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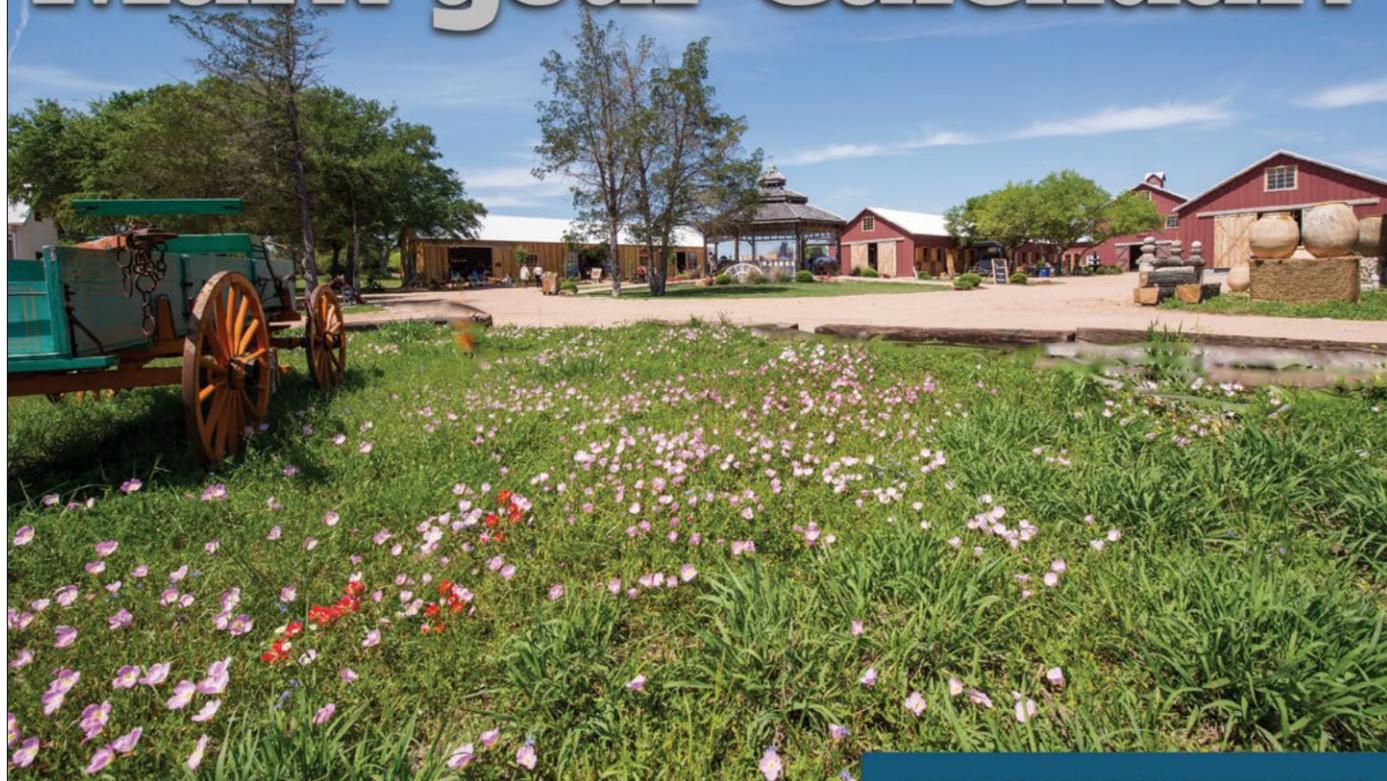
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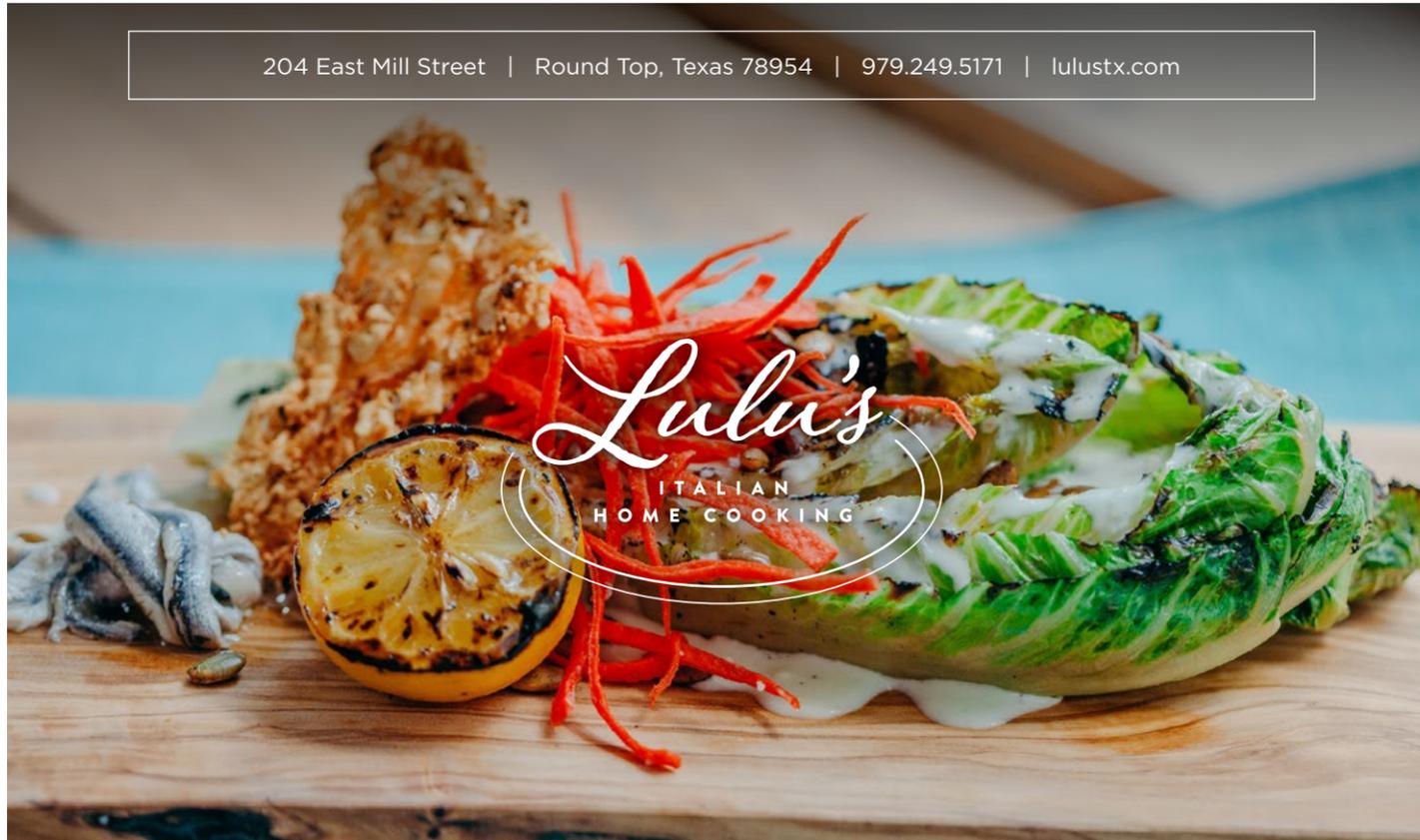
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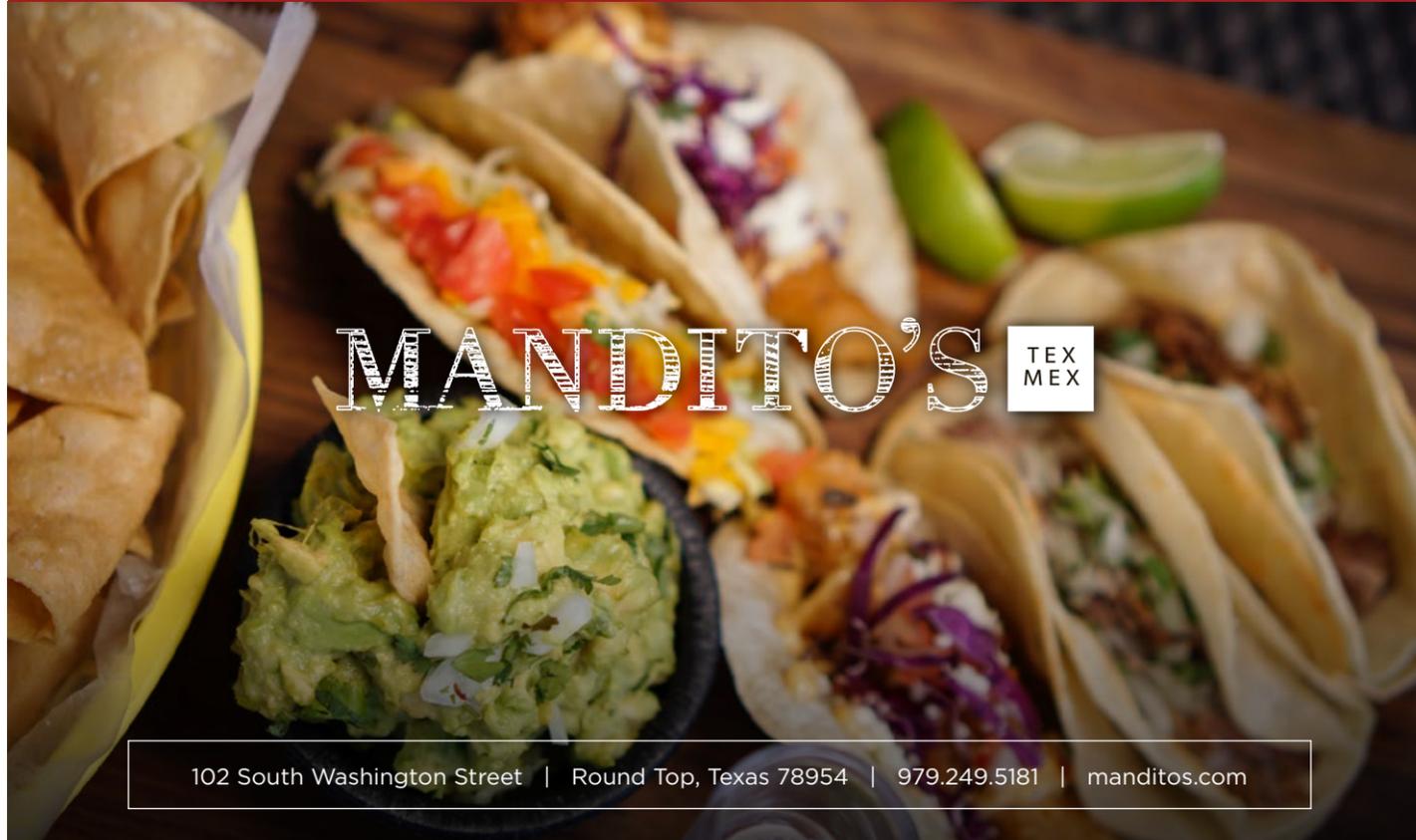


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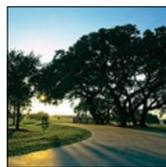
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A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR • Lorie A. Woodward

FRIENDS WITH WORDS



Because my family was country when country wasn't cool, we were locavores by default. There was no trendy word to describe eating locally because it's just what families did. If you didn't, your taste buds were assaulted year-round by things such as slimy canned asparagus and mushy frozen Brussels sprouts.

No amount of Velveeta cheese or Parkay margarine can make tiny canned peas a tasty treat—and I know because Momma tried.

Summer heralded the arrival of gardens. Nothing tasted better than the first batch of green beans cooked with bacon and tiny new potatoes. The green beans were followed in quick succession by fresh onions, yellow squash, tomatoes—full-size and cherry—peppers, cucumbers with accompanying dill for pickle-making, corn so sweet you'd risk a case of "digestive distress" by eating it raw in the garden, and finally okra.

Canning and freezing on a large scale would commence. Michael Breddin, co-owner of Leftovers in Brenham, recently told me his grandmother's ingredient list on her sauerkraut recipe began with "one wheelbarrow load of cabbage." It was work.

In late spring, the dewberries ripened. Picking them for pies, cobblers and jelly required a stick to move the thorny vines and kill copperheads that liked to hang out in the shade. Later, the mustang grapes and wild plums got ready. Hill Country peaches and hard-as-a-rock Kieffer pears with the alchemy of sugar and cooking made preserves that when smeared on buttered cornbread elevated it to the pinnacle of the dessert mountain.

Fall brought native pecans, small nuggets of unadulterated goodness. They were a pain to pick up because it took so many to fill a bucket, and they were even harder to crack unless you mastered busting tiny round rocks.

On a ranch, protein was plentiful. Grass-fed beef was on the table most days, generally twice. Chickens for meat (some years) and eggs most of the time after we moved to the country because my middle brother was good with chickens. Pork was a regular

feature usually after the county stock show.

Depending on the season, we also ate venison, quail, dove, duck, frog legs and squirrels, which my mother refused to cook or eat. For fun, there were wild hog barbecues and fish fries in which only hours elapsed from the time the catfish were

swimming in the creek until they were swimming in bubbling oil.

After any particularly satisfying meal and there were many, one of my parents was prone to opine, "We may not be rich, but we eat well."

They weren't kidding and now in the vein of everything old is new again, people are re-discovering the bounty that comes from local farms and ranches. In this issue, Katie and I are excited to introduce just a few of the many land-based entrepreneurs who are delivering the goods including Lynsey and Jason Kramer, who specialize in pasture-raised protein at Yonder Way Farm in Fayetteville. Rita Albers, a third generation farmer, grows happiness on her Cuts of Color flower farm near Weimar, and Christi and Nathan Wade, who founded Lazy Bee Honey Co. near Burton, are abuzz about honey-sweetened jams and more.

We also shoot the breeze with Abianne Falla, who co-founded CatSpring Yaupon with her sister JennaDee Detro, when they discovered that the often maligned shrub is North America's only native caffeine source. And as a bonus, you'll get an insider's look Oak Hill Ranch near Round Top, where Bob and Marilyn McDowell have been busily restoring historic buildings and the native prairie.

In this season of gratitude, we're lifting a toast to the bounty of the Roundtopolis™ and the people share it with us all. ★



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# Shooting the Breeze

ARTICLE BY LORIE A. WOODWARD  
PHOTOS COURTESY OF CATSPRING YAUPON

## JUST THE FACTS

**Abianne Falla**  
**OCCUPATION:** Entrepreneur  
**DOB:** August 17, 1985  
**EDUCATION:** Texas A&M, BS Accounting and Master's of Marketing, Acton School of Business MBA of Entrepreneurship

During the drought of 2011, yaupon was a beacon of green in a sea of brown on the family's ranch near Cat Spring; it caught the attention of sisters JennaDee Detro and Abianne Falla in a "surely it's got to be good for something" sort of way. As it turns out, yaupon, the much-maligned and often battled shrub, is the only native plant in North America whose leaves contain caffeine. By botanical definition yaupon is not true tea, but Native Americans used it as a tea-like drink for thousands of years.

Spanish explorers exported it to Europe. Britain, which dominated the imported tea trade (remember the Boston Tea Party?), didn't brook any competition. In a colonial-era PR coup, "yauponer" became a pejorative term implying that anyone who drank yaupon tea couldn't afford the imported variety. Yaupon fell out of use.

Intrigued, the sisters began experimenting with drying yaupon as well as using green leaves to steep a drink. It was surprisingly tea-like and could be enjoyed hot or cold. One small batch at a time, they tested it at farmers' markets, cafes and with trend-setting chefs. The response was so positive that in 2013 the duo launched CatSpring Yaupon.

Since that time they've produced over a million cups worth of yaupon tea. The leaves, which are organic and obviously non-GMO, are harvested on their ranch and that of several neighbors. In addition to using a local, overlooked resource, CatSpring Yaupon employs people who need a second chance.

Abianne and I shot the breeze over the phone late one afternoon as the entrepreneur, third-generation Aggie and soon-to-be mother, wound down another busy day.

# SHOOTING THE BREEZE WITH ABIANNE FALLA



**WHAT IS YOUR FIRST CHILDHOOD MEMORY?** Playing on the ranch in Cat Spring. My sisters (there are three of us) and I used to find the red clay deposits and make little clay figures that we dried in the sun. Most of the time we were red head to toe.

**WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST PAYING JOB?** When I was in high school, I worked at the Houston Garden Center for the Brookshire-based Brookwood Community. It's a residence and vocational program for adults with disabilities.

**WHAT WOULD YOU TELL AT 16-YEAR-OLD ABIANNE?** The best is yet to come. And give people room to surprise you because they will—usually in a very good way.

**EARLY OR LATE?** I'm punctual, but I prefer the night.

**WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE QUOTE?** I think it was Eleanor Roosevelt who said, "An error only becomes a mistake when you refuse to learn from it." It's good advice when you're trying to start a business because you make a lot of mistakes.

**WHO WAS THE FIRST ONE TO TRY THE YAUPON TEA, JENNADEE OR YOU?** We tried it at the same time. We figured if the Native Americans drank it for thousands of years, how bad could it be?

**WHY GO LOCAL?** I think as a culture we're only now rediscovering the importance of local agriculture. As we ramped up agricultural production for quantity 80-plus years ago, we sacrificed control and quality, and local agriculture is again placing a value on quality rather than high-yield production. Also, yaupon is a largely forgotten resource. It's pure American goodness grown right down the road. "Yaupon is Texan, for tea."

*\*To try CatSpring Yaupon yourself, purchase it directly at [www.catspringyaupon.com](http://www.catspringyaupon.com). ★*

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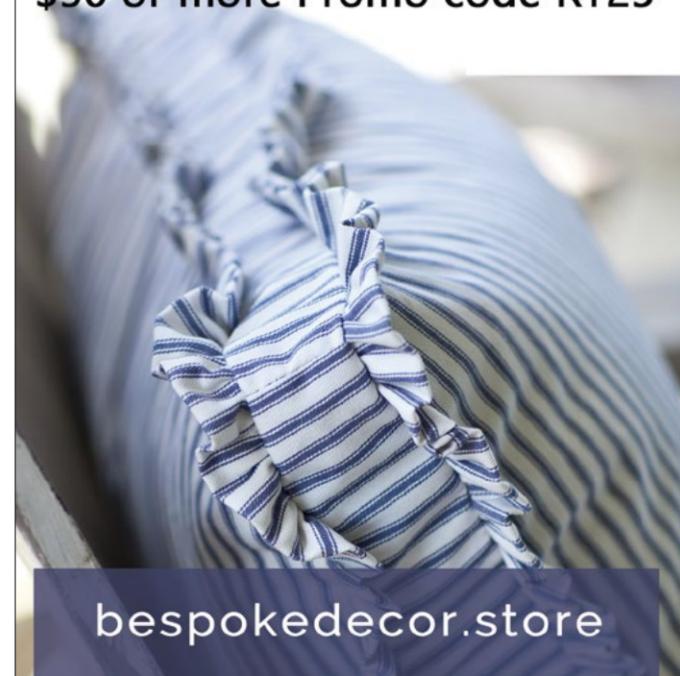
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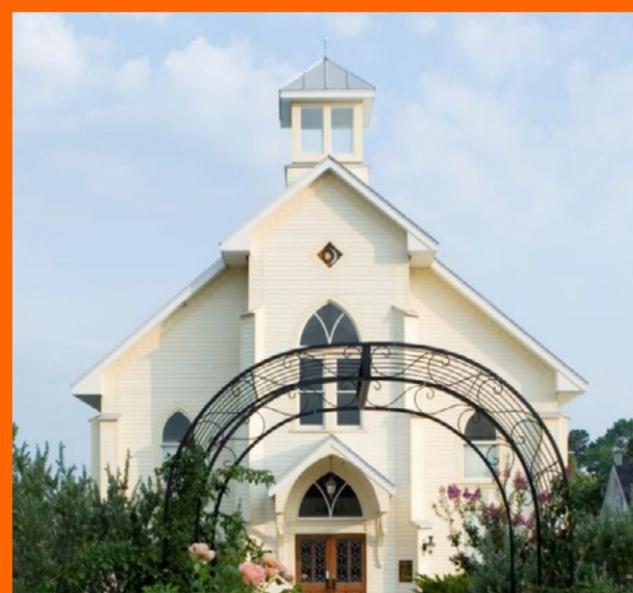
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**“WE WEREN’T FARMERS—AND WE DIDN’T SET OUT TO BE. OUR JOURNEY TO BETTER HEALTH TOOK US TO A PLACE WE DIDN’T EXPECT.”**—Lynsey Kramer

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When they were their early 20s, Lynsey and Jason Kramer, owners of Yonder Way Farm in Fayetteville, grappled with health issues normally associated with people decades older.

“At 22 I was insulin-resistant, pre-diabetic and struggling with fertility issues,” Lynsey said. “At 23 Jason was a Houston firefighter; we couldn’t afford a life insurance policy because the required physical revealed he had ‘the bloodwork of a 70-year-old.’”

The couple, who had met and married as undergrads at Sam Houston State University, vowed to change their lifestyles beginning with their diets. Over time, their quest for pasture-raised meat and organic vegetables and fruits, purchased as close to the source as possible, led them to a new life.

“We weren’t farmers—and we didn’t set out to be,” said Lynsey, who was reared in Arlington. “Our journey to better health took us to a place we didn’t expect.”



**“WE KNEW NOTHING, EXCEPT THAT ANIMAL AGRICULTURE IS A BIG RESPONSIBILITY—IF YOU MESS UP, A LIVING CREATURE CAN DIE. WE WENT SLOWLY, TOOK OUR RESPONSIBILITIES SERIOUSLY AND PAID CLOSE ATTENTION TO MOTHER NATURE BECAUSE SHE’S AN EXCELLENT TEACHER.”**—Lynsey Kramer



### *The Unexpected Destination*

The first stop was 100 acres near Brenham owned by Jason’s aunt and uncle. Knowing the Kramers were searching for a life closer to the land, the older couple asked the young family to come live on the property with them and help take care of it. In 2006, the Kramers did just that. They fixed fences shredded pastures and tackled the ever-present “to do” list when Jason wasn’t on duty at the fire station in Houston.

“During this time we were frustrated by how difficult it was to find the type of food we wanted to eat,” Lynsey said. “One day Jason said, ‘We have 100 acres here. Why aren’t we just growing our own?’”

They planted gardens and acquired some chickens, both layers and broilers, and eventually a few cows and hogs.

“We knew nothing, except that animal agriculture is a big responsibility—if you mess up, a living creature can die,” Lynsey said. “We went slowly, took our responsibilities seriously and paid close attention to Mother Nature because she’s an excellent teacher.”

In addition to Mother Nature, they periodically turned to YouTube. For instance, they learned to butcher chickens by watching a video of an Amish family completing the task.

“It was our first batch of broilers—there were 50 of them ready to process for our freezer, so we put the girls to bed, sat down at the computer and took notes,” Lynsey said laughing at the memory. “Like everything else, it gets easier once you do it.” (These days all of the meat is processed at a state-inspected facility.)

As they gained knowledge, confidence and proficiency, Jason had another idea.

“He suggested we expand what we were doing for our family by providing wholesome meat and eggs to other families,” Lynsey said. “We’re both entrepreneurs at heart and prefer the risk and independence of self-employment, so it had a distinct appeal.”

The idea incubated.

When Jason’s uncle died and his aunt chose to move, the idea of having their own farm hatched. The Kramers considered staying on the Washington County property but were drawn to Fayette County.

“When we began our property search, we only looked in Fayette County,” Lynsey said. “Something about it called us.”

In 2011, the big-city firefighter, the former professional photographer and their brood of four beautiful blonde chicks, ranging in age from seven years to six months, arrived at their

## *The Supper Club at Yonder Way* From Their Farm to Their Table

During the Supper Club at Yonder Way Farm, the Kramers celebrate their farm at their table with their guests.

"We work hard to bring the best, freshest food to our customers, and the Supper Club lets us see them enjoy it," Lynsey said. "It brings us a full circle experience, and a lot of satisfaction and joy."

Hostesses from the ranks of the girls' homeschooled friends greet guests at the gate and direct them to the parking area in an open patch behind the farm compound. On one side of the parking area, a sow and pigs root in the dirt for edible treasures. On the other, a flock of chickens in their mobile pen cluck contentedly as they scratch for their supper. Turkeys strut their stuff, and tail-wagging dogs act as the unofficial welcoming committee.

More busy, smiling kids—and adults—take care of immediate hospitality needs such as pouring wine, beer or cold drinks and pointing out the appetizer stations. Guests can stroll around the farm or gather under the live oak trees in comfortable chairs and talk with friends, those they know and those they've just met.

"Our Supper Club is not about being fancy; it's about being real, being present and being well-fed," Lynsey said.

The Supper Club kicked off in June with the completion of a rustic, barn-inspired gathering space just behind the family's historic farmhouse. Like the area's historic dance halls, the barn is ventilated with well-placed, oversized windows and doors and outfitted to accommodate a large group.

The family plans to host a dinner each month, but because the menu is dictated by seasonal availability of farm-fresh products in a 150-mile radius of Fayetteville, some months, such as August, which is when I attended, prove to be challenging.

"August is tough because the heat has put an end to the summer growing season, and fall crops aren't ready yet,"



unexpected destination. They purchased a 36-acre farm just outside Fayetteville and named it Yonder Way.

"We arrived with a passion for farming the way the Lord designed," Lynsey said. "By being good stewards of the land and raising animals free of confinement in a natural environment, our goal is to re-establish the almost-lost art of grass farming."

### *The Business of Protein*

From the outset, Yonder Way has been a livestock farm. In fact, the chickens and the eggs (as well as the pork and the beef) came first. Well, they came before the customers.

"When the farm started social media didn't exist," Lynsey said. "We networked the old-fashioned way."

They targeted potential clients in Houston and Austin at gyms, yoga studios, health food stores, naturopaths and alternative medicine providers and other places of business where the clients were already tuned into their health.

"We offered a product people couldn't easily find, and we connected on a personal level that inspired them to support our business," Lynsey said.

Not content to hope for sales at farmers' markets or other outlets, the Kramers established a delivery service for their urban and suburban customers. On designated days Jason and the girls deliver to specific locations, and the farm's clients can pick up their orders.

"Yonder Way was the original curbside delivery service," Lynsey said. "It's convenient for our customers, and it allows us to maintain that connection between what we do and what they eat."

The connection is important. Some of their customers have been with them for the past 12 years and are now ordering food for their children who are at college or in their first adult jobs.

"In our business model we need to feed 300 families a month," Lynsey said. "In the scheme of American food systems, it's a tiny niche, but one that is very important to us."

Social media has expanded the connection and increased demand. With a newly upgraded website, the Kramers are preparing to ship nationally.

"Thanks to social media, people have heard our story and are hungry for what we do," Lynsey said. "Philosophically it's been a bit of a leap because Jason and I are so focused

locally, but they feel connected to our farm and want to support us, so we need to feed them."

Plus, the world has changed.

"We never imagined a time when people wouldn't want to go to the grocery store themselves," Lynsey said referring to the explosion of delivery services. "As a society our relationship to our food and where it comes from just gets further removed and more confused. We simplify it for our customers."

From a customer's perspective, Yonder Way offers maximum flexibility. Instead of requiring customers to order a quarter or more of a steer or hog, the Kramers offer retail cuts. Customers mix and match ribs, roasts, steaks, sausage, bacon, whole chickens, chicken pieces and eggs in each order. For delivery there is a \$50 minimum. There is no minimum order for farm pick-up.

In addition, Yonder Way's product list includes lard, rendered beef tallow, organ meats and a variety of bone broths. They also provide access to a variety of products including olive oil, sourdough bread and preserved fermented foods from like-minded area farms.

"Our approach to farming is different than that of large commercial farms," Lynsey said. "Part of our business is helping customers understand the difference—and how that translates into what they're putting in their mouths."

### *Land, Livestock and Life*

The Kramers selected Red Angus cattle as the source for their beef, Mangalitsa, a heritage breed, as the source of their pork and a Cornish-Rock cross as the source for their poultry. They rely on Production Reds and Hylines to produce eggs. All the animals are raised on pasture, so their primary food source is grass as well as forbs or, in the case of the hogs, acorns.

"We rotate our animals so the land is enriched by their manure, but it also gets to rest and recover in between," Lynsey said.

All livestock feed is non-GMO. None contains soy or corn.

"So many people have allergies to soy and corn; our customers asked us to avoid it in our feed," Lynsey said. "It took some doing, but we pulled it off."

The family only uses antibiotics if necessary to treat an animal's illness. Treated animals are taken out of the farm's production.

Lynsey said. "We had so many requests for an August dinner that we got resourceful and did it anyway."

Their resourcefulness yielded a bounty of flavor. The all-inclusive, prix fixe meal, served family style at long tables as the sun set, included brisket-topped caponata, a ratatouille-like mélange featuring eggplant instead of zucchini, on grilled sourdough; grilled romaine salad with beets, pork cracklings and shaved parmesan with a lemon vinaigrette; maple-glazed smoked pork accompanied by grilled potato salad; and charred Chinese long beans with sautéed onions and deep-fried pork belly.

Jason and his team of sous chefs, who are talented friends pressed into good-natured service, cook the majority of the meal over open, wood-stoked flames.

"Everything incorporates grilling and smoke," Lynsey said. "Jason loves it, and it's becoming our signature."

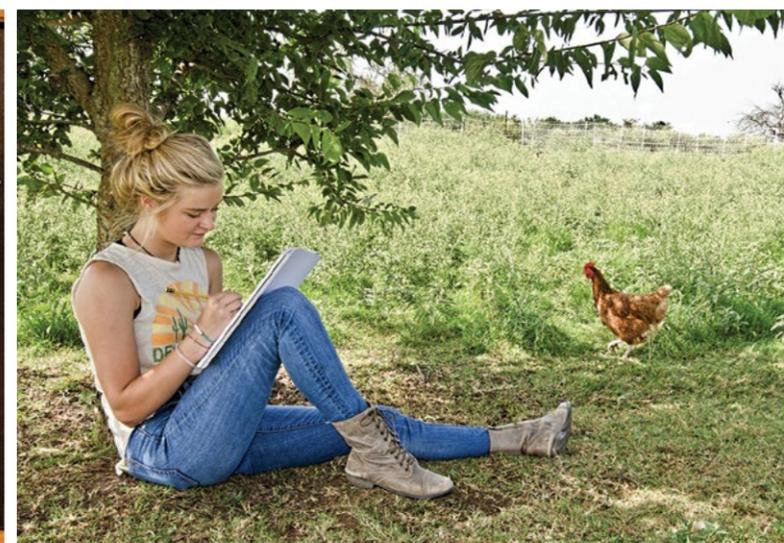
Dessert was home-style banana pudding (and as the Kramers joked, the bananas weren't sourced locally, but Texas-grown fruit is hard to come by in August) and the wines came from the Rohan Meadery near La Grange.

"We're blessed to live in an area of abundance," Lynsey said, noting that they source organic produce from several farms near Houston and Austin, olive oil from nearby CatSprings, cheeses from a family dairy in Schulenburg, fermented products from a farm in Elgin and sourdough bread crafted from unbleached flour and ancient starters at Kraftsmen Bakery in Houston.

"People often ask why we don't post our menus in advance," Lynsey said. "Frankly, it's because we don't know what ingredients we'll have to work with until three or four days before it's time to throw the doors open and start cooking."

Guests shouldn't expect a vegetarian menu.

"All of our dinners feature a lot of vegetables, but our preparations generally contain meat or meat products such as lard," Lynsey said. "We operate a livestock farm, so our life—and our menus—are pretty meat-centric."



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"In our opinion, withholding treatment to a sick animal is inhumane, so we treat as necessary and then keep them segregated," Lynsey said. "Of course, because of the way our stock is raised, we have very few health problems."

They also keep their herds closed. All animals in their care are bred and raised on the farm or on leased land. They partner with Mark Stang from Schulenburg and run 300 cows on 4,000 acres of leased land. A closed herd allows them to control the genetics, prevent diseases from being introduced from outside, and control every aspect of the animals' care.

When the Kramers became full-time farmers, they constituted the entire workforce. Today, they have four full-time employees as well as their daughters who have grown alongside the business.

"One of the best things about our life is that we're all in it together," Lynsey said noting their girls are homeschooled. "When it comes to jobs, we all do whatever needs to be done, but it's been amazing to watch our older daughters find their skills and talents on the farm."

Their oldest, who is 14, gravitates to the administrative and customer service side of the business and can often be found waiting on customers, writing thank you notes or working in the farm store. Their second daughter, 11, chooses to work outdoors alongside Jason, preferably with the animals. The youngest, 9 and 7, pitch in where they can.

"The farm is our classroom," Lynsey said. "It's a place of life lessons. On a farm, sometimes you give it your all, but it's still not enough. It's humbling, but you have to get up, brush off and do it again."

Challenges abound. Animals get sick. The weather turns fierce. Consumers tastes change.

She continued, "Farming, as my favorite saying goes, is a profession of hope. We're blessed to cultivate our life in an environment of hope." ★

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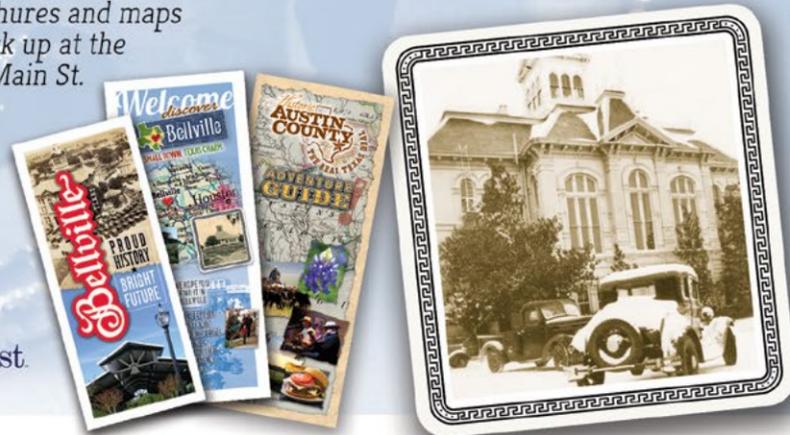
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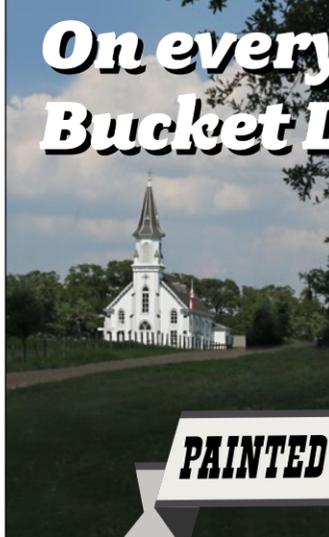


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*“Even though people don’t always realize it, we need bees. Of course, our family needs bees more directly than most.”* – Christi Wade



# The Buzz on the Lazy Bee Honey Co.



by Lorie A. Woodward

photos by Rachel Alphonso-Smith,  
Shutterbunny Photography

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Despite the name, “lazy” isn’t part of the culture at the Lazy Bee Honey Co., the multi-faceted, farm-based business owned by Christi and Nathan Wade of Burton.

“This [interview] is the first time, I’ve been still today,” said Christi who, in addition to being a hands-on partner and lead jam maker for Lazy Bee, works as a realtor and oversees, with the help of a tutor, homeschooling the Wades’ four children, ages 5 to 15.

“I’m a person of routine, but the only routine in my life is dealing with the unexpected,” she said laughingly, recognizing the humor in the understatement as only a seasoned farmer, entrepreneur and mother would.

Launched in 2012, the company transformed Nathan’s part-time hobby into a full-time business that specializes in all things honey.

“We started out selling honey in Round Top on occasional weekends,” Christi said.

Through the local grapevine, the Wades heard the owner of Scotty & Friends, a Round Top restaurant that has since closed, wanted to establish a farmers’ market in the tiny town.

“Most of the time we were the only ones sitting under that big oak tree [that now shades the deck of Feed & Firewater],” Christi said. “We’d sit at our card table until we sold out.”



Today the product mix includes not only honey—raw, creamed, liquid and in the comb—but honey-sweetened jams made from original recipes, and condiments such as honey peanut butter, honey mustard and honey barbecue sauce. At the request of their customers, they have just released a line of fruit and pumpkin butters. Products can be purchased online or at select independent retailers such as Silver Barn and Espressions Coffee & Art in Round Top, Burton Sausage in Burton, Home Sweet Farm in Brenham, at farmers markets and festivals including the Round Top Antiques Show and at HEB in Brenham and nearby College Station.

“We are currently finalizing an agreement with a co-packer to help produce our jams, which will increase our capacity and allow us to move onto a larger retail stage,” Christi said. “Right now, though, it’s us—in our commercial kitchen—located on the farm.”

Through the years the couple has learned how to deliver flavor that garners attention.

Earlier in the year Lazy Bee Honey Co. was a finalist in HEB’s “Quest for Texas’ Best” contest that attracted 2,000 entries. The Texas-based grocery giant looked across the state to identify its next big thing.

“We developed a honey butter that held its own against some excellent products, but it required some specialized expertise, which ended up being its downfall,” Christi said.

No co-packers in Texas handle butter-based preparations. The only processor with the necessary capability is in Colorado, which prevents the product from holding the title of “Texas Made” and making it ineligible for the chain’s “Primo Pick” marketing promotion.

“The contest’s prize money would’ve allowed us to invest in the storage and delivery infrastructure we need for a refrigerated product,” Christi said. “Honey butter is still on our radar, but it isn’t going to materialize as quickly as we’d hoped.”

While the Wades were developing new products, they also created a bee services division. Residents in a 60-mile radius of Washington County can lease bee hives for their properties. (With an increasing interest in honey bees, this option has proven very popular; there’s a waiting list for the hives.)

“Our bees can help pollinate family crops—we don’t lease to pollinate commercial properties—gardens and orchards,” Christi said. “And because beekeeping is a recognized and necessary agricultural practice, leased hives can help landowners maintain their agricultural tax valuation.”

In addition to putting bees where landowners want them, the Lazy Bee team can remove them from places the insects are unwelcome.

“Bees show up in all sorts of places—utility meters, walls, attics, chimneys and vehicles that people prefer to be bee-free,” Christi said. “Nathan and his team will travel to the site, capture and re-home them.”

To be clear, bee removal is a paid service not a trade. Most of the wild bees don’t settle down and set up housekeeping in the domestic hives when they are introduced to their new homes. In fact, about 75 percent of the re-homed colonies return to the wild to re-establish their hives.

“We rescue the bees,” Christi said. “If they stay on the farm—great; if they don’t that’s okay too because at least we, unlike an exterminator, saved them.”

In a world that relies on bees and other insects to pollinate at least 30 percent of its major food-producing crops and 95 percent of native plants, it’s an important distinction.

“Even though people don’t always realize it, we need bees,” Christi said. “Of course, our family needs bees more directly than most.”



### *In a Jam*

As part of the homeschool curriculum, Christi often made jam to reinforce math and science lessons. Soon after the couple launched the business, Nathan walked into the kitchen just as Christi was adding eight cups of sugar to the fruit mixture that would become jam.

“His eyes got big and he said, ‘We produce honey. Why in the world are you using all that sugar?’” Christi said.

Her response? “It’s what the recipe calls for.”

She accepted the challenge of developing a recipe for honey-sweetened jam quickly discovering honey has a much lower boiling point than sugar.

“I burned a lot of honey in pots with fruit,” Christi said. “Some of it was so bad that when I scraped it outside the bees wouldn’t even eat it.”

She persisted and eventually perfected her formula. By the end of the first year, they sold 4,000 jars of jam.

The company’s top sellers are traditional blackberry and strawberry jams, but strawberry jalapeno and peach habanero, which is Christi’s personal favorite, fly off the shelves as well.

“I fought making the spicy jams for a long time because everyone else was making them, and I’ve never been one to do what everyone else does,” Christi said. “Plus, I just didn’t think it would taste good, but people just kept asking for them, so I gave in—and wow, just wow, they’re good.”

*continued to page 28 >>*

### *Bees, Burton and Birthing a Business*

When the Wades met during a high school geography class in their hometown of Abilene, Texas, they were sweet on one another, but neither was abuzz to become an entrepreneurial beekeeper.

“At the time, we didn’t imagine a life like we live,” Christi said noting they got married when they were 20 and 21 and started their family soon after.

Nathan entered the workforce as an entrepreneur early and was operating his own successful business by age 17. He continued to grow his business while he attended school and through his early professional years; his career path eventually led to the communications industry. As Christi pursued her business administration degree, she was also in the workforce and over time landed a position at Blue Cross/Blue Shield.

Within the communications industry, Nathan quickly climbed the corporate ladder to the executive level where moving up meant moving around. The journey took the family from Abilene to Flower Mound to Corpus Christi and finally to Brenham.

“I fell in love with Brenham,” said Christi, whose career allowed her to work from Blue Cross/Blue Shield’s corporate offices, satellite offices and to telecommute. “It was everything West Texas wasn’t—green, hilly and tree-filled.”

Nathan’s father was reared in Walhalla and attended school at Round Top/Carmine and La Grange, so Nathan, who attended family gatherings in the area as he was growing up, was familiar with the Roundtopolis™. The couple found a rental property in Burton and put down temporary roots, which became permanent a year later when they purchased property near Burton.

“We liked Burton, so we stayed there,” Christi said.

On the day they closed on their farmstead, Christi got an ultimatum from Blue Cross/Blue Shield. Either return to the Metroplex or lose her job.

“I told them we had just closed on our property, and I would be staying put,” Christi said. “We’d budgeted based on Nathan’s salary alone, so the layoff wasn’t pleasant, but it was manageable.”

As they got settled into their new home, Nathan was intrigued by the two bee boxes on the property. Bees were buzzing in and out. The couple assumed they owned productive hives until Nathan began attending meetings of the local bee club about six months later and learned what was supposed to be happening.

“We were the proud owners of abandoned hives and scavenger bees—bees that were looking for honey,” Christi said.

Nathan bought bees and a beekeeping suit. He pursued beekeeping as a hobby while he worked full time. Baby number four arrived. The Wades began selling honey on the weekends in Round Top and encountered strong demand.

Then corporate America called again with another ultimatum, Nathan would have to once again move the family or take a severance package.

“Farming—bees and cows—was our only income outside of Nathan’s job,” Christi said. “We had a choice. We could either move back to the city or we could take leap of faith.”

They leapt full of faith. Their combined severance packages gave them one year to build a business.





### The Business of Family

The business is part of the family's life, and the family's life is part of the business.

"Our kids think it's odd that other families don't have bees, a commercial kitchen and a life where everyone is together most of the time," Christi said. "Our oldest son was in the second grade when we moved to Burton, but he took to the country and will never lose his farmer's tan. For the rest of them, this is the only life they've known."

No one has assigned roles, but they gravitate to the jobs that need to be done. The older boys help Nathan with the bees, but the younger ones are still growing into those tasks. Everyone puts on their "special shoes and stylish hairnets" when they come to help in the kitchen.

"Our daughter, who is five, thinks wearing her kitchen shoes and a hairnet is as fun as wearing a princess dress," Christi said. "In fact, I'm sure there are times she's worn all three in the kitchen."

Because they work alongside their parents, the children understand the relationship between their work and their lifestyle.

"They see the benefits of our collective labor," Christi said. "The kids know there's not money in the checking account unless we all work for it. Out here work isn't sitting in a chair; it's taking initiative, making things happen and taking care of the things that generate money."

Working on the farm has also taught them to adapt, adjust and value the power of family.

"When you have a land-based business, you have to expect everything you can't expect—and deal with it," Christi said. "And you have to be partners because when everything else works against you, as it sometimes seems it does, you have to work together." ★



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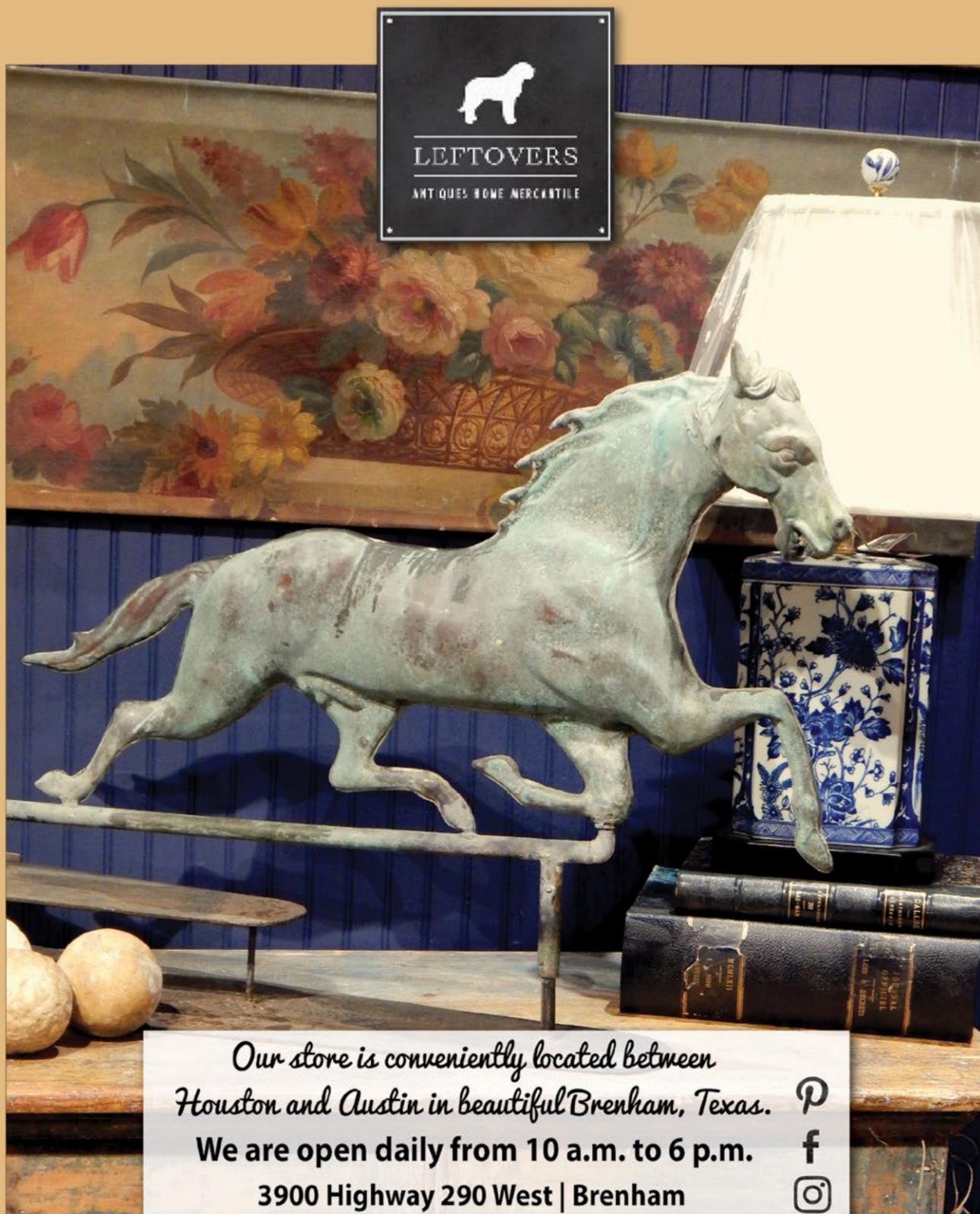
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## *Growing Happiness and Giving Joy*

### CUTS OF COLOR FLOWER FARM



by Lorie A. Woodward • photos by Anna Spencer Morse, Grace Photography

*“Flowers bring joy. It’s the best thing about my job.”* —Rita Anders

Cuts of Color Flower Farm • 1166 County Road 210 • Weimar, TX 78962 • 979-561-6162 • [www.cutssofar.com](http://www.cutssofar.com)  
 FB: Cuts of Color • Instagram: @cutssofar

Rita Anders grows happiness at Cuts of Color near Weimar. “Flowers bring joy,” said Rita, a lifelong resident of Weimar, who can see the silos of the farm where she was reared from her flower farm. “It’s the best thing about my job.”

And she’s not kidding. I challenge you to keep from grinning ear to ear as I did when I walked up on the largest flower arrangement I’ve ever seen. The vase? A Kawasaki Mule® and trailer outfitted with plastic buckets. A profusion of zinnias, gomphrena, celosia, sunflowers and foliage such as mahogany hibiscus filled the containers. If my smile hadn’t been so big, the sight might have left me slack-jawed.

“Just so you know, September is our leanest month,” said Rita, explaining the farm was transitioning between warm season and cool season flowers. “Flowers are just like people. They get tired of the heat.”

Spring is her favorite season. Summer is her least favorite. I won’t be visiting in the spring because, if the flowers are truly more glorious than when I visited in September, my oversized smile might just break my face.

Cuts of Color uses a combination of small-scale fields and greenhouses, to produce cut flowers throughout the year. Anders’ first greenhouse came from her grandfather, who raised hothouse tomatoes. Initially, Rita, who grew up on a dairy farm that also produced peaches and pecans, produced greenhouse tomatoes on the

property she and her husband Edwin, also a Weimar native, purchased in 1983.

“Both my grandfathers were farmers. My dad was a farmer,” Rita said. “We’re not very good at working for other people. Well, except for God and Mother Nature—and they can be hard bosses.”

Anders’ children grew up working on the family’s farmstead. “They worked alongside us all their growing-up years—that’s why none of them are here now,” Rita said laughing. “We raised flowers and another generation of entrepreneurs.”

Daughter Erin and her husband Jeff Glueck own and operate Glueck Tree Farm in CatSpring. Son Jim and his wife Nikki own Traditions Pools and Landscapes in College Station. Son Brian and his wife Samantha recently purchased Mr. B Fireworks in Schulenburg.

“I’m proud of what they’ve accomplished with their own hard work,” Rita said.

Due in part to rising fuel costs, Rita diversified to include cut flowers. She phased out the tomatoes and began solely growing flowers in 2004. Anders primarily uses organic production methods. Chemical treatments are a last resort. If needed, they are applied sparingly and as a spot treatment.

“Growing flowers is different than growing tomatoes, but it’s still growing something,” Rita said.



## BLOOM WHERE YOU'RE PLANTED

A Q&A with Rita Anders



**RTR:** What's the best piece of advice you can give someone who wants to start a cut flower farm?

**RA:** Start small and figure things out before enlarging. Grow some flowers. Sell them to your friends and in your local community. See what you can grow. See what sells. Figure out how to get them to market.

Then find a larger audience. For me it was an urban farmers market. Refine all your processes. Ramp up your production. Learn to deliver a high volume of high-quality product. Make your big mistakes when the stakes aren't so high.

## A Flexible Foundation

Growing things requires flexibility.

"We're working in reverse today—harvesting the fields first and then the greenhouses," said Rita as she snipped zinnias along with the rest of her team. "Normally, we work in the greenhouses early before it gets hot—in the summer, the greenhouses run at least 10 degrees hotter than outside—and then move outside, but today we're trying to beat the rain."

Rain at a flower farm is a mixed blessing. While nothing quenches growing plants' thirst like rainwater, the rain can pulverize the blossoms, and the wind accompanying a thundershower can wreak havoc. Normally, Rita relies on drip irrigation. A recent rain flattened an entire row of zinnias. The team propped them up in hopes the stems would straighten, strengthen and continue to produce blooms.

"When people are buying flowers, they only want the perfect ones, so we have to be selective—rain, heat and insects can all leave their marks," Rita said. "We're picking them extra close today, too. If we get the 5-7 inches like they're predicting over the weekend, we won't have any flowers worth picking on Monday."

When the weather cooperates, the Cuts of Color crew harvests on Mondays and Thursdays and delivers bouquets to Central Market, located at 3815 Westheimer in Houston, on Tuesdays and Fridays. Rita got her spot in Central Market in 2012 by walking through the door and tracking down the manager. At the time, she had been setting up every Saturday morning for eight years at the Urban Harvest Farmers Market just around the corner. She and her business were both ready for a change.

"I wanted one consistent customer, and I wanted to get my weekends back," Rita said. "Because of the farmers market, I knew what would grow, what would sell and I understood the clients and the demand."

Armed with knowledge, a proven track record and the advantage of being locally grown, she struck a deal.

"By the time I got home that day, the paperwork was waiting for me on my computer," Rita said. "We built our lives in Weimar, but we built our market in Houston."

Today, Cuts of Color is front and center in the floral department. Signs prominently identify the company and trumpet its Texas roots, which align perfectly with HEB's locally grown focus.

"Did you know about 80 percent of the fresh flowers purchased in the United States are imported?" Rita said. "Local flowers like ours are fresher and more vibrant. The varieties we grow touch people's hearts because they often remind them of what their grandmothers grew. Plus, they don't leave a carbon footprint—and when you buy local you're supporting your local farmer."

To fulfill a wholesale contract with a corporate giant like HEB, a small business has to have a consistent supply of product and a consistent team that can deliver the goods. At Cuts of Color the team includes Umparo, a full-time employee, as well as Christine, Melanie and Evelyn, who work part-time. They harvest in the mornings.

Each woman wields a pair of Fiskars scissors and cuts the stems long. Once their hands are full, they deliver the blossoms to the appropriate container on the ATV. When the vehicle is full, someone moves the filled containers to the shade where the women will gather after lunch to make bouquets. Then they repeat the process until the three acres allocated to flowers are harvested. In the summer Rita also hires local high school students to help.

"The people here make hard work easier," said Rita noting they spent six hours the day before weeding muddy fields. "It's pretty stress-free around here. It's peaceful and quiet. We're working in nature. We laugh a lot and enjoy each other's company."

The Cuts of Color team also includes Mario, who works full-time, as well as Edwin. After 39 years at Weimar's MG Feeds, Edwin retired and now pitches in on the farm wherever he's needed. He routinely performs construction and maintenance, runs farm errands and, if needed, bundles flower bunches. On this particular day he's picking up a load of bone meal to be used on the farm.

"He makes it possible for me to stay on the farm and get my work done," Rita said.

On Fridays, Edwin delivers to Central Market, so Rita can design bouquets for the weddings she's booked. On the day I visited, she was creating 35 additional arrangements for a weekend wedding after finishing the bouquets for Central Market.

Once you have it all sorted out, go land a wholesale customer. The big boys don't give second chances, so you need to be able to do what you say you can. Of course, you'll still make a few mistakes, but they won't be the big ones that will cost you a contract.

**RTR:** What has been your best business decision?

**RA:** We paid as we went. I leased my first greenhouse from my grandfather when he quit growing tomatoes. We saved the money we made and then bought the greenhouse. We just kept repeating that process until we got where we wanted to be. It kept us from overcommitting. It kept us from getting too big too fast. And it kept us from getting crushed under the burden of a big loan.

A lot of people who I talk with, especially young farmers, think they need to jump right in with a big debt. Then they're under constant pressure.

By building a piece at the time, I have always been able to run the farm instead of the farm running me.

*"While I don't expect to ever retire, when I turn 65 things will change. I love my work here on the farm, but I also love living the life it has provided."* —Rita Anders



"My farmers market customers—and my friends—kept asking me to do weddings, so I went to some workshops, watched some people and taught myself how to design flowers."

Her wedding design service was a hit. "I said yes to a few weddings, and all of the sudden I was doing 45 weddings a year," Rita said.

She maintained that pace for two years before limiting herself to no more than two weddings per weekend and by learning to say, "No."

"Now I block out some weekends and just don't take any events," Anders said. She is involved in 30 weddings this year.

These days she strives to end her workday by 5 p.m. so she can enjoy activities with Edwin and their family. While the business is satisfying, the 60-year-old grandmother of 10 is not planning to operate Cuts of Color until she is planted.

"I've grown this business until it's just what I want it to be," Anders said. "While I don't expect to ever retire, when I turn 65 things will change. I might run a cutting garden to supply the local market or teach workshops—and people are after to me to write a book. Who knows? I love my work here on the farm, but I also love living the life it has provided." ★

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## A Bouquet of Experiences

Although Central Market in Houston is a year-round source for Cuts of Color bouquets, flower enthusiasts in the Roundtopolis™ can get their fresh-picked fix from Cuts of Color in several ways:

**FARM-FRESH PICKUP:** Watch Cuts of Color's Facebook page (Cuts of Color) or follow its Instagram feed (@cutsofcolor). The crew posts when flowers are available for pickup at the farm. Announcements usually appear on Thursdays or Fridays, so customers will have flowers for the weekend. The cost is \$10/bunch. **Insider's tip:** If you request a bunch and they run out, the crew will create one for you and have it available the next day.

**SPECIAL EVENT PICKUP:** In addition to weddings, the Cuts of Color team will design bouquets for special events. They can also provide bulk flowers. Call in advance to discuss your needs, or make an

appointment. **Note!** Cuts of Color doesn't deliver for special events except weddings.

**PICK YOUR OWN WORKSHOPS:** The Cuts of Color team will open the farm and share their expertise with groups. The morning workshops, arranged by appointment, allow guests to pick their own flowers on the farm and then create their own bouquets under Anders' direction. The cost is \$40/person.

**OFF-SITE DESIGN WORKSHOPS:** Cuts of Color will deliver its farm-fresh flowers and design expertise to groups in the region. Each session can be tailored to the host's needs. Anders is also available to

speak at conferences throughout the state and nation.

**FARM TOURS:** The Cuts of Color team hosts farm tours for garden clubs, for cut flower growers, and for others interested in the business of growing flowers.

**BENEFIT YOUR FAVORITE CHARITY:** If you're looking for something unique to donate to your favorite charity's fundraising auction, ask about purchasing a "12-months of color" subscription from Cuts of Color; the high bidder will get a bouquet of farm-fresh flowers each month.

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Homer and his dog, Rusty, were the inspiration for my photo-essay 'Mutt 'n Man' - dogs and their owners. They lived in Hugo, a small town on the plains of Colorado. I was first attracted to the sign. It was hard to miss. I stopped to chat a while. The while turned into several hours. I left feeling that they probably could fix everything.

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## Stirring the Pot

ARTICLE BY  
LORIE A. WOODWARD

photos by Lezu Photography



### KEY INGREDIENTS

#### Lulu's

204 E. Mill St.  
Round Top, TX 78954  
979-249-5171

[www.lulustx.com](http://www.lulustx.com)  
[contact@lulustx.com](mailto:contact@lulustx.com)

#### Hours

Thursday – Saturday  
Lunch: 11 a.m. – 2 p.m.  
Dinner: 5 p.m. – 9 p.m.

Reservations recommended  
for dinner service

Lulu's also offers full-service  
catering in the Round Top area.

## LULU'S

Cinda Palacios invited me to join her at Lulu's, one of two Round Top restaurants she co-owns with her husband Armando Palacios, for an early lunch. For a few minutes I had the memorable space and attentive wait staff all to myself as I journeyed (at least in my mind) to southern Italy. Some patrons maintain the ambiance is reminiscent of Provence, but the aromas—fresh basil, aged parmesan and warm, rich red sauce enhanced with good red wine—didn't let me detour. She ordered for us showcasing her lunch favorites: an appetizer of bite-sized, house-made meatballs with Pomodoro sauce on roasted polenta and a combination plate that paired a classic Caesar salad alongside a cold basil pesto pasta salad featuring bucantini, oil-cured sun-dried tomatoes, toasted pine nuts and both parmesan and feta cheese. For the record, my leftover pasta salad (thanks to the stellar pesto) was just as delicious when I slurped it up at dinner while standing in my kitchen, but the experience was not nearly as elegant.



**RTR: WHAT'S THE STORY BEHIND THE NAME LULU'S?**

**CP:** Lulu is what Armando and our granddaughter Ruby nicknamed me.

**RTR: HOW DO YOU AND ARMANDO DIVIDE THE ENORMOUS WORKLOAD THAT COMES FROM RUNNING THREE RESTAURANTS?**

**CP:** We respect one another's skills and tastes. Armando is the big-idea guy who thinks miles and miles outside the box. I'm the analyzer and the executor who catches the ideas. Every time he brings me a concept, I immediately say, "No!" Then I think about it two or three days, and we sit down and discuss it. If it weren't for him, we wouldn't be as progressive. If it weren't for me, his big ideas would remain ideas without action to bring them to life.

**RTR: WHAT'S THE BEST THING ABOUT BEING IN THE RESTAURANT BUSINESS?**

**CP:** I like to control all of the details, and a restaurant is the perfect environment for a dictator. Everything from the music to the wine list to the straws used for cold drinks is a decision that I, along with Armando, am involved in. Running a restaurant is an ideal job because it requires creativity, organization, adrenaline-laced multi-tasking and problem solving—and you encounter and entertain incredible people night after night.

**RTR: WHAT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT INGREDIENT IN YOUR RESTAURANTS?**

**CP:** Our people. The people who work for us make us better restaurateurs and better people. We couldn't do it without our amazing team.



### The Recipe for a Restaurant

The Palacios family, who helms Lulu's and Mandito's in Round Top and Armando's in Houston, never intended to operate two restaurants in Round Top.

"On many occasions, Armando and I discussed opening a restaurant in the old Stone Cellar because the building is just so exceptional, but we'd never talked about the possibility of opening two restaurants—especially at one time," Cinda said.

In late 2017, they were finalizing a deal with Bobby and Ann Rausch, owners of Bybee Square, to open what became Lulu's. Then their phone rang. The owner of the building that previously housed Los Patrones called to tell the restaurant-savvy couple the building would soon be available and to ask if they were interested in the location.

"Armando said, 'We can't not do it,'" Cinda recalled. "For two days I considered the challenges and logistics of opening and running two restaurants in a town with a population of 90. Recognizing that every staff person at our landmark Houston restaurant was trained to perform at least two jobs led to a lightning bolt realization."

She continued, "We could share management, systems and staff between the locations, allowing us to take advantage

of economies of scale and distribute the operational costs."

With that business model in mind, the family team, which also includes their daughter Alexandra Palacios Donnelly, set out to open two restaurants in time for the spring 2018 Round Top Antiques Show. Under the banner of Mandito's, the restaurateurs reimagined their signature, fresh Tex-Mex, and at Lulu's they challenged the chef to create a menu of artisanal Italian comfort food as inspired as the setting.

"Armando has 40 years of restaurant experience, and I've worked alongside him in the business for the past 25 years," Cinda said. "Even with our combined experience, bringing two restaurants online simultaneously bordered on overwhelming." In a blur of construction and decision-making, they achieved their goal. To provide the impeccable service that is their hallmark, the couple brought in staff from Houston and rented three houses in the area so they wouldn't have to commute.

"I'm a fierce competitor who relentlessly manages the nickels and dimes, but I'm generous with our staff," Cinda said. "I believe the combination is what keeps our businesses growing year after year at a rate that outpaces the market."



### TASTEFUL ITALIAN COMFORT

Lulu's roots are planted in southern Italy and culinary creativity.

"At Lulu's we gave our chef a chance to shine—and he has," Cinda said. "Our guests, many of whom have traveled extensively, tell us Lulu's is home to the best Italian food they've eaten on this continent."

According to Cinda, the food is simple, but chef-driven with complex flavor profiles and a beautifully clean presentation.

"Lulu's, like all of our restaurants, offers highly refined comfort foods," Cinda said. "Our goal is to offer an array of food that invites our guests to eat with us three or four times a week."

All food is house-made fresh daily. The dinner menu includes a chef's selection of charcuterie, hand-tossed pizzas, salads ranging from a grilled hearts of romaine to a grilled octopus with braised fennel and heirloom tomatoes, pastas such as classic carbonara and Pomodoro with a giant meatball, entrees showcasing a rack of lamb with a guajillo pepper and cabernet reduction, and grilled salmon with heirloom cauliflower and blistered grapes.

As the Palacios family planned Lulu's, they developed a noteworthy wine list and a complete bar service to round out the dining experience heightened by the building's ambiance and the staff's attentive service.

"When our guests walk out the door, we want them to say, 'The service was impeccable; the food was deliciously memorable and the ambiance was unlike any we've ever experienced,'" Cinda said. "If we get those three things right, then they'll want to return time and again." ★



# OAK HILL RANCH A PALETTE OF CREATIVE RESTORATION

by Lorie A. Woodward

photos by Rachel Alphonso-Smith, Shutterbunny Photography

Bob and Marilyn McDowell of Houston were looking for a 100-acre weekend getaway when they found Oak Hill Ranch near Round Top. The 1,000-acre working ranch has been their palette for creative restoration since 2008.

“Our youngest child, Katie, had just left to attend the University of Texas, so we were looking for a project to fill the extra time that comes when your nest empties,” said Bob, who is president and owner of W. M. Dewey & Son, Texas’ oldest oilfield trucking company.

Their search had taken them to smaller acreage properties in Washington and Fayette counties. Just like Goldilocks, they had found one that was “just right” and had put an offer together. And just like Goldilocks, the deal didn’t quite work out, so the McDowells were still in the market when they got a fateful phone call.

“My best friend Johnny Walker, who has a place over in Fayetteville, called to tell us Oak Hill Ranch was on the market,” Bob said. “He encouraged us to come take a look even though it was bigger than what we were looking for.”

Walker, who also owns a trucking company in Houston, grew up in the cattle business, so he

knew there was potential for something special at Oak Hill Ranch. Dr. Michael DeBakey and his family were selling the property they had operated as Thousand Oaks Ranch, raising registered Brangus cattle and Paso Fino horses for 25 years.

Marilyn said, “Initially, I didn’t go look at it. If I fell in love with it and we didn’t get it, I knew I’d be disappointed.”

When Bob and his son, Austin, arrived at Oak Hill Ranch, they found a piece of land with its well-worn work clothes on. Yaupon, cedar and mesquite had encroached. Improved grasses had been grazed to the ground. Weeds were proliferating. Fences were in disrepair as were the barns and houses. Time and the elements had taken their toll.

But in the middle of the property, they encountered *the hill*, one of the highest points in Fayette County, topped with majestic heritage oaks that gave the ranch its name. The view makes an impression that is hard to ignore. The initial visit prompted more visits with Marilyn in tow.

The property was being sold through a closed auction, and the family decided to put in a bid

using a strategy Marilyn, who is a recently retired ASID Interior Designer, perfected at antiques auctions.

“When you go to an antiques auction and see something special that everyone knows its worth, you have to bump up your bid just a bit to take it home,” Marilyn said.

They submitted their bid package assuming they would not win. When the phone rang with the news that the McDowells were ranch owners, it was a celebratory moment. They closed Oct. 3, 2008, which just happened to be Marilyn’s birthday. After the closing, the McDowells went to Scotty & Friends in Round Top. The restaurant, now closed, was the only nearby place to have a drink.

“We raised a toast that sounded an awful lot like, ‘What in the crap have we done?’” Bob said, noting the stock market had crashed just days before and the shock waves were rolling across the country.

In that moment the novice landowners came face to face with the enormity of the project they had undertaken. Bob is a lifelong Houstonian. Born in Texas, Marilyn is a “military brat” who lived around the world. She returned to Texas as quickly as she could and hopscotched through its major cities before landing in Houston in the late ‘70s. The couple met while working at an insurance company and married in 1978. In 1979, Bob joined his family’s oilfield trucking business. While they had a lot of business expertise, neither of them had any hands-on experience with land, agriculture or long-term country living.

“We didn’t know much about the technical aspects of what we’d gotten into,” Marilyn said. “But we shared a passion for improving things and conserving history. The ranch, as it turned out, was a place where we could put our twin passions into action.”

Early in their marriage, which marked 40 years last April, the McDowells divided their domestic chores into outdoors and indoors.

“When we got married I told Bob, ‘If you’ll mow the grass, I’ll clean the toilets,’” Marilyn said.

Although their life has changed, the division of labor hasn’t.

“Neither one of us mows the grass or cleans the toilets now, but Marilyn is still in charge of the home projects and I’m in charge of the land projects,” Bob said. “On the ranch the scale is just bigger.”

## THE GREAT CEDAR WAR

Initially, the couple planned to continue leasing the ranch to a local cattleman for grazing while they began addressing the effects of the deferred maintenance by replacing fences, stabilizing outbuildings, repairing roads, digging additional stock tanks and other similar projects.

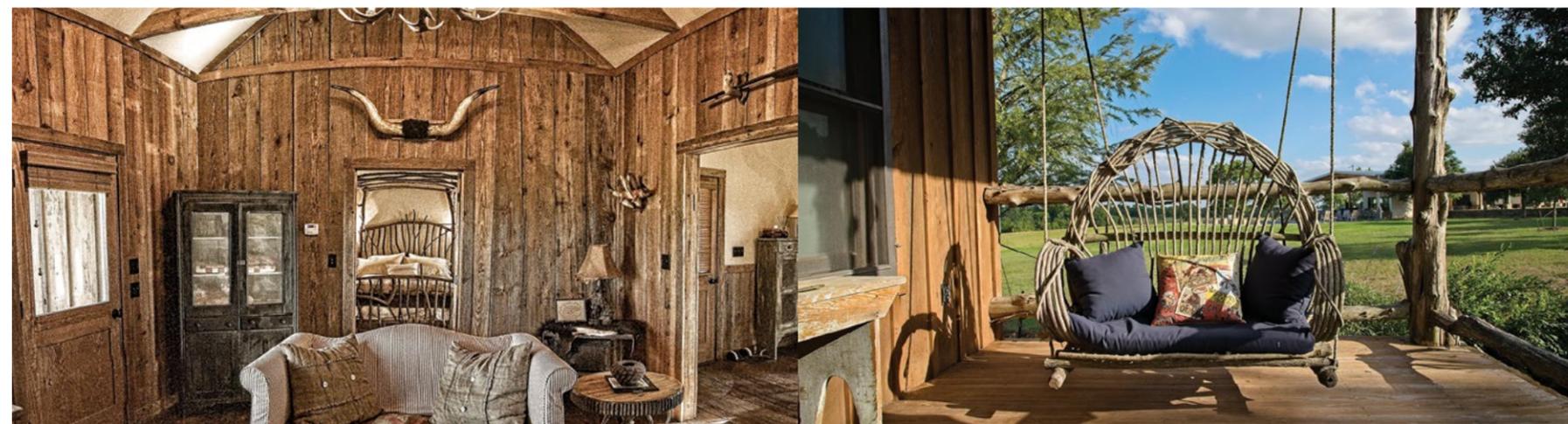
“In the design business I learned that, if you give a project time, houses will ‘speak’ to you and let you know what needs to be done,” Marilyn said. “I suspected land would be the same way, so we were in no hurry to make drastic changes other than clean it up. We didn’t know much about land, but we were eager to learn.”

Bob concurred, “We planned to take a backseat when it came to the land management and enjoy the property as a traditional weekend getaway.”

Two things changed that plan.

The first was the drought that descended on Texas beginning in 2009 and reached a scorching peak in 2011. Constant grazing was taking an obvious toll on the landscape, so the annual grazing lease wasn’t renewed when it expired. The second was a complimentary membership to the Texas Wildlife Association that came as a thank you gift from Capital Farm Credit as part of the land loan package.

“I began reading and learning about land management and land stewardship,” Bob said. “I became aware of the benefits of native



vegetation, especially grasses, in the ecosystem—and was inspired to restore Oak Hill back to native prairie.”

Marilyn said, “It was the beginning of ‘The Great Cedar War.’ If you want to make Bob happy give him a pair of clippers and let him go.”

(Side note: Bob has completed 47 marathons around the world. He is not good at sitting still.)

And while Bob, who has retired his chainsaw, did—and does—tackle some brush stands with clippers and loppers, he, working with his loan officer, Tim Knesek, identified and established a network of land professionals. They included representatives from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and the Lower Colorado River Authority as well as locals such as Larry Pineda and his sons, Junior and Christian. Together they put together a plan designed to prompt change across the landscape.

“My top goals are to re-establish native grasses, such as Texas blue stem, across the ranch and to get more moisture into the soil,” Bob said. “Additional moisture not only helps the plant community but helps replenish groundwater and can help with surface water supplies.”

One of the restoration plan’s cornerstones was brush management with an emphasis on cedar, which is known for its propensity to absorb water and shade out the plants beneath its dense canopy, as well as mesquite and yaupon. The team used primarily mechanical control with an eye on ecological balance.

“We selectively removed brush to increase open areas and allow the grasses to re-establish themselves,” Bob said. “With that said,

wildlife needs the cover and food that brush species provide, so we didn’t remove it all. We struck a balance.”

After the drought broke and the land had rested for about two years, the McDowells bought their neighbors John and Frances Pittman’s cattle when the couple dispersed their herd. The 11 head formed the foundation of the commercial cow-calf operation that now numbers more than 100 cows that they manage with the help of their nephew David Sorsby, who owns Sorsby Cattle Services in Independence.

The family uses a rotational grazing system, which allows parts of the ranch to rest and recover after they’ve been grazed. It mimics the patterns of use and rest that existed when the bison and other vast herds roamed the prairies.

“I never imagined we’d have a commercial cattle operation,” Bob said. “My goal is to build it to a point where it can help defer the operational costs of ownership.”

The pragmatic businessman doesn’t see himself trading in his desk in Houston for a full-time life in the saddle any time in the near future.

“With the prices of land in this area and the cost of production, it’s almost impossible to run cattle without another job,” Bob said.

## MAKING A HOUSE (OR SEVERAL) A HOMESTEAD

Oak Hill Ranch’s history stretches back to the 1840s when it was settled by Louis and Caroline Heller from Alsace-Lorraine. On topographic maps the ranch’s prominent hill is labeled Heller Hill. Heller descendants owned the property until the 1960s, when it

sold outside the family for the first time. In 1972, the new owner sold to the DeBakeys, who retained ownership until 2008. The McDowells were fortunate to connect with Elva Meiners Keilers, a descendant of the original owners, who provided them Heller family photos and history.

“Early Texas history runs deep in this area,” Marilyn said. “The ranch has been part of that history that deserves to be preserved not just for our family but for Texas.”

When it came to the buildings clustered atop the hill that formed the ranch’s nucleus and provided an informal architectural history, the news was good and bad.

The good? Despite generations of owners, the buildings hadn’t been razed.

The bad? Between deferred maintenance and benign neglect, they were on the brink of collapse. The collection included the original Heller farmhouse built in 1851, two sharecroppers’ shacks, and a hay barn and an equipment shed.

“Although Bob loves history as much as I do, his first impression of the buildings was that they needed to be torn down,” Marilyn said. “I told him, ‘You know we can’t do that.’”

None of the buildings were livable, so the first order of business was constructing a place to stay. Their contractor, Ryan Reichardt of Cat Spring, suggested a barndominium because it could be built in about four months.

“We planned to live in the barndominium until we built a luxuriously elegant dream house, but it turns out that the barndo suited us and our life out here,” Marilyn said.

They recently expanded the “upscale western” barndo. Marilyn used “an impactful monochromatic palette” to include a new dining room and a covered outdoor kitchen and living space to allow family and friends to enjoy the new pool. The new addition also includes a greenhouse for Bob alongside the raised gardens.

“Because Marilyn grew up constantly moving, it’s hard to keep her in the same house for very long,” Bob said, laughing and noting that they’ve now lived in their Houston house for 21 years. “This project, with all its buildings, let her showcase her talents without us moving.”

The couple stabilized the old buildings, so they could be restored and/or repurposed as needs dictated and time and budget allowed. Marilyn, who eschews cookie cutter design, listened to each space and created a unique atmosphere within. The constant is a respect for history that includes tucking the modern conveniences away so they couldn’t be seen.

First, Marilyn turned her attention to the sharecropper house near the barndominium and converted it to a guest cottage now known as the Wood Cabin. With its preponderance of natural elements, such as deer antler cabinet pulls and bark-edged cabinet tops, it was their contractor’s favorite. A native garden welcomes guests and serves as the natural setting for an antique plow found on the property.

Then when their son, Austin, announced that he and his fiancée, Brittany, wanted to get married on the property, Marilyn converted the equipment shed into another cottage, now known as the Tin Shack, to serve as the gathering space for the bride and her



wedding party. At Bob's suggestion they transformed the old hay barn into an event hall.

"I saw Westminster Abbey during the most recent Royal Wedding—it was long, narrow and tall," Bob said. "They had lined the aisle with trees. I thought, 'We can do the same thing in the hay barn.'"

The Heller House, the first house constructed on the property, was the last up for restoration.

"It was in such bad shape," Marilyn recalled. "On my first visit to the property, I rounded the corner, and as I approached the house, I heard its silent voice call out to be saved. I couldn't ignore it."

The three-year labor of love was undergirded by a desire for historic accuracy. For instance, the interior stack stone walls were rethought using the techniques of expert restorers. The end result captures all of the warmth and charm of the early farmhouses that dot the region. An architectural technicality that the

family hopes to address is the only thing standing between it and the Texas Register of Historic Places.

"When I stand in the Heller House and consider what we did, I think Mary—the last Heller to live and pass on the property—would be proud of what we've done," Marilyn said.

And rightfully so. Channeling their passion for conservation, preservation and restoration, the McDowells have opened another chapter in the ranch's history featuring their family.

"I hope this will be a place our children will want to maintain as part of their lives, but who knows what the future holds?" Bob said. "Our legacy will be making memories."

Marilyn concluded, "We're blessed to be stewards of this property and have the responsibility of taking care of it for a while, so it can be passed along to the generations who come next." ★



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## MEMORABLE KITCHEN DÉCOR

### On the Porch

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS  
BY ANITA JOYCE  
[cedarhillfarmhouse.com](http://cedarhillfarmhouse.com)



Anita Joyce has a city house in Houston, a country house near Shelby and a flair for French style. The former engineer is a

wife and mother as well as a self-taught photographer, interior designer, blogger and online entrepreneur who founded [cedarhillfarmhouse.com](http://cedarhillfarmhouse.com) in 2011. Today that site alone has 80,000 unique visitors per month.



It's odd what our brains selectively remember about our childhoods. I remember glass liquor decanters in the kitchen filled with blue and yellow-tinted water. Blue and yellow were the decorative colors my mother chose to use in her kitchen. The liquor decanter display was ironic; my mother detested drinking of any kind, hence the colored water. Apparently, liquor decanters were okay, as long as they didn't have alcohol in them.

I remember ducks too, lots of ducks . . . duck tureens, a duck napkin holder, duck figurines and even a duck-covered butter dish. They all wore little blue or yellow ribbons around their necks. Perhaps somewhere in Asia it was the year of the duck. I wasn't sure then or now.

I remember the ugly kitchen table my dad bought without permission. That was a "fun" dinner! The pleather chairs with metal legs were comfortable and they swiveled, but otherwise, the dining set was a hot mess.

I remember learning to cook in that kitchen. There was the cake I made with twice the necessary amount of Crisco® because I had misread the recipe. An even more memorable evening was the time my frying pan caught fire. My dad (who could fix anything) put out the fire before there was any real damage. Perhaps that made up for his kitchen table *faux pas*, but I doubt it.

I remember my brother's cool kitchen trick. He would open the refrigerator door then throw the lettuce up in the air in front of the refrigerator. As the lettuce began to fall, and it became even with an interior refrigerator shelf, he would slam the door closed knocking the head of lettuce onto the shelf of the refrigerator while closing the door. I found the trick hilarious, but my mother was not amused. She apparently was not a fan of bruised lettuce.

He also thought it was funny to put the lettuce core in my mom's salad. She took her salad very seriously, so this was an even bigger offense. Come to think of

it, she probably didn't know about the refrigerator door trick, so now I'm just making up things.

On the plus side, the kitchen faced a bucolic pasture. From our table we often watched dairy cattle slowly grazing. These were the years we lived in Hershey, Pennsylvania (and yes, it smelled like chocolate when the wind was just right).

My mom made a forward-thinking decision to buy white dishes. She said they would go with anything. I didn't like them because I thought they were boring, and the bowls were shaped like dog bowls.

Our drinking glasses were an assortment of free ones given away for loyalty to our local service station. Not only did we buy gas there, but my dad worked for the oil company. I'm not sure if he was authorized to bring them home, but I didn't ask. I liked the curved blue ones until they became etched by the dishwasher.

My brother and I listened to many a song blaring from the radio as we washed dishes every evening. I swayed to the likes of "Sister Golden Hair Surprise," "I'm Not in Love," "You Sexy Thing," and "Bohemian Rhapsody" all while swinging my Cher-like hair and wearing my favorite bell bottoms or cut-off jeans.

I spent so much of my life in that kitchen, and even now I can visualize the questionable table and chairs, the yellow appliances and the yellow countertop.

Things have changed a bit. Now my daughter dances in the kitchen in her cut-off shorts listening to her iPhone.

And it shouldn't come as a surprise that my kitchen is different than the one I grew up in. I've made peace with white dishes, and I actually use them extensively in my current kitchen. They're not boring but quietly elegant, which means they work well with other dishes that are patterned. Our kitchen chairs are neither pleather nor metal, but antique and French. ★



### Tips for a Beautifully Elegant Kitchen

My approach is to treat the kitchen as much like another room in the house as possible. I like to add beauty and elegance to my home wherever I can.

**Light it up.** In the kitchen you can add a lovely lamp to your island or countertop. On the countertop you'll need to make sure it is short enough to fit under any cabinets. I used two crystal chandeliers above my kitchen island.

**Hide it away.** To make your kitchen look more elegant, put away your infrequently used appliances. Can openers and mixers that aren't used every day don't have to sit out on the

counter. Because we didn't use our electric can opener often, we switched to a small, manual one. I also replaced my space-hogging blender for an immersion blender that fits in a drawer. It takes up a lot less space, can be cleaned more easily and works for almost everything. I moved the coffee maker, the toaster and mixer to the pantry where we had a granite shelf installed. The shelf works beautifully for the toaster and coffee maker, and I set the mixer out when I need to use it.

**Display it proudly.** You can also display artwork in your kitchen. I also

try to keep fresh flowers from my garden (or the grocery store) on my island. It's a nice touch and makes every day better.

**Sit it down.** If you have room, put a pretty chair in the kitchen. It provides a comfortable place for guests or a family member to sit and chat while you're cooking.

**Spread it out.** I opted for a large kitchen, so there is room for everyone. We love making dinner as a family on the weekends. I still love to dance while I cook and look at the cows, but now I'm doing it with my daughter.



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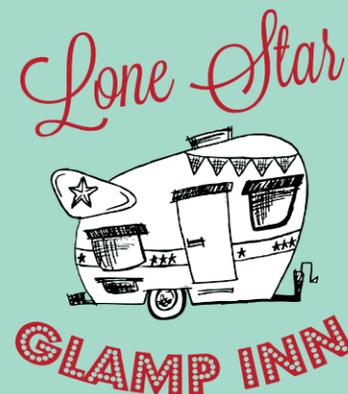
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## Rambling Boy

BY LONN TAYLOR

Lonny Taylor is a historian who lives in Fort Davis, Texas and writes columns about Texas history for the Marfa Big Bend Sentinel. For 20 years, Taylor served as a historian at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History in Washington, DC. He lived in Round Top from 1970 to 1977 when he was director of the University of Texas at Austin's Winedale Historical Center.

This piece was originally published in the Marfa Big Bend Sentinel on Nov. 16, 2017.

## TEXAS PECANS



November in Texas is the month for pecans.

When I was a boy, my father would always order a big sack of pecans in the shell around the first week in November and spend his evenings shelling them in order to have pecans for the Christmas pralines he made each year (the only time I ever saw him in the kitchen). He loved gadgets, and over the years he accumulated a large collection of pecan crackers, some of them formidable machines with levers and sliding, weighted parts that could pulverize a nut, or your finger if you were careless.

The talent of his that I admired most was his ability to crack two pecans together in his fist and then peel the shells off each to provide the perfect mid-morning snack. I learned to do that, and the year that we lived in Virginia my 10-year-old boy's pockets were full of pecans in November. They were my certification that I was still a Texan, even though living in the East.

The pecan, *Carya illinoensis*, is a tree that is native only to North America and is especially prolific in northern Mexico and the southeastern and south-central regions of the United States. The Spanish explorers of Mexico, Texas and Louisiana called them "nueces de la arruga," wrinkle nuts, and took them to Spain and to their colonies in Asia and Africa.



They were not grown commercially in the United States until the 1880s. Today most of the U.S. crop is produced in Georgia, New Mexico and Texas. Mexico is the other major pecan grower, and together the two countries produce 93 percent of the world's crop.

If you want to see a really big pecan, there is one on the town square of Seguin that is five feet long and weighs 1,000 pounds. It is made out of cement and was created in 1962 by some local pecan growers.

I had a brush with the commercial pecan business in the late 1960s when I married a woman who had inherited a large pecan orchard south of San Antonio in the Medina Valley Irrigation District, a network of canals radiating from Medina Lake. Her grandfather had planted the trees, 500 acres of them, in the 1920s after making a good deal of money in the Tampico oil boom.

His plan was to subdivide his land into 40-acre orchards and sell them to former associates from Tampico, which he did, but then the Depression came along. Most of the purchasers went bankrupt and could not pay for the land they had bought, which he had financed, so he ended up with most of the trees back, much to his displeasure because he did not want to be in the pecan business.

When my wife and I married, we had a romantic idea of restoring the orchards and



becoming commercial pecan growers, sitting on the porch of the ranch house listening to the windmill creaking, effortlessly raking in the dollars. We joined the Texas Pecan Growers Association, bought an orchard tractor, and had a series of conversations with an exceptionally nice man named Blueford Hancock, who was the pecan specialist for the Texas Agricultural Extension Service.

Unforeseen obstacles appeared. The trees had been neglected for years and had more diseases than we could possibly have imagined. We needed more capital equipment than we could afford, including a sprayer, a mechanical tree-shaker and a flatbed trailer. We both had jobs in Austin, and the work required on the trees was more than could be done on weekends.

My wife's grandfather had been fascinated with experimental horticulture and had planted varieties of trees that no one had heard of in 50 years and whose nuts were unsellable because they would not fit in modern pecan shelling machinery (when the trees were planted, pecans were shelled by hand; in 1930 16,000 people, mostly Mexican immigrants, were employed in San Antonio shelling pecans with hammers and iron picks).

It turned out that we had a veritable pecan museum. Blueford Hancock loved to visit our orchard because we had varieties of nuts he had only read about: Texas Prolific, Squirrel's Delight, Moneymaker, Mahan, John Garner, Success. My favorite was a pecan about the size of the top of your thumb called Nugget; it had the sweetest meat I had ever tasted. If we could have figured out a way to shell them mechanically, we could have made a fortune selling them to candy companies.

In the long run we gave up on our restoration project and sold the pecans on the trees to a man in San Antonio named Bagley, who had the only 1930 Model AA Ford half-ton truck I have ever seen in use. Mr. Bagley brought a crew down from San Antonio who moved into the bunkhouse and spent a couple of weeks shaking the pecans off the trees with a mechanical shaker built

onto the chassis of an old pickup truck, a device like a giant pair of pliers padded with inner tubes that gripped each tree around the trunk and vibrated it until pecans rained down into a canvas tent spread under it. At the end of the two weeks, we were given a check for about a fifth of the amount that we estimated we would have received if we had been able to harvest the nuts ourselves.

The only substantial things that came out of our pecan venture were a short story, never published, in which the principal character, a taciturn country man called T. P., is revealed to actually be named Texas Prolific, and a trip to Boston to sell pecans out of the bed of a pickup on Harvard Square. My wife had done her undergraduate work at Radcliffe, where she had been known to some of her fellow students as the Pecan Queen of Texas, and she was anxious to revisit her alma mater.

We decided to finance the trip by selling one-pound bags of our own pecans in the shell. We arrived in Boston on a Saturday morning, drove straight to Harvard Square and set up shop. You can imagine my wife's surprise and delight when one of her former classics professors, Sterling Dow, walked by and said, "If it isn't the Pecan Queen of Texas."

He graciously invited us to his house on Brattle Street that afternoon for tea. It was a cold, wet fall afternoon, and when we got there he offered me my choice of tea or whiskey, which he referred to as "cowboy juice." That afternoon in front of Sterling Dow's fireplace made the whole trip worthwhile. ★





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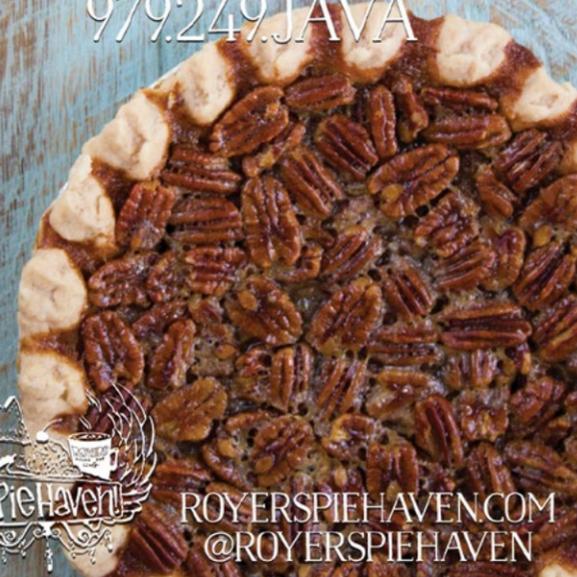
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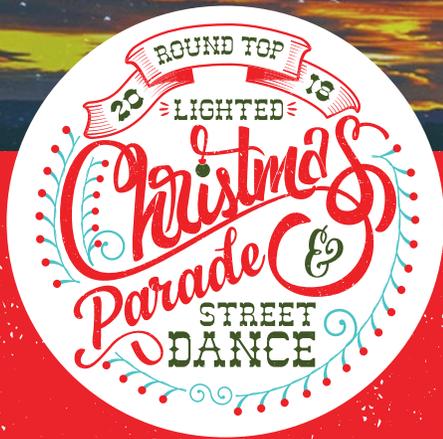
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