMANTHA FORE: That's what we're supposed to do. I was told there would be biscuits.

(Music fades in and out.)

SID EVANS: All right, now I want to ask you about the tomato pie that was on the cover of *Food and Wine* magazine.

SAMANTHA FORE: Yeah. Imagine, imagine your first recipe that you ever send to *Food and Wine* ending up on the cover.

SID EVANS: And it pretty much melted the internet, when it came out and—

SAMANTHA FORE: —and you remember, everybody had a tomato pie on their cover that August. Everybody, *Garden and Gun*, you guys, *Food and Wine*, like everything. And I was just like, “Oh my God, it's the summer of tomato pies. Like, I'm going to get lost in this.” That didn't happen. Not by a long shot.

SID EVANS: I just want to ask you, what did it mean to you to see the kind of response that that recipe got? Because that's a, a very personal recipe for you. It's your creation.

SAMANTHA FORE: It's based off of my favorite chili cheese toast and the fact that I don't like a soggy crust. And so again, I have weird parameters for everything, and I tried all kinds of dough. I ended up liking the galette because it was flexible and it didn't puff up. And when I had pitched the recipe, I'd never made it before, because I was putting together words that sounded cool because I was nervous, which is the thing that I do. I don't do that anymore. 'Cause then you have to actually put up or shut up. And the thing for me, that was the biggest thing, is that there's these tamarind onions that are on top of the pie. And those are essentially one of the most humble, common Sri Lankan condiments. So to have

seeni sambol on the cover of a magazine in America, that felt like a coup. It felt like a beautiful, beautiful moment for Sri Lankan cuisine. And like that moment, when I saw that cover, I was just like dumbfounded. It's on my wall. It is my don't-stop-believing moment. You know, it's every first day of tomato season, it's like when kids are going to school with their backpacks, I get to see tomatoes on a pie. You know, that's my first day of school, but it's brought so many people joy. It's gone around the world. And to think that it was born in a little kitchen in Lexington, Kentucky. I still have all my scratch notes, all my fails. It's a remarkable moment for me because it proves anybody, anybody can do it. If I can do it, anybody can do it. But it's the testament to flavor. It's a testament to snacks in Sri Lanka. It's a testament to beautiful Kentucky tomatoes. It's a love letter to all of the things that I love about my cuisines.

(Music fades in and out.)

SID EVANS: Sam, I want to ask you about the community of South Asian chefs in the South. You have become friends with Maneet Chauhan, who's been on this show, Cheetie Kumar, who's been on the show, Vishwesh Bhatt, Meherwan Irani, so many others.

SAMANTHA FORE: They are my family. They aren't friends now, they're family. And Vish is the one who initially brought me into the fold. They did the first Brown in the South and I was able to be in attendance. And I remember, cause that was like one of those moments where I was debating whether or not I'm going to stay in food, because I hadn't seen it actually happening out in the world. And then I got there and I had, you know, ooma grits and Asha's fried chicken and Johnny cakes, and you know, like okra hoppin' John. And I was like, "This is insane. These are people cooking the way that I want to cook and people like it. And I'm in Atlanta. But people came from all over. Is this really a possible thing?" And then Maneet cornered me and was like, "You can't quit. I will find you." And then I got scared. So, I found a culinary family; I liken it to standing on the shoulders of giants because they have paved the way for so many South Asian chefs in this country. And yet, for some reason they let me stand with them and learn from them. And we all kind of just like run things by each other. We test each other's recipes. I think one of the best things about this journey is that I have them and they are willing to open their arms, to open their kitchens. And to even open up, we don't want it to just be South Asians anymore. You know, we are all home in the south, all of the immigrants, we are all home. And so for us to embrace that as minorities, especially a time like now, it feels like a radical act and I'm kind of okay with that, because we need something to spur some sort of positive change, because otherwise we're just going to keep on spiraling.

SID EVANS: So, well, Sam, speaking of family and helping people, you have been part of an organization called the Lee Initiative, which is based in Louisville, was started by chef Edward Lee and Lindsay Ofcacek to help promote diversity and equality in the restaurant industry and to help so many of the restaurant workers survive what happened as a result of the pandemic. Tell me a little bit about how you got involved with them and what you do for them.

SAMANTHA FORE: So my first dinner at 610 Magnolia back in October of 2016. This is at a Edward Lee's restaurant, we're in the wine studio across the way. And it was Lindsey's first day, too. So we were already linked at that point. And, you know, we got along and over the years, we got to know each other pretty well going back and forth. The perception at first of Edward is that, you know, he's kind of quiet. No, his heart is huge. And he just wants to help everybody, and that is like the most remarkable thing is that in the pandemic, when everything was short, when everything was scarce, they made it happen for what, we served over 2 million meals in 2020 out of a four person run operation in 19 kitchens. Like, I think of that. I'm just like, how, how did that happen? But we, you know, we believed in direct aid and we believed in people having the right to decide how to use their funding to save the restaurants, whether it's paying the rent, repairing the A/C, repairing the stoves, you know, we just wanted it, we wanted it accounted for, but we did not put huge stringent requirements on it because everyone's needs have been different even for different cuisines, even for different locales. It's all different for what you need.

SID EVANS: Well, Sam, speaking of people making the world a better place, I noticed that on the bottom of your menus, you usually have the hashtag Dolly Parton Eats for Free.

SAMANTHA FORE: Dolly Parton Eats for Free.

SID EVANS: There's gotta be a story behind that. So why does Dolly Parton eat for free?

SAMANTHA FORE: Uh, I spent an inordinate amount of time in Sevierville, Tennessee growing up. And this is when everyone was picking on Dolly and then late eighties, early nineties, you know, she was not this anointed one that everyone has her as now, which I think she deserves every bit of it, but she never asked for it. So that's number one. She never asked to be anointed The saint of the people who's, you know, getting all the shots and getting all the books. She never asked for that she just did it. And I admire that. She fascinated me. She is everything that I am not, you know, and I'm absolutely fascinated by this woman. And then I remembered, being in school and, you know, Dolly Parton was the butt of jokes because she was on late night TV and, oh my gosh, she's got this, she's got that. She looks this, she looks that. And I'm like, you know, I don't think Dolly really cares. And that was one of those moments that was like very important to me to see that this is a woman who is defining her own path, who is getting out from relationships with, you know, male counterparts and singers that did not necessarily benefit her, who understands the power of her intelligence. And then her first song was "Dumb Blonde" I think that was released. And she's like, "You might think I'm dumb, but I'm nobody's fool," and she's right. But she does things out of the goodness of her heart, you know? And I think that's rare. She does allegedly know about the hashtag which was another, like, what-is-this-life moment? But, uh, I actually do a little bit with Dollywood PR now. So I went to Dollywood night for free. It was a fabulous time actually.

SID EVANS: I think she needs to try some of your fried chicken for sure.

SAMANTHA FORE: Hey, you know, my door is always open for Dolly Parton. I'll come home for that, I'll fly home on a red eye for that. I don't care, come hell or high water. I will be there. We always complain about expectations put on us about, oh, I've got to do this thing, I have to. She just does it. She gets it

done. And that's that I admire. That's how I want to be. I want to be able to just look at and be like, okay, I'm going to get it done.

SID EVANS: Well, Sam, I just have one more question for you. What does it mean to you to be Southern?

SAMANTHA FORE: Ooh, that's a good one: What does it mean to me to be Southern? It means that I have an appreciation for everything that the land gives me. It means that I have an appreciation for all the time I get with my family and friends. It means that I have a sense of community that is not anywhere else in this world. Being Southern is a life for me. It is how I carry myself. It is how I want to lead. I want to make sure that I'm leading with kindness with hospitality and you know, for a long time, I had this little mantra on top of my, um, I had a little crate that I'd take back and forth from Tuk Tuk pop-ups. And it's just like "work hard and be nice to people." And that has been my mantra since April of 2016. And if it's taken me this far and the South has carried me this far, I don't think I need to change anything. I just need to be a little bit more Southern.

SID EVANS: I love that. Well, Samantha Fore, thank you so much for being on Biscuits and Jam.

SAMANTHA FORE: Thank you for having me. And I hope we get to see you soon.

SID EVANS: Me too.

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins - Fiddler's Barn on Epidemic Sound)

Voice Over from SID EVANS: Thanks for listening to my conversation with Samantha Fore. Keep up with her on Instagram, @TukTukLex, and pick up her fried chicken spice online from SpicewallaBrand.com.

Join me for our next episode with one of country music's biggest icons—the one and only Reba McEntire.

REBA MCENTIRE: I'm proud of my heritage. I'm proud of the state of Oklahoma, where I grew up. I'm proud of my parents. I love the Lord. And I think that's all the training and the things I learned and grew up with by being in the South. Some people might say Oklahoma is not the South, it's central or it's the center part of the United States. But I'm South of a lot of people. So I'll take it.

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *Southern Living is based in Birmingham, Alabama, and this podcast was produced and edited in Nashville, Tennessee. If you like what you hear, please consider leaving us a review on Apple Podcasts or telling your friends about the program. You can find us online at southernliving.com, and subscribe to our print publication by searching for Southern Living at www.magazine.store.*

Biscuits and Jam is produced by Heather Morgan Shott, Krissy Tiglias and me, Sid Evans, for Southern Living. Thanks also to Ann Kane, Jim Hanke, Danielle Roth, Andy Bosnak, Matt Sav and Rachael King at Pod People.

We'll see you back here next week for more Biscuits & Jam!