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 H I G H W A Y S



J. Griffis Smith
 Sandy Yolland of Sisterdale
 pauses during the assembly
 of Garden Tomato Stacks,
 one of several dishes her
 class prepared at Onion
 Creek Kitchens.

By Maxine Mayes

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“TOO MANY COOKS spoil the broth.” That old cliché won’t hold water (or broth) at Juniper Hills Farm, southwest of Austin, where Sibby Barrett conducts hands-on classes for groups of eight to 12 through her gourmet cooking school, Onion Creek Kitchens.

The longtime owner of Dallas Affaires Cake Company, a specialty bakery that caters to upscale clients in the Dallas metro area, Sibby bought 54 cedar-covered acres between Blanco and Dripping Springs in 1997 and named the site Juniper Hills Farm. Over the next four years, she built a “rustic-elegant” Tuscan-style home, complete with a state-of-the-art kitchen befitting her culinary background.

The home was originally supposed to be her weekend/retirement place, but once Sibby tasted the quiet life on her scenic property and the laid-back feel of the Hill Country, she couldn’t go back to Dallas on a permanent basis. So she entrusted the day-to-day bakery operations to her capable manager and moved

to the farm full time. She built several luxurious lodgings (which she calls “cabins”) to rent out for weekend getaways, and after a succession of cooking parties with friends, began offering cooking classes. Her clients? Those who are clueless about the culinary arts, epicures interested in learning more, and everyone in between.

Sibby’s timing was perfect. Thanks, in part, to the many cooking shows on television, “foodies” are a burgeoning segment of our society. The official opening of Onion Creek Kitchens in 2005 brought a deluge of reservations. Now Sibby’s regular classes sell out almost as fast as she posts them, and her custom classes (called Culinary Gatherings) are growing in popularity.

Since I’m not a foodie myself (my nod to gourmet cooking is to toss some pine nuts into a salad), I enlisted seven friends to join me for a custom class. Under Sibby’s supervision, we stirred up a feast that would impress even Emeril.

We began our culinary adventure gathered around Sibby’s large dining table for her preliminary comments about our menu, which I’d chosen from Sibby’s list of dozens of “mix-and-match” appetizers, salads, sides, entrées, and desserts. Then she ushered us into the spacious kitchen, where we donned white chef aprons and got down to

business. As Sibby assigned recipes and segments of recipes, the students took up their first stations.

Nancy Rogers and her sister Sara Kliewer stood before the Cuisinart and began mixing the puff pastry that would swaddle our entrée. At the commercial range, Patt Lopez and Sandy Yolland prepped the beef tenderloin, while June Wallace and Rebecca Harp sautéed spinach for the stuffing. Terry McMorran mixed the ingredients for our appetizer toppings. Soon, the whirring of the food processor, the chopping on the cutting boards, and the sizzle of searing meat created a rhythmic backdrop for the amiable chatter that filled the room.

Throughout the morning, Sibby gravitated between stations, offering hints (which I dubbed “Sibbyisms”), sharing tidbits of information, and demonstrating short-cuts. “Do you know how to open a garlic clove?” she asked at one point. Some murmured yes while others (like me) remained silent. She then placed a clove on a cutting board, laid the broad side of a knife blade across it, and whacked the blade with her fist.

Later she told us that “cilantro” and “coriander” are both names for the same plant (cilantro usually means the leaves of the plant, and coriander usually refers to the spice made from its seeds) and showed us how to scrape the leaves off the cilantro sprigs with a knife. And I was amazed to discover the versatility of the unassuming ice cream scoop. In Sibby’s kitchen, this gadget was used to form a line of spinach-stuffing mounds across a length of pastry, scoop up mashed potatoes onto plates, and ladle chocolate cake batter into ramekins. (Funny, I’d only used it to dip ice cream.)

Midway through the morning, we took an “appetizer break,” grabbing the Potato Crisps with their varied toppings straight off a cutting board. Yummm. Within minutes, nothing remained but crumbs and a few stray pickle bits among smears of cream cheese.

Then it was back to work. “We’re in the Army now,” piped Sibby as she, Patt, Terry, and I stood over a galvanized bucket peeling potatoes. Later, to those who were preparing the Roasted Garlic Mashers, Sibby said, “After you drain potatoes, always set them back on the stove a minute to evaporate the remaining moisture.” About that time, Rebecca and June began whipping up the batter for Chocolate-Spice Molten Cakes. As Sandy and Sara minced shallots for the vinaigrette, which also called for fresh basil, Sibby, as if on cue, waltzed in the back door with a few sprigs of basil snipped from her herb garden outside.

“This dressing is fabulous,” she said, as she listed the ingredients. Our assembly line composed the individual salads, using stacks of toast rounds (sautéed in bacon drippings until brown and crisp), red and yellow tomato slices, basil leaves, and avocado slices sprinkled with bacon and blue cheese crumbles. “Always salt tomatoes before putting them in salads or whatever,” Sibby reminded us. “It brings out the flavor.”

During a break from her supervisory duties, Sibby and I had a few minutes to talk. “I was of the Campbell’s soup/Jell-O generation,” she said, recalling how the bulk of

simple recipes she grew up with contained one of those key ingredients. “I did always seem to make the cakes in our family,” she added, “but I never planned a cooking career. It just evolved.”

While in college anticipating a career in journalism, she began working at a flower shop, a business she later managed for 11 years, while greatly expanding its wedding business. “I was doing fresh flowers on cakes long before Martha Stewart,” she quipped.

Sibby’s kitchen is filled with light from a window-surround above the corner sink and floor-to-ceiling windows across the east wall. Open shelves store a colorful assortment of plates, serving bowls, and collectibles. Cookbooks cover three long shelves on an adjacent wall. Gleaming tiles in primary colors decorate the backsplash around the stove and countertops. Beneath the island, I spotted an old sterling container filled with about 25 measuring spoons, a basket holding a jumble of measuring cups, two big nests of graduated mixing bowls, and a stack of colorful cutting boards, all sizes. A peek into the cool, spacious pantry revealed one of Sibby’s secrets to good cooking: an arsenal of oils, vinegars, and spices.

By the time I’d finished snooping, our entrée was ready. To a chorus of “oohs” and “ahhhs,” our tenderloin, which had been split in half lengthwise, sandwiched with layers of spinach-walnut stuffing, and then encased in puff pastry, emerged from the oven looking like a long, perfectly golden-crust loaf of bread, embellished with rosettes, leaves, and vines fashioned from pastry.

Mingled aromas of roasted garlic, baked bread, and chocolate trailed us from the kitchen as we gathered in the dining area. We took a moment to admire the focal point of the room—225-year-old carved French doors—and to enjoy the tranquil scene beyond, a xeriscape of lantana, lavender, salvia, and other native plants in beds edged with flint rocks and limestone. Then we sat down to devour the results of our hours of labor. As we dined at the candlelit table, we laughed and talked and told stories, savoring our camaraderie along with the food. And we laid to rest the cliché about too many cooks. Our broth—I mean our feast—was scrumptious.

ONION CREEK KITCHENS is based at **Juniper Hills Farm**, southwest of Austin, between Dripping Springs and Blanco, on RR 165, off US 290. Call 830/833-0910; www.juniperhillsfarm.com.

Hands-on classes and other culinary events, including tastings and excursions to area farmers’ markets, wineries, and food-related specialty shops, are usually held on weekends and cost \$65-\$165. *Be sure to sign up early, as most classes and events sell out.*

Culinary Gatherings (custom classes for up to 12 people who choose a special menu) have a minimum fee of \$1,200.

Juniper Hills Farm offers 5 charming, secluded, well-appointed lodgings for overnight stays. Rates range from \$115 to \$140 per night.