

Hill Country Homecoming

By Laurel Evans

An excerpt from her upcoming book....

In the geographical center of Texas, spanning between San Antonio and Austin, sweeping west some 322 kilometers, lies a singular territory known as the Texas Hill Country. The rugged green hills for which the region is named are marked by wooded canyons, spring fed rivers, underground caves, and, in the spring, sprawling meadows of brightly-colored wildflowers. The bucolic scenery is punctuated by fruitful orchards, vineyards and picturesque towns still clinging to their European heritage. In fact, it's the fusion of Spanish, German and other Central European influences on the food, beer, wine, architecture and music that form a unique Hill Country culture.

This is all of great importance to me, of course, because the Texas Hill Country is my home, the land of my ancestors for the last 150 years, and the closest place to my heart wherever I am in the world.

In the late 1840s, a group of highly-educated Germans settled in Texas amidst the German revolts, and my ancestors were among them. These intellectual settlers, known as the '48ers or Freethinkers, formed several experimental, utopian colonies in the Texas Hill Country. My great-great-great-great-great grandfather, Ferdinand Ludvig von Herff, was the founder of one such commune, Bettina, with the motto "friendship, freedom, equality". Seeking to embrace democracy he, and many of his fellow aristocrats, cut the noble "von" from their names, and communicated strictly in Latin and Greek. Evidently, they weren't as great with farming as they were with ancient languages, and the colony failed after a year of hardship and hunger. Ferdinand's disillusioned co-founder, Gustav Schleicher, commented "The bigger the men, the more they talked, the less they worked and the more they ate."

After the failure of many of these intellectual communities, the German freethinkers joined the many other Central European immigrants dispersed amongst the neighboring towns and cities. The heavy German influence remains strong in the area, in towns with names like Fredericksburg, Luckenbach, Gruene, and Boerne, my home town. Boerne's main street is still called Hauptstraße, and our most important annual fair is called Berges Fest, where our Village Band dresses in Lederhosen and play traditional German songs with horns and accordions.

Obviously, a region so rich in cultural intermingling is home to an interesting culinary patrimony as well. Being in the middle of Texas, we reap the benefits of all the state has to offer. Our German and Czech butchers were responsible for the creation of Texas Barbecue (see pg. XX), we're a mere 30 minutes away from San Antonio, the cultural center of Tex-Mex cuisine (pg. XX), and only 2 hours away from the gulf, giving us easy access to fresh seafood (pg. XX) and cajun influences. These factors culminate to make the Hill Country one of the most gastronomically diverse regions of Texas. The sprawling acres of orchards and farmland

has attracted winemakers, restaurateurs and food connoisseurs from all over the country, and the region was named the #1 travel destination in 2008 by the New York Times. Many of these tourists came from New York and California, and many stayed, bringing a higher level of sophistication and creativity to the Hill Country food scene. Today, if you drive the winding roads through the rolling hills you'll encounter not only the rustic diners offering classic Texan fare, but many creative and quirky cafés, countless local vineyards, german-style microbreweries, farm-to-table restaurants, pecan and peach orchards, and frequent food festivals (sagre).

The Hill Country food culture today walks the line between innovation and tradition, pulling limitless inspiration from a diverse and colorful past. I like to think sometimes about my female ancestors who followed their intellectual, loudly-spoken husbands into the Texan wilderness, with nothing but ancient languages to protect them from starvation, wild animals, and hostile natives. How they must have longed for the tastes and smells of their mothers' kitchens, for the security of familiar foods. Since moving abroad, I identify deeply with the need to recreate certain comforts in a new world, especially in the kitchen.

The true spirit of adventure and adaptation, however, is not in looking back, but in looking forward. It is not in simply re-creating traditional dishes on new soil, but in blending old recipes with strange new ingredients to create something current, joyful and unique. I am proud to claim a part in such a long line of adventurers and idealists, and eager share the delicious results of their long and spirited journey.