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DESTINATION:

Joshua Creek Ranch

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PHOTOS BY AUTHOR



The state of Texas is big – very big. Texans are used to thinking in big terms and tend to do things with a grand sense of style that is unique from the rest of the USA. People there think out of the box, drive trucks the size of small New York apartments, and throw parties in rooms the

size of shopping malls. Musical innovator Bob Wills is from Texas. So is Ernest Tubb, Buddy Holly, Roy Orbison, Janis Joplin, and Lisa, my wife. There's lots of land, oil wells, miles of straight roads over flat terrain, and not very many trees. If you are quail hunting, you need boots and chaps made of steel to

keep the cactus thorns from turning your legs into a self-inflicted rendition of the Texas Chainsaw Massacre. At least, that was the impression I got after several visits to Beaumont, Austin, Houston, and Dallas. "Not so in the Texas Hill Country!" my wife kept telling me. As with most things, she was right.



Joshua Creek Ranch is nestled in the breathtakingly gorgeous Texas Hill Country, 45 minutes northwest of San Antonio. Spring-fed Joshua Creek joins the beautiful Guadalupe River in the middle of the property. Cypress trees flank both sides of the water, and you encounter only an occasional cactus on land that has been inhabited by humans for several thousand years. The Tonkawa Indians thought of themselves as reincarnated wolves, and game was so plentiful they refused to farm the land, preferring to hunt like the wolves.

On a photo shoot last fall in northern England, I met a couple of large-thinking Texas Hill Country residents, Joe and Ann Kercheville, on a driven pheasant and red grouse shoot close to the Scottish border. The two blended right in with the scenery, looking like models in a Barbour ad as they canvassed the moors in their tweed shooting attire and wax cotton jackets. I snapped pictures and watched as Joe dropped high-flying pheasants coming off a bluff.

A similar shoot in 1988 is what turned Joshua Creek Ranch from a longhorn cattle operation to the quail and pheasant wingshooting destination it is today. Joe remembers, “The terrain in Scotland reminded us so much of our place at home, we decided to give it a shot. People like us were spending lots of money, time, and trouble getting to Britain for good quality pheasant shooting, and the situation in Mexico was getting bad for quail hunters. The cattle business we had run for ten years was on a downturn, so an upscale hunting lodge seemed like the perfect alternative.”

In 1990, the ranch opened its doors to wingshooters. In 2003, the Kerchevilles began placing conservation easements on the property, and in 2010 it became one of the first four lodges in the U.S. to earn the Beretta Trident designation.

Upon my return to Georgia from the UK, I got a call from Ann inviting me to come to Texas to shoot some photos and some birds.

“You’ve got to get here while there’s still some color in the leaves,” she said, and I found myself being picked up at the San Antonio airport just before Thanksgiving. About 30 miles up I-10, a turn off of the expressway suddenly led to small, path-like roads that twist up and down, back and forth through hackberry and cedar elm trees. After another four miles through what seemed to be a completely different landscape from the rest of Texas, we turned in the entrance and drove the last half-mile, passing huge oaks and a father and son fly fishing in the creek.

I was greeted by General Manager David Edwards and Chef Kay Read at the Main Lodge. Cocktails and venison carpaccio were already being served on the patio around a crackling fire. I stashed my gear in one of the guesthouses overlooking the creek and hurried back for one of Kay’s signature dinner dishes, Pheasant Chardonnay, and got a chance to meet some of the other guests who would be shooting the next day.

Ann gave me a quick tour around the grounds the next morning at first light. There were herds of axis deer as well as whitetails that were visible from a mile away across the Guadalupe, grazing down in the milo and red-topped cane. Trophy axis deer are legal to shoot year-round. In the summer months, JCR hosts a week-long youth program for 8-15 year olds to learn sporting clays, rifle shooting, fly fishing, archery, and even field-dressing deer. I put the camera away,

and we whirled back and gobbled up some breakfast before the morning quail hunt.

Bill Angelelli, Bob Skiba, and Gene Davenport, a trio of electrical designers who are experienced hunters and fans of nice double-guns, invited me to come along for some photos, claiming that they “never miss,” and I accepted. Ray Seale, our guide, loaded up a beautiful Llewellyn setter named Brigade, an English setter named Josie, and a mischievous

English cocker named Java into the buggy and off we went.

After being on the ground for less than five minutes, Brigade snapped into a point, quivering with tail high, and Java was brought in to flush. I clicked off a few photos of the dogs, but before I could get repositioned and ready, brown feathers were whirring in every direction; the guns spoke and there were four birds down. This pattern continued for another hour and a half, and I was starting to



PHEASANT CHARDONNAY

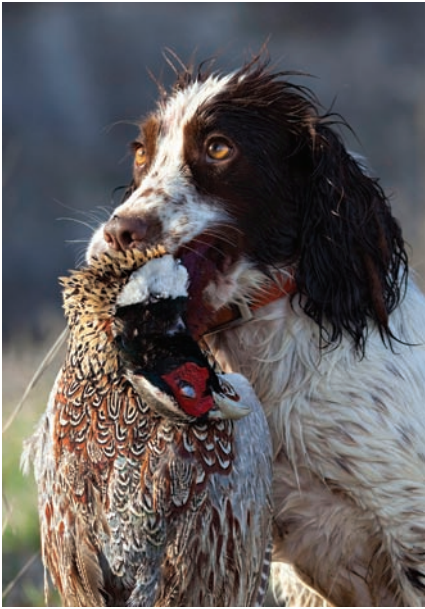
- 4 pheasant breasts, slightly pounded
- 1 cup flour, seasoned with salt and pepper
- ½ cup toasted almonds
- ¼ cup each red, green, and black grapes, halved
- ¼ cup red bell pepper, chopped
- ¼ cup parsley, chopped
- ½ cup feta cheese, crumbled

Heat some oil in a sauce pan. Dredge pheasant in seasoned flour and fry in oil to brown. Place in baking dish and bake in 325 oven for 20-30 minutes. Place breasts on plates. Top with chardonnay sauce and a sprinkling of almonds, grapes, bell pepper, parsley, and feta.

CHARDONNAY SAUCE

- 2 cups white wine
- 4 cups heavy cream
- 2 Tbls chicken base
- Roux, to thicken
- Salt and white pepper to taste

In a saucepan over medium heat, reduce white wine to ½ cup. Add cream and chicken base. Bring to simmer and add roux to thicken. Season to taste.



believe that the “never miss” claim was true – until Gene finally missed a tough shot on a chukar peeling off to the left into a thicket of elms.

After a nice lunch of wild game gumbo and peach cobbler, I joined a corporate group of shooters, including several sharpshooting ladies who were treated to an English style driven pheasant shoot. As Joe had described, 12 pegs were scattered along the winding creek at the bottom of a huge bluff, which gave shooters a challenge of 35



to 50-yard shots at pheasants rocketing overhead. The dogs, as always, were having as much fun as any of the shooters with their amusing water retrieves.

Late that afternoon, Joe appeared with a couple of his Italian small bores and a twinkle in his eye. “Enough photos,” he said as he handed me a wispy Bosis 28. A quick run next to a field of milo produced a mixed bag of quail, chukar, and several long tailed-roosters, a suitable ending to a perfect day.

I left Joshua Creek Ranch with a new impression of Texas and not a single thorn in my boots. There is an overwhelming sense of peace. Game is plentiful, the river is crystal clear and full of trout much like it was 200 years ago. In the evening, the bobwhites call and covey up as deer slowly emerge from the shadows to graze as the last rays of light disappear from the sky. 🦌

For more information, please visit www.joshuacreek.com

