

Up Close and Personal

Story by Jessica Dupuy



The view from the patio of the main house at Juniper Hills Farm is idyllic. Guests of this culinary-adventure venue not only try their hands at cooking ambitious meals, but also get a chance to relax in the comfort of the Hill Country. (Photography by Kirk Tuck)

These days the conventional way to have dinner with family or friends looks something like this: Hop in the car after a long day at work, fight the hurry-up-and-wait traffic on MoPac, swing into a store or food chain to grab something pre-made, and arrive home in a huff to get the evening's winnings on the table without having to mess with reheating the meal in the microwave.

This is assuming, of course, that if you're having company, your home is already presentable. If not, you'll be dialing a couple of swanky restaurants to see if they're taking reservations and hoping the place won't be filled with an unruly crowd that impedes social conversation. Hardly the image of the days when Donna Reed made everything look so simple. Fortunately, there are a few ways to attain quality time with friends and family. And without everyone and their uncle seated in the room trying to do the same thing.

On a recent Wednesday evening, I drove to the Hill Country for a much-anticipated cooking class at Onion Creek Kitchens at Juniper Hills Farm. Not just any cooking class; a highly sought-

after culinary experience that has received quite a lot of buzz among foodies in recent months.

I pulled onto a gravel road just outside of Blanco on Ranch Road 165 and found my way to a perfectly situated hilltop home. The landscape has the feel of a Tuscan villa, with rustic earthen walls, meandering walkways lined with flowering plants and herbs, and dramatic pencil-thin evergreens.

Before I could even knock, a cheerful woman wearing a white linen blouse and faded blue jeans threw open the oversized antique door, grasping in one hand a well-worn pair of cowboy boots. "Hi, I'm Sibby Barrett," my petite host greeted me. "Come on in."

She guided me into her comfortable living room and offered a seat in a cowhide-covered rocker. We chatted about the farm and how she made the leap to the Hill Country after more than 20 years running a successful cake business in Dallas.

The farm began as a refuge for Barrett and her friends. But her love of cooking and including her guests in the experience soon became a full-time business that now allows her to offer her home to guests from all walks of life. "People really want to create their own experiences around food," she says. "After working together in a kitchen for a couple of hours, they all enjoy sitting together and eating the delicious meal they've created."

Over the next hour, the remaining eight students arrived. We all convened in Barrett's living room, making introductions before she invited us to begin the class. She led us into her kitchen, arranged with sleek lines and modern appliances in an eclectic array of Skittles-like colors. It was a cook's dream: every possible size of mixing and measuring utensils, as well as an entire wall of floor-to-ceiling shelves housing colorful bowls, platters, plates, and serving pieces.

Our cooking theme for the evening: "A Hill Country Picnic." The menu included buttermilk-fried chicken, garden succotash, stuffed portobello mushrooms, strawberry and melon salad with a citrus-yogurt dressing, and tarte tatin. Barrett spread out laminated recipes before us. Her introduction was short and sweet. We would form groups of two or three, pick a recipe, and get to work. We all stared at her blankly for a second, unsure of what to do next. Then suddenly she grabbed the fried chicken recipe and held it out. "Let's go!" she urged.

Mayhem erupted in the room as we assembled in teams, selected recipes, and began scavenging the kitchen for cutting boards, cast-iron skillets, ears of corn, sticks of butter, and glorious buttermilk-marinated chicken legs. Stepping into the dining room for a quick breather, I could hear Barrett wending her way around the kitchen giving tips and encouragement. Later she told me, "I like that the people who come here have zero to a ton of cooking experience. It allows for everyone to come away with a unique shared experience."

I noticed the familiar sounds of clanging pots and pans, and the whisking of ingredients in

mixing bowls as an old Beatles album played softly in the background. And amid all of this, I heard laughter and lighthearted banter flowing among the classmates. It's this feeling of home that Barrett creates with both public cooking classes and the private bookings throughout the year for small parties of 10 to 12 people. Behind the main house are cozy cabins available to rent, ideal for groups of friends and family to enjoy a few days of relaxation and have their own cooking adventures in Barrett's kitchen.

Onion Creek Kitchens at Juniper Hills Farm may be a perfect option for adding a little kick to your culinary repertoire, and it is certainly an alternative to the average dinner party at home.