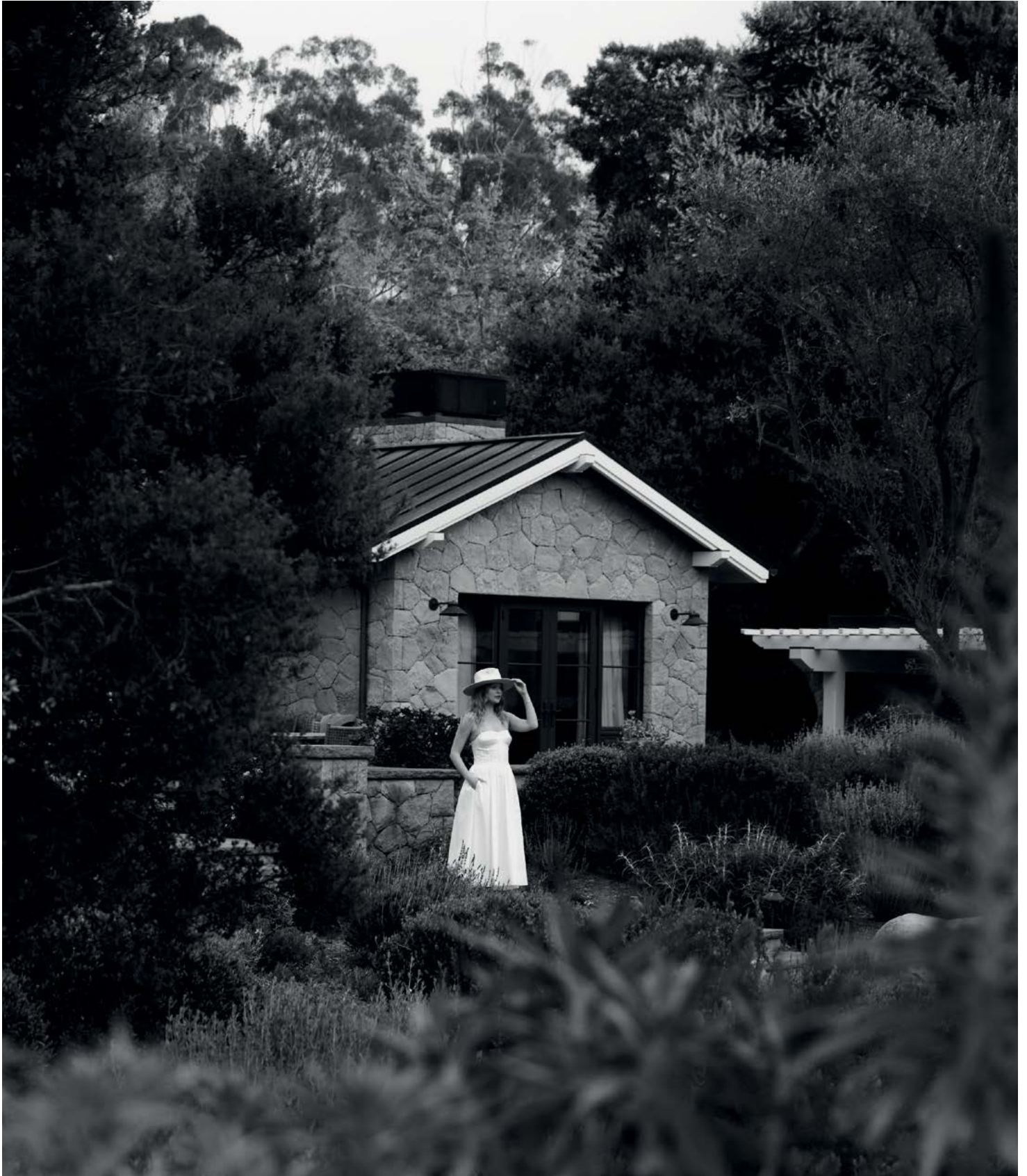


SBLS

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FORWARD THINKING

MIKOH

at

15

FOUNDER-SISTER DUO OLEEMA AND KALANI MILLER
ON GROWING UP WITH THE BRAND

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Something's in the water at the Miller households. Sisters Oleema and Kalani are celebrating a milestone fifteenth year of their bikini-loving brainchild MIKOH, a rare pillar of modern, minimalistic swimwear and resort finery that has not just remained on the radar, but consistently on the mark, since its 2009 inception.

MIKOH's elevated classic cuts and breathable coastal essentials could bear no better stamp of authenticity: their makers are born-and-bred Orange County surfers. Oleema—a former professional waverider—heads

creative and design, and Kalani—a UCSB alumna—is all business. A full-throttle transition to sustainable materials marks just one recent addition to MIKOH's drawing board, joining the Miller's inspired wanderlust and reverence for women's bodies. A handful of *Sports Illustrated* covers and Miami Swim Weeks later, the duo are cutting out just enough time in their nomadic calendars for a bit of nostalgia.

I called the pair to catch up on all things Santa Barbara, (never quite) settling down, and moments ahead—which include welcoming incoming additions to the family.

SBLS I'm reaching both of you from Oahu right now: do either of you live there part time? I know you're always globetrotting.

Oleema Miller I've been here more lately. I'm actually pregnant, so I've called Hawaii more of a home base for the last couple of months—I think we're going have the baby here! Still, California will always be home; we're from San Clemente, so we'll always be back and forth.

SBLS That's amazing, congratulations! Kalani, what about you?

Kalani Miller My partner and I split our time between Florida, California, Hawaii, and Australia almost equally. We still consider Santa Barbara a home base too, especially since I went to UCSB. It's always in our five-year plan to move back up there.

SBLS I know you two grew up coming up the coast to Santa Barbara; how would you say you continue to connect with the local community?

KM Being a part of the surfing community—it's so connected, especially up there.

OM Our parents actually still own property at Hollister Ranch, so we were up there in September to October. It was the first time we had done a full family trip with all of our partners. I think that's one of the best things, like Kalani said, about the surfing community: it's so connected that whether you're at the beach in Hawaii, or in Orange County, or in Santa Barbara, you see the same people.

SBLS Totally. It's also wild to me that you both launched the business at 19 and 21, respectively, and that you, Kalani, were fresh out of school here.

KM I was actually still at UCSB. It was so funny: I was in a business writing class, and convinced our team to do a business plan for a swimwear company.

OM I had called Kalani with the idea of starting a swimsuit company, and I remember she'd had the class that day. She was like, 'Perfect, let me talk to my fellow students.'

It definitely wasn't accurate for what we do, because it was like a fake business plan based in Arizona. You remember that, Kalani?

KM No, it was Delaware. [Laughs]

OM It's funny: even though it's 15 years later, I think we're still shooting from the hip and just trying to figure it out as we go along.

SBLS It sounds like the stars aligned with that phone call. Can you tell me a little bit about what celebrating 15 years in business means to the both of you? How has it felt seeing the brand grow, and be so widely adored; and how have you two grown in the process?

OM They tell you not to work with family—that's the number one golden rule. But I think one of the biggest blessings, although of course we've had our ups and downs, is that we've gotten to grow up and enjoy and expand and mature, not just through the business, but also as individuals, and as sisters. As Kalani and I reflect back on the last 15 years, many of the biggest moments of our lives have been connected to MIKOH.

One of the things that I've loved the most about MIKOH throughout—especially now that I'm 35, and we started when we were so young—is that so many of the women that wear our suits to this day have *also* grown up with us. So in a weird way, I always refer to MIKOH as another family member, because it's played such a huge role in not just me and Kalani's lives, but also my family's: they've come along for photo shoots, and my brother works with us.

I think it's just phenomenal—if I were an outsider—to see a brand that has been able to still be as relevant and authentic today as it was when I look at the very first photo shoot from 2010. We really stayed tried-and-true to the things that matter most, which is all about being confident and sexy in your own skin, and feeling feminine and powerful in what you're wearing. I love that our clothes and our swimsuits have been there for so many of the biggest memories

in our lives and have also been there for a lot of the women that wear them.

SBLS Given the swim market is increasingly oversaturated, I was going to ask how your designs, your impact and your values stand apart, but I feel like you touched on that—it's that timelessness.

OM Of course we've followed trends to a certain extent, when one-shoulder silhouettes or one pieces are more in, whatever it may be. But I think because we've never diluted who we are or brought in other designers or creatives, but have honed in on our vision, people have resonated with us. I think swimsuits are like beautiful lingerie or undergarments: people like what they like. And 15 years later, people are still coming to MIKOH because they know they can get a beautifully fitted suit, with a nice silhouette and a perfect cut on the butt, year after year, and season after season, that they'll keep in their closet forever.

SBLS Incredible. What are each of you proudest of in the last 15 years?

KM For me, it's Oleema and I being young, passionate women who truly love what they do, and building a company that we still love being a part of every single day.

OM It again goes back to the importance of authenticity. In today's world, especially with social media, I feel it's so easy to lose your identity and to fall victim to the trends or to fitting in. Like Kalani said, obviously being here 15 years later—after some of the most tumultuous times in the world, it seems—and still coming out knowing exactly who we are and what the MIKOH brand stands for is very powerful. And it's hopefully inspiring to young women: you can have this clear path and vision and stick to it, despite what maybe the outside world is telling you.

KM I think also, like you said, having timeless pieces and seeing women of all different shapes and sizes wear MIKOH. That's something I'm really proud of: making people feel confident and beautiful in basically nothing.

SBLS Going along that line of thought—I feel like anyone could speak to the embracing feeling of your products. Our SBLS publisher, Ottocina, is pregnant right now, and is genuinely wearing one of the two piece Matuku top and Tambo skirt sets every time I see her.

OM Oh my gosh. I love it. Yeah, I've never been pregnant before, and obviously, being in Hawaii, all I wear every day is MIKOH, whether it's our swimsuits or dresses. Like Kalani said, we've done a lot of different photoshoots called 'Our MIKOH' where we've had women of all different ages, generations, shapes and sizes, and now that's kind of me. [Laughs] I've never been that different in my own body. We actually did this little shoot the other day, and there's this one photo that particularly stands out to me, which says 'the curves of a woman.' It's truly crazy what women's bodies can do.

Clothing just plays such an important role in life. Even the t-shirt I'm wearing today: I wore it back when I was in Positano, and now I look at it and I remember wearing it and drinking rosé. I love that swimsuits and clothing now play such a big role in these crazy memories of how my body's changing. We're having a baby girl, so it's so fun and inspiring to think that I'm able to pass these memories on to her.

SBLS 100 percent. I know she'll be wearing MIKOH Mini every day.

OM Yes, of course. [Laughs]

SBLS More recently, you two started the Strength Collection, which I know was inspired by a conversation with a woman in Montecito that really hit home. Tell me about what that collection meant to MIKOH.

OM It actually started at the Rosewood Miramar: we were having drinks one night with some girlfriends that live up there, and this woman, Shelly, pulled me aside and was telling me how she was a longtime fan of MIKOH. She was a breast cancer survivor, and wanted to compliment me on how the suits fit, but said that there were only certain silhouettes that she felt





really comfortable in because she'd had a double mastectomy, so she had scars. She said, 'I don't know if this is ever something you'd think about: making suits for women who were either undergoing treatment or already had surgeries?'

In that moment, these flashes of all the women in my life who have been affected by breast cancer came to mind. I was like, 'Oh, my God, I can't believe I hadn't thought of this sooner.' That was one of those really amazing, 'aha' moments that connected me to Shelly forever. That photoshoot that we did in particular was very moving, because there was a girl there that was my age that was currently undergoing treatment, and a few others that were in remission. So to create something to give back to another huge community of women—one in eight

women will get affected by breast cancer—and make them feel strong, confident, beautiful, and part of a community was very impactful.

The Strength Collection is something we're doing each season. It was important for me from a design perspective to have it be integrated so the pieces don't necessarily stand out as being something separate, which, instead of just giving back, also *brings them in*. That's something that we've done for the last two seasons that's very important to us.

SBLS That's absolutely incredible. Another kind of recent collection update was in 2021, when you had your first eco-friendly, recycled nylon fabric line. Is MIKOH fully transitioning to solely using sustainably sourced fabrics?

OM Yes, moving forward, all of our swim is made from recycled fabrics. Our recent clothing collections have also been changing over to sustainable materials like 100% cotton, linen, and hemp—the majority of our ready-to-wear collection is now natural fabrics without any synthetics. Obviously any part that we can do, to not just give back, but to not contribute to such a huge waste problem by creating sustainable materials that are earth-derived is so important for us to continue to do throughout each season.

KM Also all of our poly bags—everything that we ship in—are also biodegradable. I actually use poly bags a lot of time for dog poop bags. [Laughs] Even if you have to create waste, you can always at least find multiple uses for it. We also design our suits so they are built to last the test of time. I'm still wearing great classic bottoms from 2010, which is another way we're creating resistance to fast fashion.

SBLS There's a palpable sustainability focus with MIKOH. Your lines also spring from your lifelong relationship with the ocean—Oleema, obviously you have a professional surfing background. Would you say the last 15 years of MIKOH have furthered that spiritual connection to the ocean?

OM Definitely. I look back on my entire life, and the ocean has been our backyard. Having parents who literally live and breathe everything to do with the ocean, the beach, nature, and the outdoors has truly ingrained that connection into who I am and who Kalani is. And now I look at the choices I've made in my life: who I've married, who I'm having a baby with, where I live, what MIKOH stands for, and where it's brought me on all of my travels... it's always circled back to surfing and the ocean being at the root of everything. As I enter motherhood, it's something so important that I want to pass down to our daughter. There's nothing better than surfing and the ocean—they have definitely given me all of the very best things in life.

KM I date a professional surfer—so our life is literally determined by swells. And having a company where we're able to travel and be led by the ocean—I'm so grateful to be able to intertwine my work and personal life seamlessly. Again, as Oleema said earlier about authenticity: being able to live and breathe a true beachwear lifestyle—and to test the products ourselves—is really special.

SBLS That's amazing. Switching gears to the everyday, what have you two been up to lately?

OM Anyone that knows me knows I'm kind of in a perpetual *go, go, go, do, do, do*—there's always something to do, somewhere to go, someone to see. And being pregnant has—whether I've liked it or not—forced me to slow down and realize that everything has worked out in such a serendipitous, beautiful way. I'm so happy that we've created this beautiful home life here in Hawaii and still have our connection to California: I feel like I have the best of both worlds, but get to be here for this more slow, feminine, nurturing part of life. It's been a big time for reflection. Being able to go for a little ocean dip or hike is just something that is so good for the mental and physical self. And having Kalani here at the same time is one of the best parts.

“You can have this *clear path and vision and stick to it*, despite what maybe the outside world is telling you.”

They say women can do it all: you can run a business, you can have a baby, you can do this, and you can do that. But one thing I've actually learned is it's okay to also *not* do it all. And as much as I've loved work, and I think what this phase of life has taught me is balance. I think it's what they call the soft girl era. [Laughs] So I'm excited to teach my baby girl that yes, you can do it all. You can also do it in a beautiful, feminine way, and have boundaries just as much as you can also show up 110 percent.

SBLS That's an incredible perspective. Kalani, any recent realizations you'd like to share?

KM I think being so young when we started MIKOH has been a learning process. Oleema and I are still learning every single day; neither of us have done this before. Every time something comes up, we go, well, let's try and figure it out. It has been fun reflecting back on 15 years: I can't believe that we've been able to do something that has had so much success. It's really, really special.

SBLS It's been an honor and a pleasure talking to you two.

OM Oh my gosh, thank you for thinking of us! We've loved sharing our story.

KM Especially when it has to do with Santa Barbara—it's always a highlight reel for us.

OM Ooh, I could go eat some soup from Pierre Lafond right now. [Laughs]*