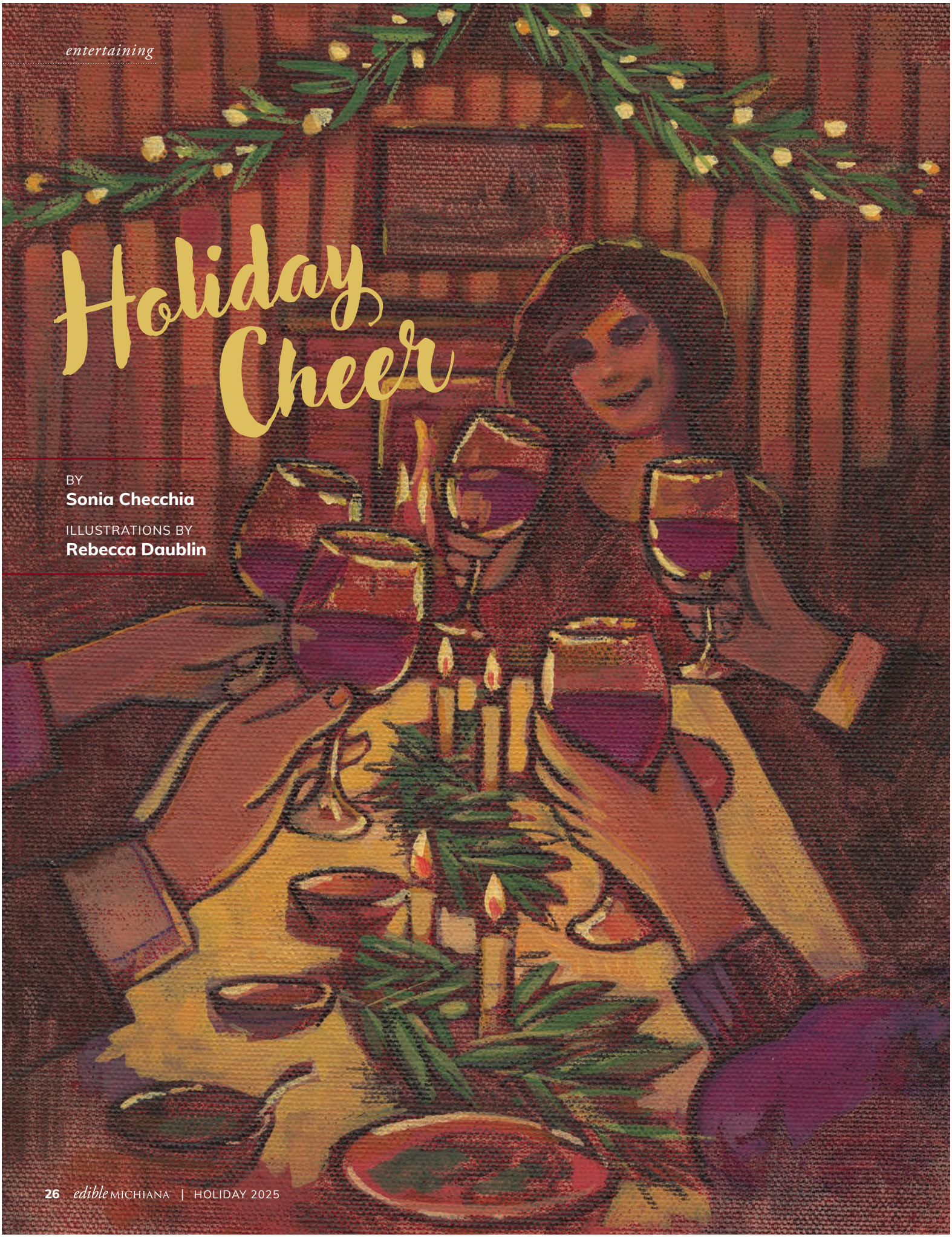
Holiday Cheer

BY
Sonia Checchia

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
Rebecca Daublin



Serve up connection at your next gathering

I'm that friend who's always throwing a party. Over the years, as countless guests have commented, "I could never do this," I've made it my mission to help people host more at home. My shtick is, whether you're a fabulous chef or prefer to host potlucks, the important thing is to bring people together, because what we're all craving most is *connection*.

But if I'm really honest, I'm not a pro. I'm a work in progress. As we approach the festive season I'm asking, How do I not just throw a great party, but host a gathering that connects guests across the table? Aside from serving a delicious meal, how do I make it meaningful? How do I spark that magical sense of belonging?

The best hosts make it seem effortless. Their home is your home. They are great listeners and know how to make people feel seen. They look out for guests—explaining inside jokes so no one feels left out and asking questions to get people to open up. It's a skillset I admire, and, as far as I can tell, there's no hack for it. That said, I have a few pointers to pass along. Consider it a little hostess gift …

Expectations – It may seem thoughtful for a host to keep things low-key, but guests are looking for structure—especially if they don't know the hosts well and might feel out of place. Whatever the occasion, communicate the dress code, what to bring, etc. For example: "Join us for winter solstice. Dinner at 7pm, followed by a bonfire. Dress for your comfort."

Welcome – The moments just before guests arrive can feel frantic, but being intentional about greeting everyone at the door is a surefire way to connect one-on-one. Think of how happy your puppy is to see you, and channel that energy as you greet guests. They'll cross the threshold to party-land feeling at ease and ready to enjoy the event.

Introductions – If your guests will be meeting for the first time, why not do the intros *before* the event? I learned this from a host I admire. She texted everyone the guest list and a fun detail or two about each person, e.g., one guest had worked at NASA, another had just celebrated her 90th birthday in Paris. It gave the dinner a real sense of occasion—like we were all part of a playbill! And it was useful. We quickly learned names and arrived at the party primed with conversation starters.

Opening – Once everyone has arrived, flash the lights to get everyone's attention, and formally welcome everyone. Say a few words to acknowledge why you're gathering, whether it's momentous (new baby) or silly (finally got a haircut), and raise a toast or snap a group photo. I must admit I felt I was playing house the first time I did this, but it's a game changer. A little bit of ceremony creates shared meaning.

Whimsy – I love to set a pretty table, but I've seen people's reactions. When the table is too nice, guests panic. *What if I use the wrong fork or stain your linens?* A little whimsy goes a long way to temper the formality and put people at ease. For example, print a beautiful menu card, but also add some levity to the dish names. A pun or pop culture reference will prompt chuckles and get people talking.

Questions – When conversations feel "surface," I've learned to be brave and get curious. It doesn't take much more than, "Can you say more?" It can feel awkward, but remember that we dread the small talk at the company holiday party not because we don't want to talk to coworkers but because we long for something deeper and more nourishing. Questions are key!

Simplify – I call it the holiday edit. I do deck the halls before a holiday gathering, but not *all* of them. I set a pretty table and decorate one other thing—the entryway, tree or mantle and then stop *before* I'm exhausted. The key is, as guests arrive, there must be no mention of "I was going to do … but ran out of time." No one will notice the missing nutcracker figurines, but they will notice if I'm tired.

Whereas, if I'm party-ready and take my place with the guests, it sets the tone for fun. Which is the goal, right? To enjoy everyone's company, and to connect.

*Event designer and communications consultant **Sonia Checchia** lives in Fort Wayne, Indiana. She writes a weekly newsletter, "Company's Coming," and a monthly column, "Table Talk," in* Fort Wayne Magazine. *Follow Sonia on instagram.com/SoniaMChecchia.*