

# Taste

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BILL ALBRECHT/Juniper Hills Farm

Cedars surround Juniper Hills Farm, which attracts foodies from Austin, San Antonio and Dallas.

# Hill Country Retreat

Sibby Barrett, owner of Dallas Affaires, has cooked up a new gig

By JOYCE SAENZ HARRIS  
Staff Writer

BLANCO, Texas — Travis “Sibby” Barrett’s heart has found a new home in the hills near Dripping Springs. The founder of Dallas Affaires Cake Co., a fifth-generation Texan born in Fort Worth and reared in Dallas, is 49 and has spent almost her entire life in her native state.

It was a sojourn in Mexico, however, that set Sibby on her career path. Today, that road finds her operating Onion Creek Kitchens at Juniper Hills Farm, a popular cooking school and country retreat attracting visitors from all over Texas.

When she moved her principal residence to the Hill Country in

2001, “Everyone asked: Are you going to open a bakery?” Sibby recalls. It seemed like the logical thing, since she was leaving the day-to-day running of Dallas Affaires in the flour-dusted hands of her trusted staff.

But she’d already done the sugar-and-spice thing. Now, Sibby Barrett was ready for

something different. She yearned to explore the savory side of cooking, rather than baking sweets full time.

“I made a pro-and-con list,” she says, “and it kind of found me.”

Sibby liked entertaining, and she loved having a group of people in the kitchen with her. Once she realized that, a cooking school seemed like the next step.

“I’m a big believer in not over-thinking things,” Sibby says. “I just like to do what feels right.”

## Class time

Sibby’s a down-to-earth teacher whose low-key style doesn’t intimidate inexperienced cooks. The atmosphere in her



Photos by ERICH SCHLEGEL/Staff Photographer

Sibby Barrett (center) talks to Cindy Montgomery while Mia Kinzer (left) and Deborah Sharp pipe decorations onto a chocolate cake.



Sibby carves a stuffed beef tenderloin prepared during a class at Onion Creek Kitchens.

Pastry vines and leaves decorate the top of Sibby’s stuffed beef tenderloin (far left).

kitchen is informal and relaxed, and there’s always a happy buzz of contentment over the tasting plates. Her food has a trattoria sensibility: fresh, seasonal, nicely presented, but not overly precious or needlessly complicated.

Onion Creek Kitchens has a Web site ([www.juniperhillsfarm.com](http://www.juniperhillsfarm.com)) where Sibby schedules hands-on cooking classes, specialty tastings and kitchen-demo “dinner parties” year-round. Among her scheduled offerings for the rest of 2006 are classes and meals featuring chiles rellenos and margaritas; wine and cheese pairings; an overview of olives and olive oils; “Scones 101;” a classic bistro dish, steak frites; “Three Easy Fishes;” and panini, the popular Italian hot sandwiches.

She makes sure to include sessions on her own favorites, “things I like to cook: enchiladas, cooked salsas, jams, canning tomatoes,” as well as the pies, breads and cakes she still loves to bake. Daily class fees range from \$35 to \$75, with a special “spectator” rate of \$25 for students’ companions.

Many of her students drive in from Austin or San Antonio (each about 45 minutes away) for day classes at Onion Creek Kitchens. But others, especially those who make the four-hour trip from Dallas, often stay overnight and rent one of several guest *casitas* and studios that Sibby has built near Juniper Hill’s Italian villa-style main house.

Rental rates are \$125 for a *casita* and \$105 for a smaller studio space. There’s no breakfast served per se, but each *casita* has a kitchenette with a well-stocked fridge and fresh fruit bowl. And there’s a bonus: Guests find that a school lunchbox magically appears on the porch each morning packed with warm muffins and scones baked by the hostess.

## Road trip

Once a month Sibby schedules a daylong field trip called “Random Acts of Cooking” (\$150). She gathers a dozen Onion Creek students into three SUVs, sets off in a wagon train and makes the rounds of Hays and Blanco counties, with stops at some of her favorite foodie places.

Those include the Arnosky

Family Farm Market ([texascolor.com](http://texascolor.com)), just down Ranch-to-Market Road 165 from her own home; Kiss the Cook, a culinary shop on the square in Wimberley ([kissthecooktx.com](http://kissthecooktx.com)); and Buena Vista Ranch, a producing olive grove for First Texas Olive Oil Co., the state’s only commercial olive-oil press ([bvranch.com](http://bvranch.com)).

Such a day out typically features a picnic lunch of chicken- or lobster-salad wraps, perhaps held under a shade tree at Buena Vista; liberal wine-sampling at Texas Hills Vineyard ([texashillsvineyard.com](http://texashillsvineyard.com)) or another of the local wineries; and an afternoon stop at the McCall Creek Farms store near Blanco ([mccallcreekfarms.com](http://mccallcreekfarms.com)), for chocolate-covered Texas pecans or home-cracked ice cream dotted with fresh strawberries.

Whatever she buys is brought home in coolers so that, back home at the end of the afternoon, Sibby can cook for her guests. She puts together a four-course menu mostly from fresh local ingredients and, weather permitting, dinner is served outdoors at twilight under the pergola. It’s so idyllic that, except for the occasional coyote howl, you’d swear you were in Tuscan.

## A roving family

Sibby was 11 when her dad, the noted sci-fi and fantasy writer Neal Barrett Jr. (*The Hereafter Gang* and *Through Darkest America*) decided to leave Dallas and move his family south of the border, to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, for a couple of years.

It was baptism by immersion: Sibby’s parents sent her to a Spanish-speaking Catholic school instead of the local English-speaking American school. So she had to learn Spanish and adapt quickly to her new home. She also learned to love Mexican cooking that wasn’t Tex-Mex.

“Being there really got me interested in food,” Sibby says. “Because, just like in Italy, food in Mexico is such a big part of the culture.”

“Looking back, it was a really valuable, life-changing experience for me. It gave me a view that

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there are a lot of other things going on in the world.”

After returning to Dallas as a young teenager, Sibby graduated from North Dallas High School in 1974. Starting in college, she worked as a florist for 15 years before opening Dallas Affaires in 1986, first as a caterer and party planner. She did the flower arranging and cake-baking for her clients while working from home.

“After six years, though,” Sibby says, “I had to drop the catering, because the cakes took off like gangbusters. ... I was decorating cakes with fresh flowers years before Martha got famous for it.

“I was literally in the right place at the right time.” When the business got too big for her house, the bakery moved into the snug, unpretentious shop that Dallas Affaires still occupies on Abrams Road in Lakewood.

### Icing on the cake

Sibby’s delicious, intricately decorated, made-from-scratch cakes became a staple at Dallas’ society weddings and birthday parties. But “after 15 years, I was getting tired,” she says.

Wanting something new, she opened Café Georgia next door to the bakery. It became a popular local spot, but after two years she closed the cafe.

“Nothing will wear you out quicker than the restaurant business,” Sibby says. “It’s *really* hard.”

She’d begun planning a second home in the Hill Country and bought a hilltop parcel in 1997, before land prices soared out of sight. “Fifty-four acres of solid cedar,” Sibby recalls, wincing at the memory of countless grubby weekends spent clearing brush for Juniper Hills Farm. “It started out to be a weekend place. But eventually I knew I’d want to stay here.”

She still owns Dallas Affaires, talks to her staff every day by phone and spends one week out of each month in Dallas. “Being down here has allowed me to be a better owner,” Sibby says. “I’m enjoying it more because I’m not consumed with it.”



Guests toast over a dinner using local ingredients, prepared by Sibby Barrett.

ERICH SCHLEGEL/Staff Photographer

### DigitalEXTRA

Log on for another recipe from Sibby Barrett or to register for classes.

[DallasNews.com/extra](http://DallasNews.com/extra)

She’s settled comfortably into her Hill Country life and loves contributing to the local community. “I know more neighbors here than I ever did in Dallas,” Sibby says.

Soon she’s going to build a bigger teaching kitchen, to allow her students to do more hands-on food preparation. And she’s planning to travel to Italy later this year to celebrate her 50th birthday.

Life is truly good. But that’s because “you can’t help but be successful when you’re doing something you really, really love to do,” Sibby says. “You don’t know how smart you can be till you get out of your own way.”

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### SIBBY BARRETT’S BEST KITCHEN ADVICE

“One thing I like to tell students is to try to learn a method or a formula for making something they like, master it, then be brave and experiment to change it up with different flavors. I think it helps to make them be more fearless cooks, and to enjoy the process of cooking and creating. To understand how something comes together, what makes it work, texturewise, flavorwise — then change it to suit your palate.

This works with things as simple as salsas and pestos to making cutlets or tarts. Learn what the dish needs — sweet, savory, crunchy, creamy — learn how it works, then make substitutions.

Another thing I find myself telling students all the time is how to make one thing and use it for several uses. Like learning the formula for vinaigrette, then using it for a salad, or a marinade for olives or vegetables, or basting a pork roast.

And last, I preach what I hear all good chefs preach: Try to plan your meals based on what is in season. Cook what is fresh, try to cook what is local, keep it simple, and the food will speak for itself.”

### THE BAKERY

Dallas Affaires is at 2307 Abrams Road in Dallas; 214-826-9409.

### SIBBY BARRETT’S CHOCOLATE-CHIP MACAROONS

- 1½ cups sugar
- 5 cups shredded coconut
- 4 egg whites
- 1 cup semisweet chocolate chips
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- A couple of pinches of salt

Preheat oven to 350 F. Line a sheet pan with parchment paper.

Mix together sugar, coconut, egg whites, chocolate chips, vanilla and salt. Combine thoroughly. Form tablespoon-size mounds on cookie sheet, spacing about 1 inch apart.

Bake for 15 to 20 minutes, turning pan halfway through cooking time. Cool for a few minutes on cookie sheets, then move to wire rack. Makes about 30 cookies. Stores for about a week in an airtight container. Can also be tightly wrapped and frozen successfully.