

**FOOD AND WINE  
-IN- Buffalo Gap**

No matter what the mercurial April weather, the annual Buffalo Gap Wine and Food Summit draws a congenial crowd to this Abilene-area outpost.

*Text by* CHARLES LOHRMANN  
*Photographs by* J. GRIFFIS SMITH



The Perini Ranch windmill stands guard outside the dining pavilion where wine and food enthusiasts share a lavish dinner prepared by Stephan Pyles' crew.



I wouldn't swear to the year, but I'm relatively sure it was 2005. Fortunately the year doesn't matter, because the memory is timeless. The scene is the oak-and-cedar grove on the grounds adjacent to the Perini Ranch Steakhouse, just a short hop down FM 89 from the village of Buffalo Gap. The late-morning weather is perfect Texas April: blue skies, a velvety soft, cool breeze diluting a touch of the sun's heat. Tables dotting the grove are draped with white cloth and set with cutlery and numerous wine glasses at each setting. One long table, actually several

ABOVE: 2011 Wine and Food Summit guest of honor Jacques Pépin with Summit co-host and co-founder Tom Perini.



ABOVE: Tom Perini, left; Stephan Pyles, with microphone; and Richard Becker of Becker Vineyards, chat with the crowd of Summiteers at the Buffalo Gap Wine and Food Summit. INSET LEFT: Stephan Pyles created this grilled beef with bordelaise for the 2011 event. INSET RIGHT: Another of Pyles' accomplishments, a shot of mussel-infused cream soup.

six-footers lined up end-to-end, is set with even more glasses—enough to accommodate the dozen or so experts who will soon be holding forth therefrom.

People take their places in twos and threes and talk quietly as they move among the tables. I had taken my seat a little ahead of the crowd and was pretending to review some notes as I daydreamed. If I'd seen angels floating overhead, it would not have been a surprise for me, for the scene was heavenly.

One surprise did come in a few minutes, though. Or at least, it ambled toward the scene. This surprise appeared in the form of a half-dozen Longhorns. About 40 yards away, then 30, the massive cattle, all sporting lengthy horns, plodded slowly in the direction of the tables, making the expected grunts and groans. The scene could have been staged as part of a Lone Star movie set, and, in fact, the people at the tables reacted nonchalantly, as if the creatures were only props.

Lisa Perini, however unruffled, was not allowing the scenario to achieve a screenplay denouement. Moving quickly, waving a clipboard and noisily urging the Longhorns to change course, she convinced the animals to stop, switch their tails a few times, and then slowly turn and stroll back from whence they came.

"They just wanted to know what was going on," Ms. Perini said to the onlookers, who had registered just a hint of concern.

What the cattle missed, even if their attempted participation is now in the event's history, was the Buffalo Gap Wine and Food Summit, an annual gathering of chefs, vintners, and associated sommeliers, restaurateurs, and enthusiasts who covey up one weekend each April to share stories, insights, and a hyper-developed appreciation of wine and food.

This is not an uncommon combination, you might say, noting the plethora of events laying claim to similar culinary turf, and you might be right. Except that the Buffalo Gap event has stayed small enough to be collegial and comparatively low-key, even as it attracts a who's-who of food-world luminaries.

**F**ast forward from the dreamy weather of 2005 to 2011, when the natural forces were not so kind. Driving west of Fort Worth on I-20 on my way to the Summit, heavy smoke from wildfires blanketed the road so that traffic slowed to a crawl.

The smoke prevented flights into Abilene and stranded Summit special guests Jacques Pépin, his daughter Claudine, and longtime colleague Jean-Claude Szurdak in Dallas, so the Perinis had to fetch them in a Suburban. And the wind off the high plains brought more red dust to add to what was swirling around Buffalo Gap.

But the show does go on. Successfully. Cavernous, chandelier-illuminated tents protect Summitgoers and Lisa Perini notes that, while packing for the return trip, Claudine wrapped her red-dust-covered boots in plastic so she could show friends back home. And Pépin himself marvels at the red clay, as he and Jean-Claude engage in a mock swordfight near the Perini Ranch fire pits, pretending

**Each April, an international cast of food and wine luminaries and enthusiasts gather in Buffalo Gap to share stories, insights, and a hyper-developed appreciation of wine and food.**

Revolution, a local high school band, entertains Summit picnickers with a boisterous extravaganza of fiddle music.





Through the tent windows, diners and wine-tasters can keep track of the ranch-y buildings that comprise Perini's operation.

## Cavernous, chandelier-illuminated tents protect Summit- goers, regardless of weather conditions.

to spar with sticks of mesquite they snatched from the nearby woodpile.

Even though he's far from his native France, Jacques Pépin seems right at home in Buffalo Gap, entertaining enchanted fans with anecdotes and asking questions about Texas. This is just the sort of interaction that makes the Buffalo Gap event unusual, if not unique.

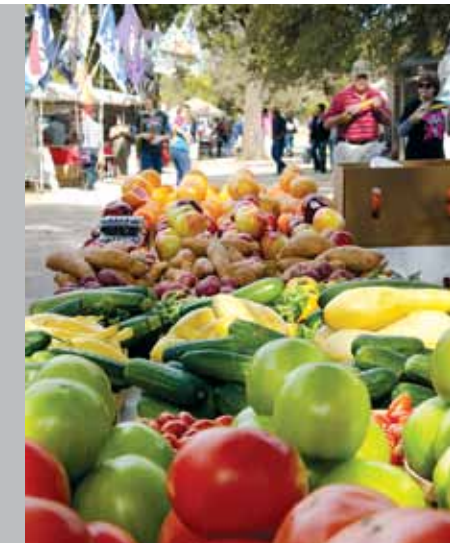
"It started in 2003 with Fess Parker," Lisa explains, as we share a basket of fried quail drumsticks in the steakhouse she and husband Tom operate six nights a week, year-round. "He flew here to take us to Austin in his plane and started in with the idea of an event. 'But it has to be serious' he told us. Not a festival. No turkey legs. And no face painting."

At this point in the conversation with Lisa Perini, I'm imagining Fess Parker not as the sophisticated winemaker he became later in life, but as



When the weather permits, the tent sides open up to let in the breezes. Buffalo Gap's elevation makes its weather more like the Hill Country than the High Plains to the north.

## Wine, Food... and a Farmer's Market



**ON YOUR WAY** to or from the Buffalo Gap Wine and Food Summit at Perini Ranch, stop and visit the historic village of Buffalo Gap, which takes its name from the seasonal migration of the great southern buffalo herd before the late 19th Century. Visit Buffalo Gap Historic Village and keep an eye out for the special events on the Old Settlers' Reunion Grounds. Scheduled events include the monthly farmer's market, barbecue cook-offs, and flea markets.

Texas hero Davy Crockett, the character Parker played in a television series decades ago. I don't ask the Perinis, but I believe it is safe to assume that Parker did not wear the coonskin cap on the private jet that night as he ferried the group to Austin via jet and laid out suggestions for the event that would become the Buffalo Gap Wine and Food Summit. Since Parker's death in 2010, his family continues to operate its winery in California, and also continues to take part in the Buffalo Gap Summit.

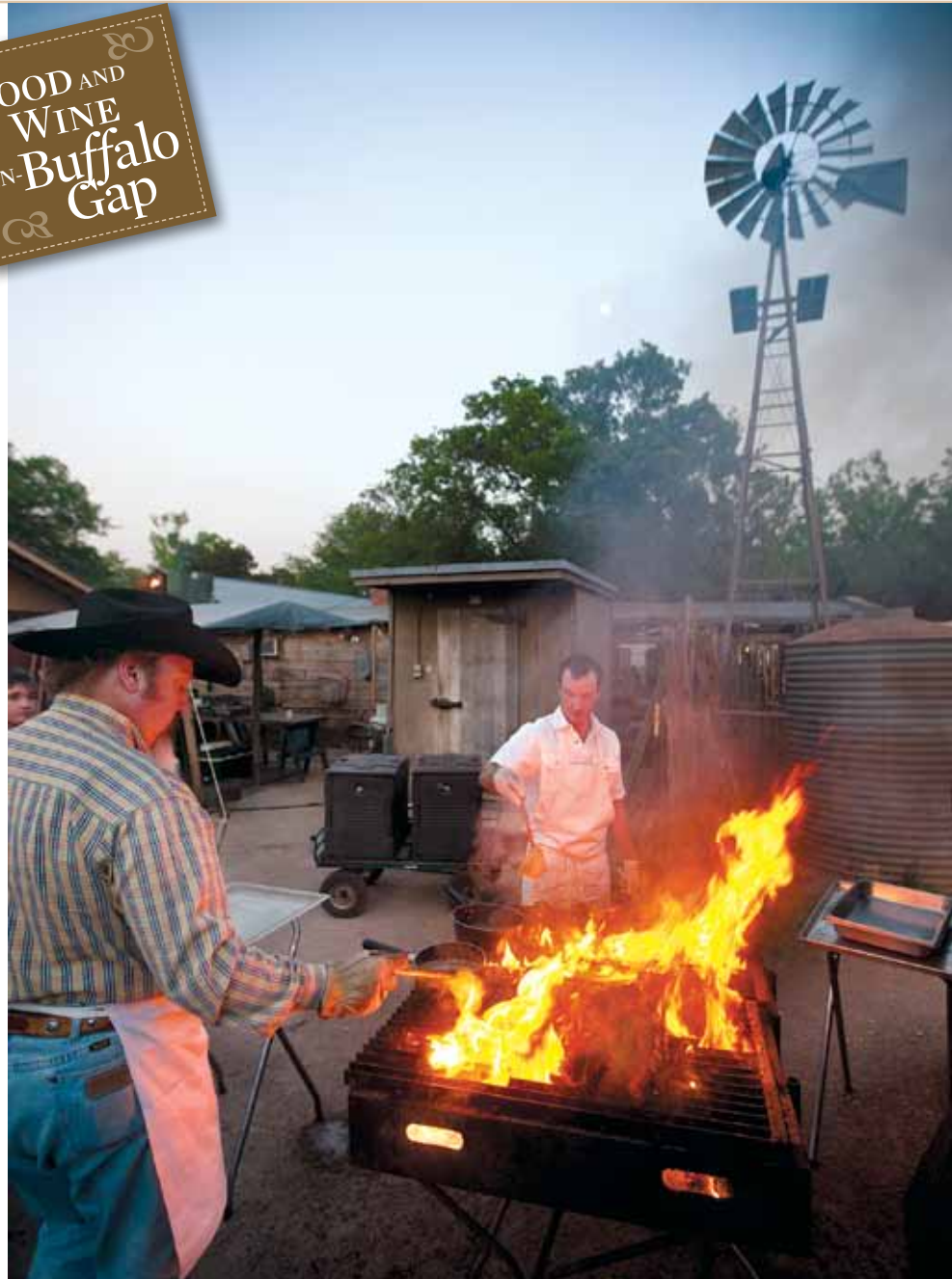
Another founder of the Summit who remains active is Richard Becker, who collaborates with his wife Bunny and their family to operate Becker Vineyards—just off US 290, between Stonewall and Fredericksburg.

"Tom Perini and I are from Abilene and Fess Parker is from San Angelo," Becker says, "so we wanted to do something to celebrate an unlikely aspect of the culture in that part of the world.

"We wanted to invite some luminaries each year," he continues. "This year we have three winemakers from Italy coming, and of course Stephan Pyles comes to cook a fabulous meal. And it's not at all a mass event. I believe this year the event sold out in two hours."

During the first morning event of the 2011 event, Becker reviews the mission of the Summit to the assembled wine-tasting crowd as he trades barbs with master sommelier and noted Texas-wine-world-figure Guy Stout. As the tasting begins, Stout masters the ceremony

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Cooks at Perini Ranch Steakhouse, site of the Buffalo Gap Wine and Food Summit, burn down cord after cord of mesquite to make the coals on which they grill the steaks.

and urges comments from the panel of assembled winemakers who hail from Texas, California, and France. A legion of volunteers systematically pours multiple flights for everyone in the entire tent. White. Rosé. Red. By noon, Stout is able to announce, “Well, we’ve tasted 15 wines before lunch and, where I come from, that’s living right.” (A quick note to the uninitiated: It is possible to taste 15 wines before noon and not suffer any ill effects. A true tasting is just that. No drinking required.)

Because the dusty, windy conditions of Friday give way to a sunny, mild Saturday, the morning’s tasting is followed by a picnic on the grounds, with Perini’s trademark fried chicken (not as famous as the steaks, but gaining popular ground) with cucumber salad and, for dessert, the light, buttery bread pudding.

Later, the grounds will teem with a crowd gathered to test the fare presented

RIGHT: A panel of wine-makers join the wine tasting to add their special insights. (INSET) Tony Truchard, native of Cat Springs, Texas, operates Truchard Vineyards in the Napa Valley.



by 13 Texas chefs and drink the wine of 18 vintners. It’s an opportunity to talk with the chefs, their staff members, and the vintners about how they work and what secrets they use to make their products different.

As Richard Becker explains, “We wanted to celebrate food and wine in an

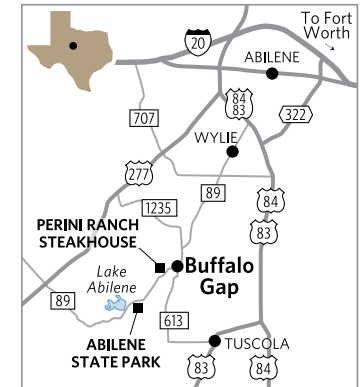
unexpected way in an unexpected place.” Tom Perini waxes philosophical, “When you make that connection with the wine and food experts, it will change your life.”

A toast to life-changing experiences. **TH**

Decades of cooking experience: Tom Perini, left, in his horse-trailer-turned-kitchen with Jacques Pépin, Stephan Pyles, and Jean-Claude Szurdak.



**TH ESSENTIALS**



## Buffalo Gap Wine and Food Summit

FOR MORE information on the event; [www.buffalogapsummit.com](http://www.buffalogapsummit.com).

**Abilene Convention and Visitors Bureau**, 101 North 1st St., 800/727-7704; [www.abilenevisitors.com](http://www.abilenevisitors.com).

**Abilene State Park**, 150 Park Road 32, Tuscola, 325/572-3204; [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/spdest/findadest/parks/abilene](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/spdest/findadest/parks/abilene).

**Perini Ranch Steakhouse**, On FM 89, a five-minute drive from Buffalo Gap, 800/367-1721; [www.periniranch.com](http://www.periniranch.com).

**Becker Vineyards**, 464 Becker Farms Road, Stonewall, 830/644-2128; [www.beckervineyards.com](http://www.beckervineyards.com).

**Stephan Pyles restaurants**, including Samar by Stephan Pyles and Fuego by Stephan Pyles, 214/580-7000; [www.stephanpyles.com](http://www.stephanpyles.com).

*TH Photography Editor GRIFF SMITH is a vegetarian, so his favorite item on the Perini Ranch menu is the bread pudding. TH Editor-in-Chief CHARLES LOHRMANN suggests taking a look at the video clip of Perini and Pyles: Texas Food Two Ways, at [www.texashighways.com](http://www.texashighways.com).*