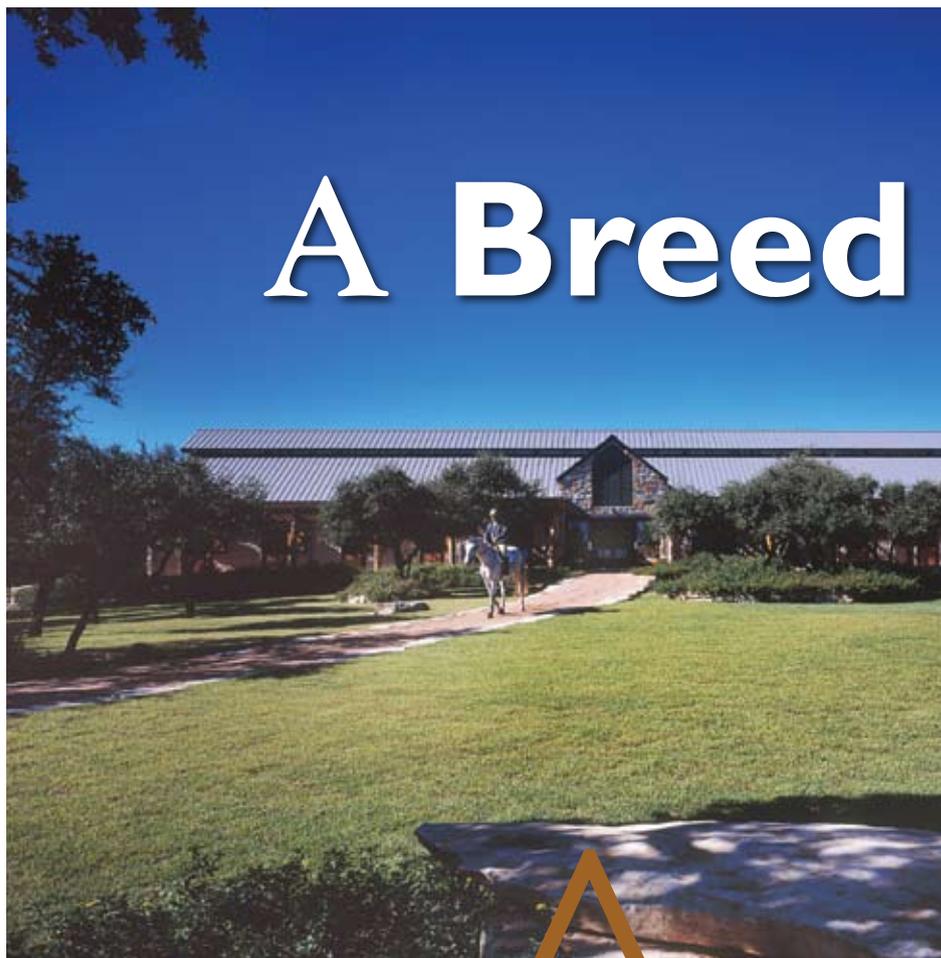




This unparalleled
equestrian estate
not only serves as an
exclusive retreat,
but also preserves the
Texas heritage
that so many
still long for today.

A Breed Apart



Text by Christine Tomana

Photography by Tre Dunham

Architecture by Blackburn Architects

Ask this Austin family of five to define Texas life and they'll tell you it's still "all about the horse." Preserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the Texas Hill Country was also of utmost importance to the Graves family when building this exquisite, custom-designed 150-acre equestrian estate.

Oakhaven Farm embodies this passion for the well-being of horses and the preservation of the Texas landscape while providing a sense of authentic ranch living.

"I dreamed that my horses would feel like they were standing out in the open under a big shade tree during their time in the barn and soon came across an article featuring a design that really caught my eye," says owner Debbie Graves of her first vision of the farm. Debbie and her husband, Willy, immediately contacted the man behind that ideal—award-winning equestrian architect John Blackburn of Blackburn Architects, P.C., in Washington, D.C.—and the dream of Oakhaven Farm soon became a reality.

"To fulfill Debbie's dream meant designing the main barn to be an integral part of the surrounding landscape while providing a safe and healthy environment for their horses throughout all seasons," says Blackburn. The architect was very particular about situating the barn on a hilltop facing the prevailing breezes, resulting in the barn being the "coolest place on the ranch in our hot summers," says Debbie. The 16-stall barn is constructed of cedar timber and local "Austin stone" unearthed from the property, and is topped with a metal seam roof. The Graves' love of the surrounding countryside is clear. "Willy and I have been committed to preserving and enhancing the natural beauty and harmony of Texas Hill Country and working with Blackburn to design the layout of our facility would do just that," says Debbie.

Designed with wide aisles and passageways, the family can spend quality time together without stepping on each other's toes—and hooves. Dutch doors and operable louvers in





the front and sides of the barn make it easy to adjust the airflow. And with a primary residence, a guest house for the groom and staff, an upscale tack room, a 200-foot-by-125-foot jumping arena, two additional six-stall barns, a round pen/exerciser, grooming racks, large storage and hay barns, two apartments, and several paddocks with run-in sheds that the broodmares and young stock love, the property has plenty of space for tranquility.

The grooming stalls also act as a gathering place for riders and are steps away from the barn's entry, storage and stalls.

"The high ceilings combined with the nine-foot skylight that runs the length of the barn and all the options we were given for ventilation and natural light make it such a comfortable, airy and bright barn. It feels like walking into an open-air cathedral," says Debbie. The Graves wanted a barn where they could work, play, and (speaking of cathedrals), even host weddings if they wanted to, which they did when Debbie's close friend chose to walk down the aisle of the Oakhaven Farm barn for her Austin-autumn wedding.

Debbie and her daughters, Laura and Amy, are the avid riders on the farm; son Jeremy watches from the sidelines. When they decided to build Oakhaven, Debbie, who began her riding career in 1993, and her daughters were showing their horses in A-rated hunter/jumper shows about 20 times a year. Once the girls left for college, Debbie began concentrating on the breeding and sales side of the horse business full time. Then, in 2004, Willy left his corporate job as a national insurance executive to manage the completed estate.

"Debbie had a vision of sitting under the deep perimeter trellis and enjoying a drink outside her office after a long day of riding while seeing her horses in the paddocks and her daughters riding in the arena," says Blackburn. "This was one of many desires that helped us customize Oakhaven to fit her specific vision." This step is crucial in every design process, according to the architect. Supported by cedar logs similar to the logs used for the family's residence, the trellis keeps direct sunlight out of the horse stalls and creates a walkway shaded from the hot sun. Watching the sunsets from her rustic rocking chair beneath the cedar timber-flank trellis has become an evening ritual for Debbie. The vantage point is just one of the many special places unique to the estate.

Debbie and Willy take pride in their very holistic approach to the development of their property. This method includes Debbie's organic vegetable garden and the recent addition of new fencing and mulch, for the surrounding trails, made from cedar harvested from the farm. A 50-foot-wide shed was built from rock collected on the farm.



All of the horses' waste is composted into a rich soil for the pastures.

"We have been fortunate to have the services of George Salinas, a gifted local rock mason, to work on our property for over eight years," says Debbie. George has designed and implemented most of the landscaping and stonework on the buildings, which feature a custom-cut stone shaped as the state of Texas and a Texas Lone Star above the entry of the main barn. Large, uncut stone tables and benches and timeless natural wood handrails incorporate nature, linking the contemporary buildings to the past. "George has dedicated himself to researching the native plants and wildlife while studying the history of the area," says Debbie. "Countless artifacts he discovered on our property are displayed in my garden—arrowheads and tools from the Native Americans that lived here long before any European immigrants."

The Graves are also very aware of the land development taking place in Texas, especially in South Austin where they live. "I think the biggest concern is the impact of development on water supply," explains Debbie. "Our land is in the recharge zone for the Edwards Aquifer and we are dependent on wells for our water. The combination of recent drought and the housing boom in our area is causing several of our neighbors' wells to run dry."

Plans for the future? The Graves' oldest daughter, Laura, plans to operate a horse-showing business after her college graduation this fall—it is safe to say that the farm will remain in the family for generations to come.

There is no question that Oakhaven Farm exemplifies the best of ranch living and equestrian culture through its charm, style and luxurious surroundings. But when asked for the first word that comes to mind to describe her family's daily lifestyle on the estate, Debbie's response is unexpected, but truly exemplifies traditional Hill Country living: "simplistic." ^{AH&L}