

Lessons from Juniper Hills

At Hill Country farm, guests go in search of ingredients for dinner

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Sibby Barrett, center, oversees students and an employee as they prepare at meal during a class at Onion Creek Kitchens at Juniper Hills Farm. At this class, Barrett guides students through a complete meal from shopping to prep to cooking.

In 2004, Sibby Barrett was hosting a combination cooking and dinner party for an extended circle of friends at her newly built Texas-Tuscan style home in the Hill Country when a friend raised his wine glass and made a suggestion. "You should charge for this," he said. The next year, Barrett did just that, creating cooking classes that combine casual, hands-on

instruction in her spacious, custom-made kitchen with a communal feast. Since then, Barrett's peaceful spread in the Blanco River Valley, known as Juniper Hills Farm, has expanded to include a full slate of classes from "Company Dinner" to "Pies, Pies, Pies." And there are cabins with Mexican-tiled sinks, an infinity pool and other amenities for guests who are visiting for the cooking or yoga classes.

Barrett, who founded the successful Dallas Affaires Cake Co., did not intend to launch another business, now known as Onion Creek Kitchens, when she first bought the property in 1997.

"I was in retail for years with a flower shop and then the bakery. I was ready to do something different, but I didn't know what I wanted to do when I moved out here," she says. "I gave myself time to be open, to see what would come my way."

In the meantime, Barrett's friends from Dallas were eager to see her new homestead in the Hill Country between Dripping Springs and Blanco, which was completed in 2001.

"People would come and visit and I would end up cooking for them. And . . . I would show them the area," she says. "It started out just going to the farmers markets, then to these other farms. I admire these farms so much, and I like taking people from Houston and Dallas to see these entrepreneurs. I realized I had a repertoire that I could make a class out of."

That realization grew into one of Barrett's most popular classes, "Random Acts of Cooking," which books out months in advance and includes a tour of Hill Country wineries and farms to gather the ingredients for dinner that evening. A class held earlier this month included a stop at the olive grove at Bella Vista Ranch, CKC Farms (which raises goats and makes creamy, flavorful goat cheese), the Arnosky Family Farms Market, McCall Creek Farms Market, and a picnic lunch and tour of Heron's Nest Herb Farm (which grows persimmons, echinacea and lavender).

Though the stops vary for each class, Barrett always sticks to the plentiful farms, markets and wineries throughout the surrounding area. "There is enough right here, and because it is here and I know these folks, we stay within the Hill Country," she says. "And it is a full day, just with a few stops."

After a September "Random Acts" class foray for meal ingredients, the 16 participants returned to Onion Creek Kitchens to prepare dinner based around what was bought. The freestyle approach works surprisingly well, considering it generally does not involve precisely determined recipes and flies in the face of that old saying about having too many cooks in the kitchen.

"Amazingly, it does somehow always come together," Barrett says.

Barrett typically stocks a protein in her freezer to build meals around. She likes Texas products such as Buddy's air-chilled chicken breasts from Central Market or Nolan Ryan's T-bone steaks. Occasionally, lamb is available at McCall Creek Farms Market the day of the class.

Her well-stocked pantries, including Onion Creek Kitchens' products such as Juniper Provence Spice Mix, rounded out this sumptuous dinner.

"We help people to learn to cook this way. Instead of having a recipe and going to the grocery store, you stock your pantry, so you can turn fresh produce and ingredients into a meal," Barrett says.

"This is really two classes in one. It is sharing these little gems in the Hill Country, and it is a lesson in cooking seasonally, and locally, on the spur of the moment with a well-stocked pantry," she says. "People are so recipe-dependent, which makes them ingredient-dependent. So then you are looking for something that is not in season. This helps people to start with, what is fresh?"

The September class unanimously and harmoniously decided on a menu and quickly split up to slice, chop, mix and sauté in a warm, hectic bustle. Barrett guided the class throughout the meal, pointing out, for example, that when a piece of eggshell accidentally lands in batter, the remaining egg shell can be used to fish it out.

The eventual dinner included a goat cheese soufflé, grilled steaks with Onion Creek Kitchens' salsa verde Italiano seasoning, butternut squash risotto, roasted beets with blackberry balsamic vinegar and pear, limeade okra, and tropical carrot cake, among other dishes. Barrett also worked to accommodate vegetarian and gluten-intolerant guests.

"It's collaborative. She loves seeing what's fresh and creates the meal. She is patient and encouraging and doesn't worry about a meal turning out perfectly," says Kelley Burrus, who was returning to Onion Creek Kitchens to celebrate her mother's birthday with her mother, sister and sister-in-law.

Barrett, born and raised in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, has no formal chef training, but says she was trained "by fire" through her bakery and restaurant. Though the restaurant closed down, Dallas Affaires Cake Co. remains in business.

"The classes were not in the plan when I built the kitchen," Barrett, now in her early 50s, says of her Hill Country spread. Nonetheless, the experienced cook, baker and restaurateur designed her home around the rule of thumb that when entertaining everyone ends up in the kitchen.

Barrett's kitchen boasts pine floors, large windows, pastel Kitchen-Aid appliances, a wine chiller and a built-in bookshelf stuffed with titles from "The French Laundry" cookbook to a series of Cooking Light books. All manner of cookery from tart pans to miniature spoons provide inspiration for novice cooks and those looking for a culinary adventure.

Susan Goins, who lives in Tyler, tried for months to get into the class and has only recently taken up cooking. "When the kids were growing up, I never really had time to cook. It was basketball practice, running around," she says. The class was "like being in a science lab. You can experiment, and you're not sure how it will all turn out if you try something new."

For others in the class, the draw was the property itself, which is tranquil and blanketed by stars at night. The rolling hills and wide-open expanse of the property are a calming departure from the everyday hustle and bustle.

Three cabins and two studio units for overnight guests are near Barrett's home, where the cooking classes are hosted. Three part-time employees assist Barrett in the preparation for the classes and cleanup.

Various touches, from the pair of bright blue Adirondack chairs that sit adjacent to the gravel path on the drive up to the farm to the old pair of cowboy boots stuffed with aloe vera plants, add to the relaxed, Texas-style comfort of the farm. Thick wood tables and cozy outdoor sitting areas fit into the landscape.

Most of Onion Creek Kitchens' cooking classes, which range from \$95 to \$250, are sold out through March, with the exception of the Oct. 25 Mediterranean Evening class and the Saturday, Dec. 20 Holiday Cookies class.

Barrett's hospitality and down-to-earth manner contribute to the success of Onion Creek Kitchens. "I really do love doing this," she says.

And visitors appreciate that, just as her friend suggested they might four years ago.

*Cooking classes at Onion Creek Kitchens at Juniper Hills Farm can be booked through the Web site:
<http://www.juniperhillsfarm.com> 830-833-0910*

Tropical Carrot Cake

For the cake:

butter

2¹/₃ cups all purpose flour

1 cup sweetened flaked coconut

1 cup toasted macadamia nuts

3/4 cup chopped crystallized ginger

4 tsp. ground cinnamon

2¹/₂ tsp. baking powder

1 tsp. salt

1/2 tsp. baking soda
2 cups sugar
1 cup vegetable oil or canola oil
4 large eggs
2 tsp. vanilla extract
2 cups grated or shredded carrots, scrubbed clean
16 oz. can crushed pineapple, well-drained

For the frosting:

24 oz. (3 8-oz. packages) cream cheese, room temperature
1 1/2 sticks unsalted butter, room temperature
2 cups powdered sugar
3/4 cup canned sweetened cream of coconut
1 tsp. vanilla extract
1/2 tsp. coconut or almond extract

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Butter three 9-inch cake pans. Line bottom of pans with parchment paper. (Or line muffin pans with paper liners.) Combine 1/3 cup of the flour, coconut and macadamia nuts in processor. Process until nuts are finely chopped. Whisk remaining 2 cups flour, cinnamon, baking powder, salt, and baking soda in medium bowl to blend. In a mixer, beat sugar and oil in large bowl to blend. Add eggs 1 at a time, beating well after each addition. Beat in vanilla. Beat in flour-spice mixture. Stir in coconut-macadamia mixture, crystallized ginger, carrots and crushed pineapple. Divide batter among pans or muffin tins. Bake until tester inserted into center of cakes comes out clean, about 25-35 minutes. Cool cakes thoroughly in pans. Run knife around edge of pans to loosen cakes. Turn cakes out onto parchment-covered cardboards.

For the icing, beat cream cheese and butter in large bowl until smooth. Add in powdered sugar, then cream of coconut and both extracts. Chill until firm enough to spread, about 30 minutes.

For baby cakes, poke a hole in the center of each cupcake and fill with frosting. For layer cake, place 1 cake layer, flat side up, on platter. Spread 3/4 cup frosting over top of cake. Top with second cake layer, flat side up. Spread 3/4 cup frosting over. Top with third cake layer, rounded side up. Chill cake thoroughly, about 30 minutes. Spread thin layer of frosting over top and sides of cake. Chill cake and remaining frosting 30 minutes. Spread remaining frosting over top and sides of cake. Alternately, you also may drizzle frosting over lightly frosted cake. Chill until ready to serve. Allow cake to sit at room temperature for about 15 minutes before serving. Makes 12 baby cakes or 1 9-inch layer cake

~ Sibby Barrett

Limeade Okra

2 Tbsp. olive oil
1 small onion, diced
3 garlic cloves, minced
1 Tbsp. fresh ginger, grated
1 tsp. tumeric
salt and pepper to taste
1 small can tomatoes, diced, with juices reserved
4 cups fresh, whole okra
1 small bell pepper, diced
3 Tbsp. frozen limeade, thinned with 1/4 cup water

cilantro or mint to taste

In a large sauté pan, heat olive oil over medium high heat. Add onion and garlic and sauté until fragrant, 1-2 minutes. Add ginger and tumeric and sauté for an additional 3-4 minutes or until dry. Add tomatoes, reserving juices for later. Add okra and bell pepper. Stir fry for 3-4 minutes. Add reserved tomato juice and limeade with water. Season the mixture with salt and pepper. Allow to simmer for about 5 minutes. Top with cilantro or mint if desired

(Recipe suggested by former Onion Creek Kitchens guest)

Onion Creek Kitchens' pantry essentials

Extra virgin olive oil One higher-priced, good quality olive oil to use for uncooked applications salad dressings, finishing drizzle A second medium-priced olive oil to use for cooking. Always buy small to medium-sized containers and store in a dark, cool location.

Canola oil/vegetable oil

Assorted vinegars

Salt: kosher, fine-grained and sea salt

Peppercorns

Good stock of basic spices: red pepper flakes, oregano, rosemary, thyme, herbes de Provence

Spice mixes: mix these up yourself to keep on hand for a quick flavor jolt

Pasta: assortment of shapes

Rice: long grain, arborio, wild

Couscous

Bread crumbs

Crackers

Croutons

Dried fruit

Fruit juice

Honey

Molasses

Maple syrup

Corn syrup

Sugars: white, brown, powdered

Flour

Baking powder

Baking soda

Cornmeal: coarse, fine

Cornstarch/tapioca

Stock/broth

Coconut milk

Canned beans: white, black, kidney

Chickpeas/garbanzo beans

Canned tomatoes

Tomato paste

Roasted peppers

Chipotle peppers

Pre-made, good quality tapanades, salsas and pestos

Sun-dried tomatoes

Anchovies/anchovy paste

Tuna

Worcestershire sauce

Soy sauce

Hot sauce: Tabasco

Pasta sauce

Chutney

Wine

Sherry

Brandy

Coconut

Chocolate chips/bar chocolate

Instant espresso

Tea bags

Cookies or graham cracker