



MAY/JUNE 2024

# CONNECTION

## Trial by fire

Historic barbecue spot reopens

WILD BLOOMS

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JAM SESSION

# NTCA THE RURAL BROADBAND ASSOCIATION®

## RURAL CONNECTIONS

By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO  
NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association

## Seven decades of service

Supporting rural communities through better communications

**N**TCA proudly represents more than 850 telecommunications companies across rural America as they provide a variety of services including robust broadband, landline, wireless, data, video and IT support. June 1 marks our 70th anniversary, and it's a perfect opportunity to reflect upon how far this life-changing industry has traveled.

The independent telephone industry began to develop throughout rural America in the 1890s, largely because these regions were ignored by large national providers.

After World War II, as the telephone's popularity surged and the value of connectivity was recognized, Congress passed legislation to extend loans to bring telephone systems to rural communities.

With funding on the way, the need for an independent national organization to represent small telephone companies was at an all-time high and, in 1954, NTCA was born.

Eight rural telephone systems in seven states became the original members and got to work advocating to grow the industry.

Over the last few decades, NTCA has focused on the evolution of our members from telecommunications to broadband providers as well as numerous key priorities for rural America, including building a sustainable future for universal service, building Smart Rural Communities, providing cybersecurity tools, being the catalyst for policy engagement and so much more.

As NTCA celebrates its platinum anniversary, we are excited to see what is next for this vibrant industry as it supports rural America and beyond. 📧

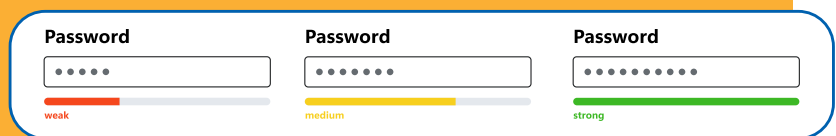
# 3 tips for password security



Illustration by origami8/Adobe Stock

Passwords are everywhere. From health care and school to work and play, software, websites, essential services and more, most of our daily online activities require a secure login.

The U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency offers three tips to better password security — and a good password follows all three.



## 1 MAKE THEM LONG

At least 16 characters — longer is stronger!

## 2 MAKE THEM RANDOM

**Option 1:** Use a random string of mixed-case letters, numbers and symbols. For example:

cXmnZK65rf\*&DaaD or Yuc8\$RikA34%ZoPPao98t

**Option 2:** Create a memorable phrase of five to seven unrelated words. Then, get creative with spelling and the addition of a number or symbol.

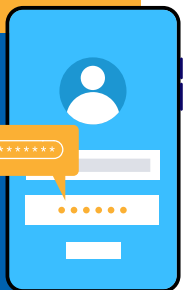
- » Strong: HorsePurpleHatRunBaconShoes
- » Stronger: HorsPerpleHatRunBayconShoos
- » Strongest: HorsPerpleHat#1RunBayconShoos

## 3 MAKE THEM UNIQUE

Use a different strong password for each account. For example:

- » **Bank:** k8dfh8c@Pfv0gB2
- » **Email account:** LmvF%swVR56s2mW
- » **Social media account:** e246gs%mFs#3tv6

Fortunately, password managers can help you keep up with these longer, more complex codes. Options range from tools already in your web browser to commercial software.





# The 30-second commute

## Remote work can be a wonderful opportunity

**T**o those who spend long hours in an office, on the road or in the field, working from home might sound like a dream. And, for some, it is.

It's estimated that by 2025 about 22% of the U.S. workforce — or 32.6 million people — will work remotely. A 2023 study by Forbes Advisor found 12.7% of the nation's full-time employees work from home, while another 28% work a hybrid model, dividing the work week between home and the office.

Working from home can help save money on gas, as well as wear and tear on vehicles. The flip side, however, is being face to face with household chores all day. The isolating nature of solo work can also be a challenge, as can establishing the distinction between work and home life.

### TOOLS FOR SUCCESS

- It makes sense that fast, reliable internet is the first component to remote work success. If your link to the working world is compromised, you can't get anything done. A backup location is another must, just in case a storm

knocks out the electricity or your peace and quiet is temporarily disturbed.

- Experts advise setting up a dedicated workspace — not in an area like your living room or bedroom — free from distractions, preferably with a door. While it might be tempting to work from the bed or couch, soft surfaces don't provide proper support and can lead to headaches, strains and arthritis. It's also important to consider how your workspace will appear to your co-workers and clients during on-screen meetings.
- Creating a routine is vital for remote work. If your family and neighbors know your schedule, they'll be less likely to present distractions.
- The opportunities for remote jobs are out there, you just need to know where to look. Computer tech jobs continue to be the most common opportunities, as are marketing, accounting, HR/recruiting and customer service.

### REMOTE WORK RED FLAGS

When searching for work-from-home opportunities, it's important to avoid pitfalls. If the job sounds too good to be true, it usually is. Be wary if:

- The ad says things like, "unlimited earning potential," "investment opportunities and seminars" or "quick money."

- The job requires upfront expenses from you.
- You're asked for personal information — Social Security number, birthdate, banking account numbers, etc. — early in the interview process or as part of your initial application.
- You are offered a job without an interview or anyone contacting or asking for references. 🗨️



## Pros of working from home

- Better work-life balance
- More freedom
- Improved employee mindset
- Decreased wardrobe budget
- Comforts of home
- No commute, less wear and tear on vehicle
- Self-regulated hours
- Flexible schedule

# Unlock your perfect break

A dream vacation is a click away

Are you ready for a vacation? Summer travel season is about to ramp up, and many Americans will be hitting the highway or heading to the airport. Whether it's a short trip or a multiday excursion, I think about all the ways HCTC's services can help you plan your perfect break.



**CRAIG COOK**  
Chief Executive Officer

Before we chat about how we can help you find your next adventure, I'd like you to keep in mind the opportunities our area provides. While we consider this place home, others are discovering that our region is a perfect destination for their own vacations.

That's the beauty of rural communities like ours. Often there's so much to do, and it's easy to take the places you see every day for granted. But our wildlands, trails, parks and more offer great opportunities for outdoor enthusiasts.

Similarly, we have plenty of history shaped by the businesses, industries, people and events that help establish who we are.

While you may know the tales of our past, many history buffs and others find these nuggets of bygone days endlessly fascinating.

That's only the beginning, because there are plenty of interesting places to stay in our area, too. While hotels are a great choice, thanks to internet-based resources, there is a range of vacation rentals with online listings managed by sites like Airbnb and Vrbo.

It's never been easier to plan a vacation and find our nation's gems. Have you visited all the local spots? If you're not sure, I encourage you to venture online. Explore what others say about our region, and you just might find a new adventure right here at home.

But if you're ready for that summer trip away from home, those same tools come into play. Travel agents very much have a place, and they're available to help you. But if you have a do-it-yourself mindset, going online opens the door to a wealth of resources.

Many travel sites offer day-by-day itineraries. Are you going to be in a city for two days? A plan is likely available. Considering a weeklong driving trip with some ocean views? Those plans are out there, too — all just a few clicks away.

If you're wired into social media like Facebook or Reddit, you can tap into another powerful resource — people. Most cities, destinations or hobbies have online groups dedicated to them, and these are often surprisingly helpful. Planning a fishing trip to the coast? Are you a hiker? Or, perhaps you want to explore all the best kid-friendly spots of a specific town or city. There's an online resource for you. Make no mistake, this type of resource exists for places in our area, too.

Even when we're contemplating unplugging, the online world can help connect us. We're proud to provide internet service that allows you to unlock your next adventure.

Thank you for allowing us to serve you. 📶

The HCTC Connection is a bimonthly magazine published by Hill Country Telephone Cooperative © 2024. It is distributed without charge to all member/owners of the cooperative.



HCTC is more than a provider of state-of-the-art telecommunications products and services. We are a member-owned cooperative with an elected board of directors who govern our organization using our bylaws, member input and business and industry conditions to guide their decisions. We are proud residents of the communities we serve, and we're dedicated to not only providing the best services possible, but doing so in a way that is ethical, safe and productive for our friends and neighbors. This institution is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

**Mission Statement:** To be the premier provider of modern telecommunications and broadband services throughout our region.

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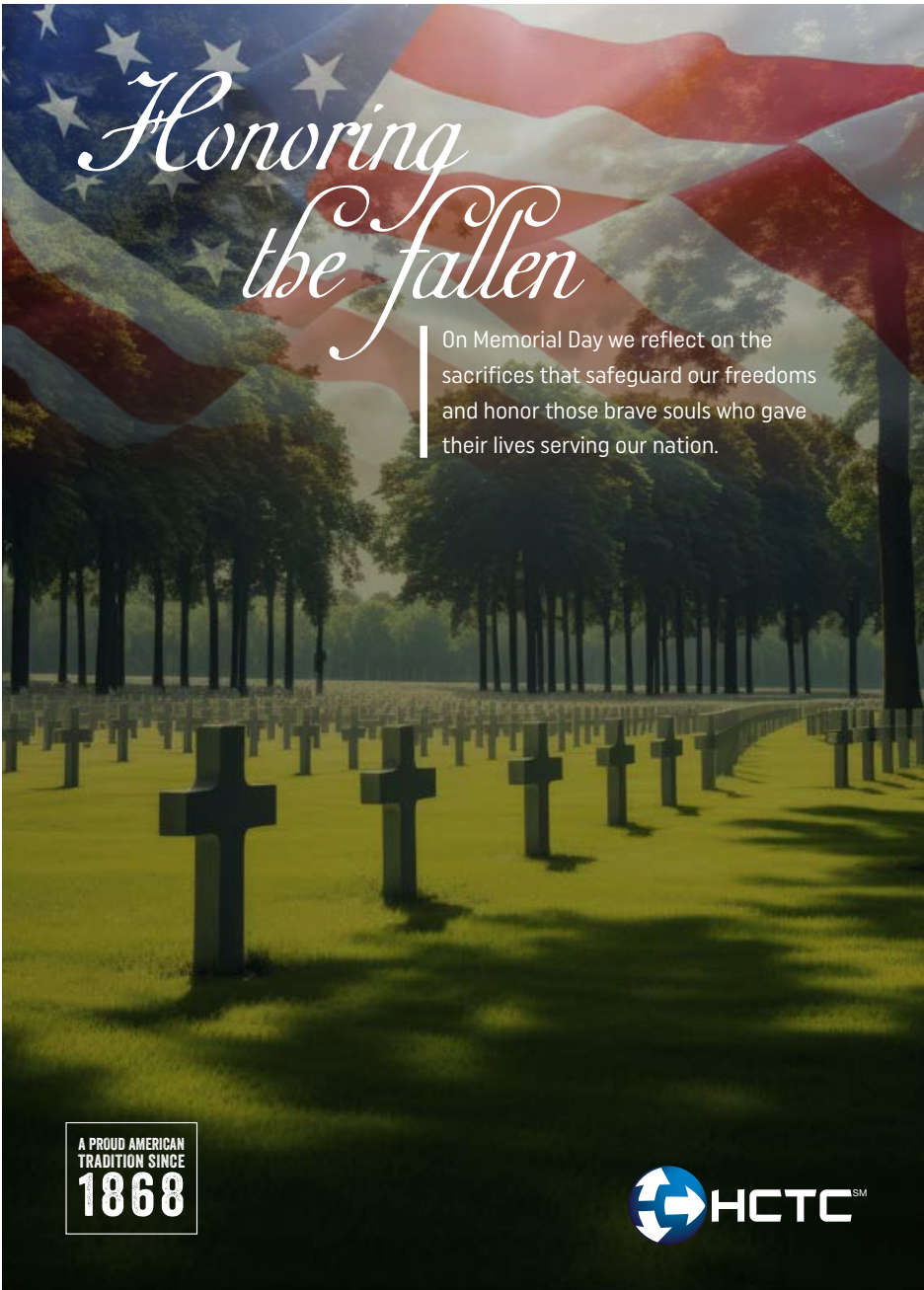
**Pioneer**  
UTILITY RESOURCES

**On the Cover:**



Cooper's Original Pit Bar-B-Q reopened in early 2024 after a fire forced the historic business to close for a few months.  
*See story Page 9.*

Photo courtesy of Alyssa Martin Photography



A PROUD AMERICAN TRADITION SINCE 1868



# Call before you dig



Is your list of yard projects longer than your arm? Be sure that a call to 811 is at the top of your to-do list.

Planting trees, installing a sprinkler system and replacing a fence line are just a few of the jobs where underground utilities need to be located before you start.

No digging project is shovel ready until all utilities providers have marked out their underground infrastructure.

Texas law requires homeowners to contact 811 and wait two business days — excluding weekends and holidays — before digging, even if you're working in your own backyard.

Respect the marks and, if needed, call for a re-marking. Learn more about digging safely or start a request at [texas811.org](http://texas811.org).

# Congrats!

## 2024 graduates!

You've accomplished so much to achieve this milestone. HCTC wishes each of you the best in all your future endeavors!

### OFFICES CLOSED

HCTC will close on **Monday, May 27**, in observance of **Memorial Day**.

### FIND US ONLINE

Follow HCTC to learn the latest on services and apps, like HCTC's CommandIQ that helps secure your network. Be sure to check out the new podcast interviews on our YouTube channel and at [hctc.transistor.fm](http://hctc.transistor.fm).



# Hitting a HIGH NOTE

## THERE'S MUSIC IN THEM THAR HILLS

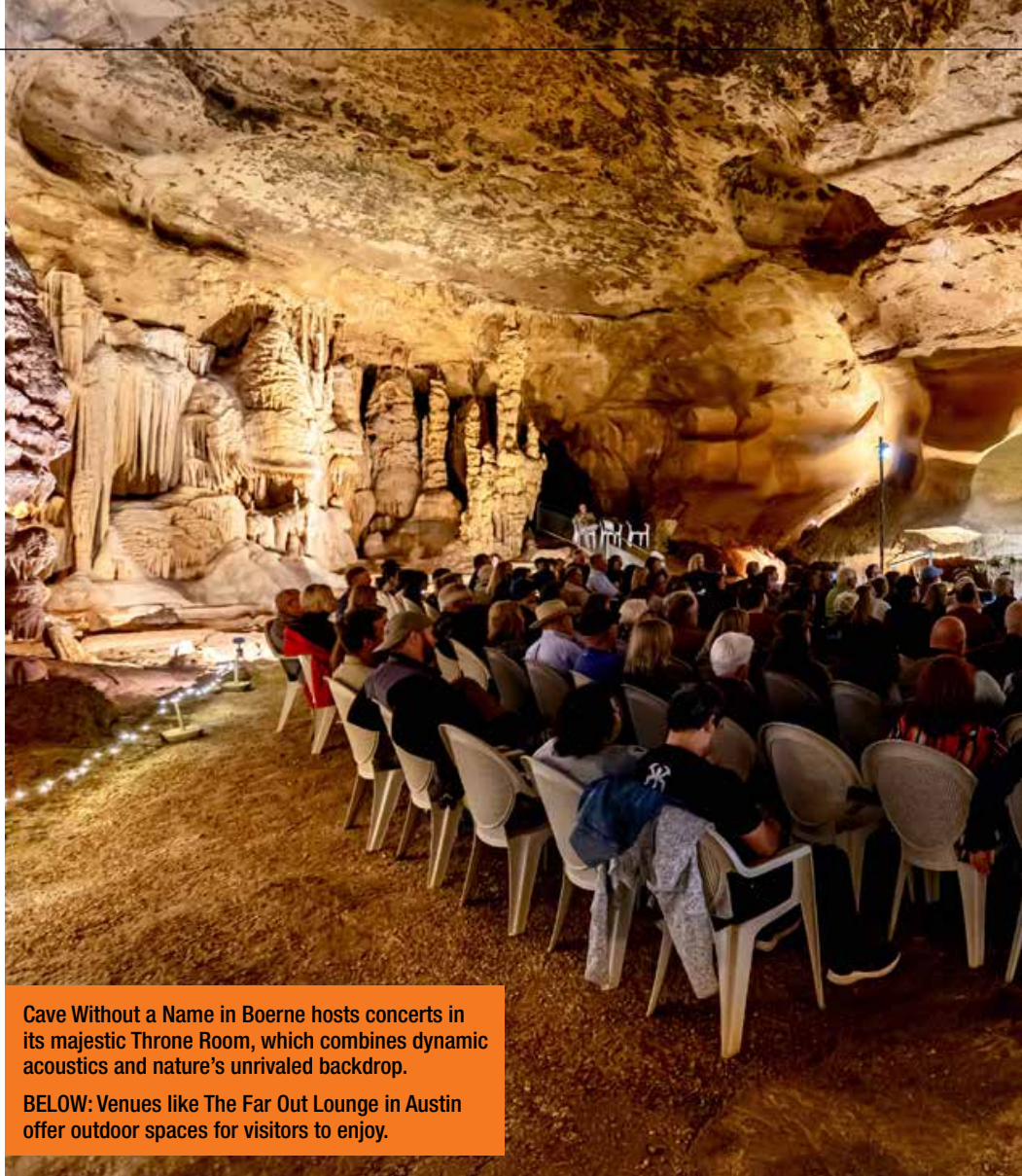
Story by KATHY DENES

**L**ike Texas itself, the Lone Star State's music scene is huge and diverse. Much of it can be found in Austin, the self-billed "Live Music Capital of the World." Besides well-known venues like the Moody Center — which hosts huge events like the upcoming Justin Timberlake tour — and the more intimate Moody Theater — home to "Austin City Limits" — the capital city has dozens of music-filled bars, halls and honky-tonks.

Options for outdoor listening abound as the weather warms, many at no cost. These include the Mother's Day Austin Symphonic Band concert, May 12 at 7 p.m., on the south steps of the state Capitol. Also downtown, the lawn at the Long Center hosts free drop-in concerts every Thursday evening from May 23 to Aug. 15. For event information, go to [thelongcenter.org/thedropin](http://thelongcenter.org/thedropin).

But you don't have to be in the music capital to enjoy live music in Texas. Just follow the highways and byways to great destinations throughout the state.

"Live music venues are the heartbeat of the Texas country music industry," says Linda Wilson, president of the Texas



Cave Without a Name in Boerne hosts concerts in its majestic Throne Room, which combines dynamic acoustics and nature's unrivaled backdrop.

BELOW: Venues like The Far Out Lounge in Austin offer outdoor spaces for visitors to enjoy.



Photo courtesy of Empire Control Room & Garage



Photo courtesy of Tom Summers

## BOERNE FOR MUSIC

Food, fun and family are the daily focus at Dog & Pony Grill, where there's a playground and basketball court for the young'uns and a fenced dog park for furry guests. On the weekends, the outdoor action shifts to three stages and a concrete dance floor as live music fills the air. There's no cost involved, except for occasional ticketed concerts and the food and drinks served at this full-service Boerne restaurant at 1481 S. Main St. Check out scheduled events such as the Cinco de Mayo Sunday Fun Day at [dogandponygrill.com](http://dogandponygrill.com).

Another Boerne business where music and dogs take center stage on weekends is 259 Brantley's Bistro at 259 S. Main St. Eclectic Hill Country food prepared by chef Joseph Brantley is the star attraction, but the recently remodeled outdoor dining area and stage are big draws on Friday and Saturday evenings and for Sunday brunch. Dogs are welcome to sit in on the fun, but they must be on a leash. For info, go to [259brantleysbistro.com](http://259brantleysbistro.com).



Photo courtesy of Alex Parker



Photo courtesy of Roger Ho

TOP: Free outdoor concerts are a big draw on Thursdays for The Drop-In at Austin's Long Center.

ABOVE: A former auto shop, the Empire Control Room & Garage is one of many eclectic music venues in Austin.

Cave Without a Name hosts a Mother's Day tribute with mariachi music on May 11 and a woodwind quintet honoring Memorial Day on May 25. The Old Blanco Courthouse is the site for Market Day on May 18. Kerrville's Folk Festival at Quiet Valley Ranch focuses on songwriting, May 23-June 9. 📍

Country Music Association. "From large cities to small, rural communities, live music is thriving."

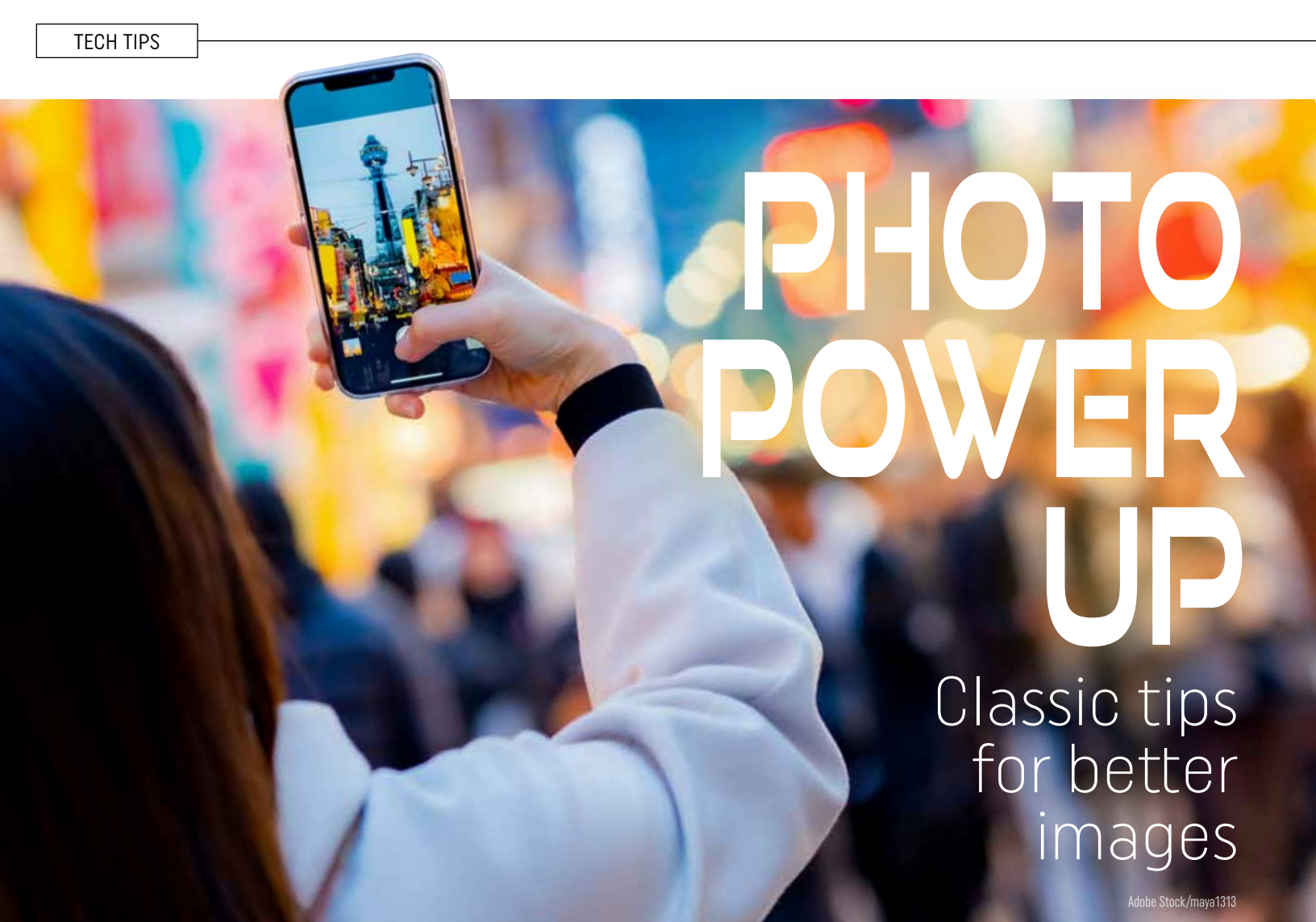
Linda says the association, which advocates for the Texas country music industry, actively supports and promotes live music throughout the state.

### BACK TO THE BASICS

You don't need to be there with Waylon and Willie and the boys to enjoy the daily music options offered at Luckenbach Texas. From the acoustic pickers' circle to concerts, there is plenty to enjoy at this rustic venue, whether in the centerpiece dance hall or on one of the outdoor stages. To see the schedule for this busy Fredericksburg landmark — where "everybody's somebody" — and to find lodging nearby, visit [luckenbachtexas.com](http://luckenbachtexas.com).

### 'NOTE'-ABLE EVENTS

Special events where music plays a big part are springing up all over. Austin hosts the Pecan Street Festival, May 4-5, showcasing dozens of musicians, and the Hot Luck Festival, May 23-26. On May 4, Brady's Mexican Colony Park celebrates Cinco de Mayo, and downtown Taylor hosts Blackland Prairie Day. Boerne's



# PHOTO POWER UP

Classic tips  
for better  
images

Adobe Stock/maya1313

**W**ith the right apps and services, a smartphone can connect you to work or school, adjust your home's thermostat, monitor a security system and provide on-the-go games, video and music. And yes, it can even make a phone call.

Not so long ago, one of today's most common smartphone functions — snapping photos — required a stand-alone camera. But, thanks to high-powered processors, sophisticated software and small, high-quality lenses, smartphones have people taking more photos than ever before.

While technology inspired innovation, some of the same rules engrained in traditional photography still apply to phone cameras. And tips from an earlier time can make noticeable improvements in the images you capture today.

**Lens cleaning:** It might sound basic, but a clean lens is essential for sharp photos. Before hitting the shutter button,

give your lens a gentle wipe with a soft cloth. Clean glass ensures sharper images, whether you're photographing landscapes, animals or family gatherings.

**Focus with care:** When you point your smartphone at a subject, software typically identifies where to focus. However, it's not always correct. Instead, tap on the screen where you want the focus. This way, your primary subject will be sharp and well-defined.

**Avoid digital zoom:** Relying on the digital zoom feature can lead to grainy, pixelated photos. Instead, use your feet to zoom in by walking toward your subject. The closer you are, the better the quality of your image. Remember, digital zoom sacrifices clarity, so opt for the good old "foot zoom" whenever possible.

**Enjoy the golden hour:** The golden hour — just after sunrise or before sunset — is a magical time for photography. The

soft, warm light enhances colors and adds a beautiful glow. Whether you're capturing rolling hills, a rustic barn or a friendly cow, try shooting during this time. The low angle of the sun creates long shadows and a cozy atmosphere.

**Put the grid to work:** Good composition elevates any photo. Follow the rule of thirds: Mentally divide your frame into a 3-by-3 grid and place your subject along these lines or at their intersections. Whether it's a lone tree against the sky or a farmer tending crops, consider the background, leading lines and balance.

**Sun strategy:** Particularly when shooting portraits or images with people in the foreground, avoid having the sun behind the subject of your photo, which can leave faces in shadows. Using a flash can help, as will photo editing software. But, when possible, photographers should have their back to the sun, which will pleasantly light the scene. 📱



# Recipe for resilience

## Historic Cooper's Original Pit Bar-B-Q eyes comeback

Story by JAMIE BIESIADA

Last December, Cooper's Original Pit Bar-B-Q in Mason experienced every restaurant owner's worst nightmare — a kitchen fire.

But owners Lindell and Pam Estes and their son, Dillon, the manager and pitmaster, are not deterred. They are embarking on a rebuild of the space, determined to get the joint's 71-year-old pits firing again, with plans to keep cooking until then thanks to a new food trailer.

"We're going to come back stronger," Dillon says. "I think adversity is good in life. This isn't the first time — when we first took over, we did a lot of remodeling at that time. It was pretty rough trying to run the business and then also remodel. Luckily, this isn't our first rodeo — we know what it's like to work through stuff, and we're going to get through it."

When they do, Cooper's promises a traditional barbecue experience where diners can taste the same recipes and cooking styles used by the late George Cooper when he founded the restaurant in 1953.

### A UNIQUE DINING EXPERIENCE

In 1983, George sold the restaurant to employee Duard Dockal. The Esteses, who had done the restaurant's accounting, purchased it from Duard in 2014.

Dillon agreed to train part time with Duard while he kept his day job as a diesel mechanic. He spent his weekends at Cooper's for several months, learning everything he could about the business. Building the evening fire so the coals are ready to be shoveled into George's original pits by 5 a.m. the next day is only part of this

complex cooking technique. Learning to adjust the heat based on the weather with only the use of a shovel, perfecting the coals and managing airflow created by opening/closing the ends of the pits are what makes this an art.

"It's a very historical, traditional experience," Dillon says. "I try to keep the same cooking methods as I was taught, and that Duard was taught by George Cooper. It's been nice to keep that traditional experience going through all these people."

It's also a unique experience. Customers actually choose their meat from the pits outside before heading inside to add homemade sides from a buffet-style bar. Meals at Cooper's are served on trays lined with butcher paper, another touch Dillon says makes the experience that much better.

### EVEN THE MEAT'S TRADITIONAL

A customer favorite is the brisket, Dillon says, as is his homemade sausage. Depending on the day, he also offers beef ribs, steaks, chicken, turkey, pork ribs, pork loin, 2-inch-thick chops, a variety of sausages and even goat. Goat used to be a more common offering at barbecue restaurants, before its price has made it more of a rarity, Dillon says. But it was traditionally offered at Cooper's, and he's keeping up that tradition at least some days of the week.

Sides include potato salad, coleslaw, baked beans, macaroni and cheese, creamed corn, green beans and more. Cooper's also offers a selection of desserts, including banana pudding, cookies, cheesecake and cobbler.

As the Esteses work to reopen Cooper's doors, Dillon has plans to start offering food via a new, 16-foot food trailer. 📱



### COOPER'S ORIGINAL PIT BAR-B-Q

810 San Antonio St., Mason  
325-347-6897  
[coopersbbqmason.com](http://coopersbbqmason.com)

Find the restaurant on Facebook as Cooper's Original Pit Bar-B-Q.

**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** The smoked meats and homemade sides can feed a hungry family.

Cooper's Original Pit Bar-B-Q has been a staple in Mason since 1953.

The original fire box is a nod to the restaurant's history.



# Living the HIGH LIFE

## Hot Air Balloon Rides Make for a Magical Experience

Story by JEN CALHOUN

**A**s a child growing up in California, Kim McCourt scrambled up hills, cliffs and trees to see the land below. “I had this need to see all those things I never even knew were there,” he says.

But when his family moved to the flatlands of Florida, he had to find a new way to see the world. In 1998, he took his first flight in a hot air balloon. “I learned that ballooning is, well, kind of magical,” says Kim, who is now a licensed hot air balloon pilot in the Orlando region. “There’s the exploration part of it, and you’ve got Mother Nature all around you.”

### ULTIMATE ADVENTURE

These days, Kim often travels the skies with tourists who want to experience a ride they can’t find at the region’s theme parks. For many, it’s a way to fly without being contained in the metal tube of an airplane. “In the balloon, you can see so much more, and you can actually feel everything,” Kim says. “You can breathe the air.”

There’s a spiritual component, too, says Mark West, vice president of the Balloon Federation of America. West, a former Navy pilot, also served as president and chief engineer of Aerostar International, which was once the largest hot air balloon manufacturer in the country.

“Ballooning has an incredible amount of magic to it,” Mark says. “Virtually everyone who sees one is enamored with them. I suppose they’re kind of representative of breaking free of the bonds of Earth and floating away.”

### UP AND AWAY

Across the country, hot air balloon rides are a popular pastime for families celebrating a special occasion or tourists looking for a new experience. Some passengers want to make memories with their families, while others go to commemorate important events, like marriage proposals, bucket lists and to spread the ashes of loved ones into the sky. “There are all kinds of stories,” Kim says. “The only things that stay the same are the sun coming up and people smiling.”

Photos by Kim McCourt



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Balloons get ready for a flight.

Most hot air balloons are operated by gas.

Hot air balloons take off during an event.



But as wide-open spaces dwindle, so do the balloon rides. Pilots simply don't have enough space to land. Weather's also been a factor, because unreliable winds can ground a pilot. Kim says he's seen this firsthand. "Over the last 15 years, the weather went from 275 days we could fly to probably 100 days," he says.

He worries other factors could cause ballooning to take a hit, too. "Fabric, wicker, propane, repairs and parts are way more expensive these days, so it takes more money to maintain them," Kim says.

### HOPE FLOATS

Despite the challenges, Kim still grins like a kid after an early-morning

flight. "There's nothing like it," he says. "When we lift off and the sun starts to rise, we might rest at the top of a tree and stare clear down to the bottom of a pond. Then we'll take off again and maybe rest right on top of the water where the mist is coming off the surface. It's up and down, up and down — gently. One person said it was like flying in the hand of God while getting a brain massage."

Balloonists enjoy attempting to describe the sensation of floating on — and with — the air, Mark says. "One of my good friends said it was 'having a destiny without a destination.' I think it attracts people who want to enjoy the beauty of the Earth and want to experience that kind of freedom." 🗨️

To catch a ride with Kim McCourt, visit [greaterorlandoballoonrides.com](http://greaterorlandoballoonrides.com). For more information on hot air ballooning and the people who are passionate about it, visit the Balloon Federation of America's Facebook page, or find the group at [bfa.net](http://bfa.net).



# 1783

## THE BIRTH OF THE HOT AIR BALLOON

### ▶ June 1783 — First unmanned flight

After a year or two of experimentation and invention, brothers Joseph Michel and Jacques Etienne Montgolfier publicly launch their version of a hot air balloon. It held no passengers. The balloon landed in the middle of a vineyard a little over a mile from where it had taken off.

### ▶ September 1783 — Confused farm animals

The first balloon flight with passengers launches in Versailles carrying a duck, a rooster and a sheep. The animals made it out alive. However, sources say the sheep kicked the duck and damaged its wing. King Louis XVI of France was pleased to learn that animals could breathe so high up.

### ▶ November 1783 — First human flight

Jean-François Pilâtre de Rozier and another passenger take the first untethered, human-occupied flight. The flight, which launched in France, lasted about 25 minutes and reached an altitude of about 500 feet. Less than two years later, de Rozier and his passenger would become the first people to die in a hot air balloon crash during a flight from France to England.

### ▶ December 1783 — Hydrogen balloon

Jacques Charles, a French physicist who had been experimenting with hydrogen balloons, boards one with a few colleagues. They traveled 25 miles in less than two hours. They also carried a barometer and a thermometer. Afterward, gas balloons became the preferred method of ballooning.

Sources: DragonFly Balloon Adventures, Virgin Balloon Flights, National Balloon Museum

# Business is *blooming*

## Wildseed Farms cultivates success

Story by JAMIE BIESIADA

This time of year, drivers on U.S. Highway 290 east of Fredericksburg enjoy one of the prettiest views in the country — a mile of colorful wildflower fields.

Wildseed Farms is behind the beautiful panorama. Owners John and Marilyn Thomas cultivated not only 41 species of wildflowers from seeds, but a destination that draws in 400,000 visitors each year with its picturesque fields, gift shop and more.

May marks the beginning of wildflower harvest season, when 10 combines take to the fields.

“You can actually watch the seeds coming in from the field, and it’s the coolest thing

you’ve ever seen,” says Jamie Martin, the farm’s general manager.

### INNOVATION ON THE FARM

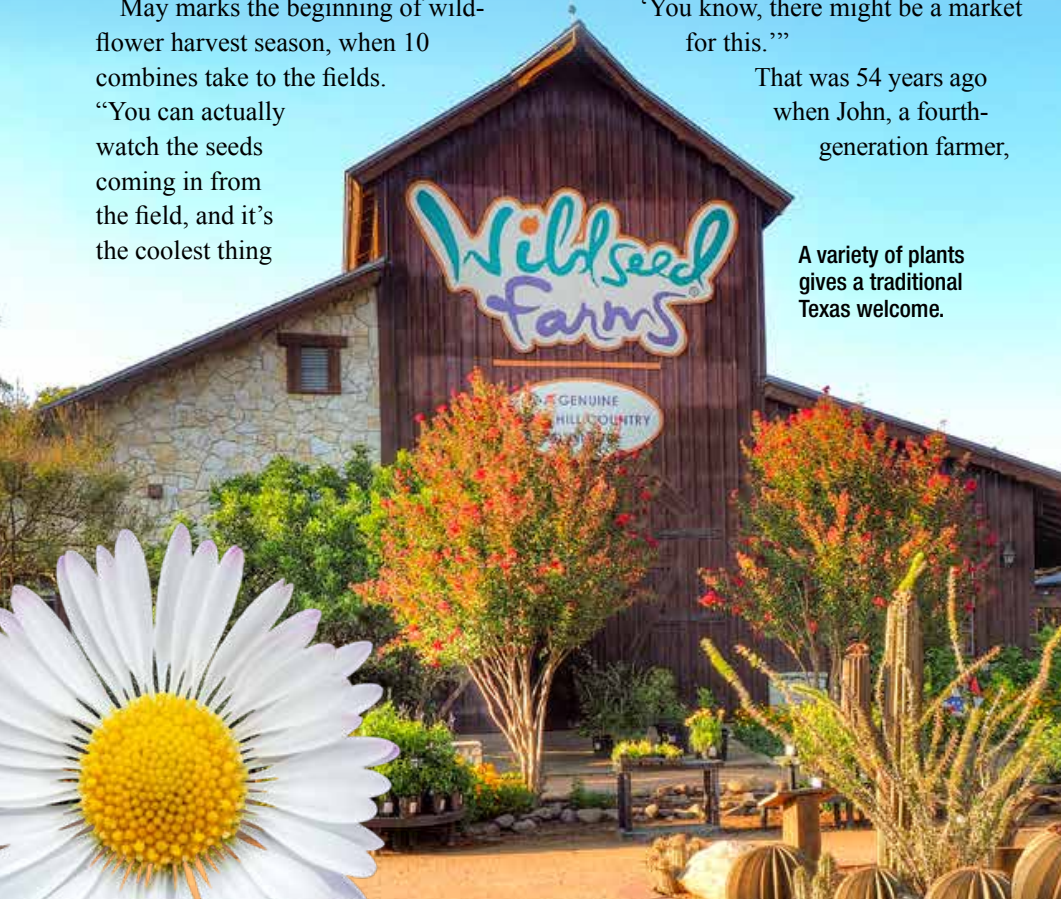
“In Texas, wildflowers are a big thing,” John says. “People who ride around in Texas in the springtime always take pictures of people on the roadsides, sitting in the bluebonnets or the other wildflowers. So, I started taking pictures of people taking pictures on the roadside, and I said, ‘You know, there might be a market for this.’”

That was 54 years ago when John, a fourth-generation farmer,

had a turf-seeding company. The landscape architects he worked with wanted to use native grasses and wildflowers, but nobody sold seeds in the necessary quantity.

John’s farming background kicked in and Wildseed Farms was born. It was new territory, though. In fact, John had to invent some of the equipment necessary to harvest the seeds.

Wildseed Farms has always attracted attention. It even caught the eye of former first lady Claudia Alta “Lady Bird”



A variety of plants gives a traditional Texas welcome.



ABOVE: Customers wander through the grounds searching for their next backyard project.



Wildseed Farms' gift shop carries a range of locally produced products.

Johnson. Lady Bird, John says, was excited the Thomases were growing wildflowers for roadside beautification. Beautification and conservation were among the efforts she championed as first lady. She was so impressed that she reached out to her connections at National Geographic Magazine. A story on Wildseed Farms appeared in the April 1988 issue and showcased one of John's inventions, a vacuum seed retriever.

Today, the Thomases' farm covers about 1,000 acres. Wildseed Farms is one of the biggest wildflower seed companies in the world based on pounds of seed produced, John says. It's the world's largest producer of Texas bluebonnet seeds, the state flower and John's favorite. Marilyn is partial to the cosmos, a summer annual.

In addition to producing the seeds, Wildseed conditions, dries, cleans, packages and sells them. "There's no middleman in our operation," John says. "It goes from the ground to the bag to the consumer."

Wildseed Farms' mail-order catalog has a customer base of around 600,000. Among its most popular products are mixes of wildflower seeds. Different varieties of seeds are combined by region of the country based on local growing conditions.



### FROM SEEDS TO SIPS

The Thomases' farmland outside Fredericksburg features trails among its wildflower crops, a live plant nursery, gardening products, a wine-tasting room, brewery, deli and Marilyn's gift shop.

"My wife, Marilyn, said, 'Look, if we bought some land up here, all I want is a little bitty gift shop, and you can grow some flowers.' Well, that's kind of gotten out of hand now," John says with a laugh.

The shop sells seeds, of course, but Marilyn takes great care in selecting other merchandise and sells food items for visitors to enjoy. "My shop is just full of very different things that people don't see because I don't go to shows," she says. "I have people come in and tell me all the time, 'You have such unique items here.' That's what I try to do. That's my little mark."

About nine years ago, Wildseed began growing grapevines and producing its own wine. Visitors can sample the final product in the tasting room. "This is a real-life, working wildflower farm and vineyard," John says. "During July and August, they can actually stroll on the walking trail and see us harvesting grapes for wine."

The farm hosts events throughout the year, including a wildflower celebration, a butterfly-tagging event, grape-stomping events and more. On Mother's Day weekend, a women's run winds its way through the flower fields.




The 2021 albarino is a citrus blend of honeydew, sea salt and grapefruit.

Photos courtesy of Wildseed Farms

### PEOPLE MAKE THE FARM

Jamie, the farm's general manager, says it's the people that really make the farm what it is. "John and Marilyn, I mean, they are salt of the earth — some of the sweetest people you have ever met in your entire life," she says. "And, they have been very fortunate to have found some really awesome, awesome people that have been with our company for 15 years, if not more."

Together, they have created a destination. Jamie recalls the farm's roots as a wheat field. John and Marilyn planted every tree, watered by hand via 5-gallon buckets. The gift shop started out as a pop-up tent by the road.

"What I really enjoy is how everything out there has just grown, but it's grown organically," Jamie says. "It wasn't programmed, it wasn't necessarily pre-thought, it just developed naturally. It just has always had a little niche here in Fredericksburg." 

*If you go...*

### WILDSEED FARMS

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# OLDIES

## but goodies

Classic recipes create timeless tastes

Although we love creating new recipes in keeping with today's tastes and trends, there's something sweet about a vintage recipe that can still hold its own. Get ready for a trip down memory lane with these old-fashioned recipes we still love.

From classic chicken tetrazzini to a delightful lemon icebox pie, these vintage recipes are worth holding onto. They may have been gone from our culinary repertoire for a decade or two, but they certainly are not forgotten.

Ready for some nostalgia and satisfied smiles at your table? Give these retro recipes a try, and they're sure to stir up good memories.



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Photography by **Mark Gilliland**  
Food Styling by **Rhonda Gilliland**



## CHICKEN TETRAZZINI

No roundup of retro recipes is complete without a classic chicken tetrazzini.

- 16 ounces linguini or spaghetti, cooked
- 1/2 cup unsalted butter, softened
- 4 chicken breasts, cooked and diced
- 2 cans cream of chicken soup
- 2 cups sour cream
- 1 teaspoon garlic salt
- 1 tablespoon chopped parsley
- 1/2 teaspoon pepper
- 1 cup chicken broth
- 2 tablespoons Parmesan cheese, grated
- 2 cups mozzarella cheese shredded

Preheat the oven to 350 F. Grease a 9-by-13-inch baking dish and set aside.

Cook noodles to al dente, according to the box instructions. Drain and set aside. Meanwhile, in a large bowl, combine chicken, soup, sour cream, butter, chicken broth, garlic salt, parsley and pepper. Mix well, then stir in cooked noodles. Pour mixture into prepared baking dish. Sprinkle both cheeses on top and bake, uncovered, for 36-42 minutes, until cheeses are melted and casserole is bubbling.

## CREAMED CORN

If you can't wait until summer to take advantage of sweet Silver Queen corn, use the sweetest corn you can find.

- 13 ears of fresh corn, husks and silks removed
- 1 cup evaporated milk
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/8 teaspoon pepper

Remove silks from corn. Cream the corn by cutting the kernels from the cobs, then scrape the

corn cobs with the back of the knife to get all the "milk" and pulp. Transfer creamed corn to a large skillet. Add milk, butter and salt. Cook over low heat, stirring often, for 30 minutes. If corn becomes too thick, add more milk for desired consistency. Sprinkle with pepper. Makes 6-8 servings.



## CLASSIC SOUTHERN CORNBREAD SALAD

- 1 skillet of your favorite cornbread
- 1 cup diced onions
- 1 green or red bell pepper, seeded and diced
- 1 cup diced tomato
- 1 15-ounce can whole kernel corn, drained
- 1 pound bacon, cooked until crisp and crumbled
- 2-3 cups mayonnaise
- 1 package ranch dressing mix

Crumble cooled cornbread into a large bowl. Add onions, bell pepper, diced tomatoes, corn and bacon. Stir until well combined. In a separate bowl, stir together mayonnaise and ranch mix until well-blended. Add mayonnaise dressing mixture to salad and stir until fully mixed. Cover and refrigerate at least 2 hours before serving.



## LEMON ICEBOX PIE

Finish your retro meal with a slice of this much-loved pie.

### Crust:

- 1 1/2 cups graham cracker crumbs
- 2 tablespoons granulated sugar
- 7 tablespoons butter, melted

### Filling:

- 2 14-ounce cans sweetened condensed milk
- 1 cup fresh lemon juice
- 5 large egg yolks
- 1 tablespoon lemon zest
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 2 tablespoons powdered sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract

For the crust: Preheat the oven to 350 F. Combine the cracker crumbs, sugar and butter in a medium bowl. Mix with a fork until the crumbs are well coated and stick together when pinched. Press the mixture into the bottom and up the sides of a 9-inch pie plate. Bake until set, about 10 minutes. Set aside to cool slightly, about 10 minutes.

For the filling: Whisk together the condensed milk, lemon juice, egg yolks and lemon zest in a medium bowl until combined. Pour the filling into the crust and bake until the center is set but still slightly jiggly, about 15 minutes. Let cool for 30 minutes, then refrigerate until chilled, about 2 hours.

Once pie is chilled, beat the heavy cream, powdered sugar and vanilla in a large bowl with a mixer on medium speed until soft peaks form. Spoon onto the center of the pie and serve.

Alternatively: Buy a premade graham cracker crust as a timesaver. 📌



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