



Weekend retreat

Near Brenham, the
Fertittas' ranch is fit
for the whole family

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Photography by JULIE SOEFER

From the rural road in Washington County it's easy to miss the dusty gravel drive that winds around in a big loop on the ranch where Houstonians Jason Fertitta and Courtney Hill Fertitta go to relax on weekends in cooler months.

The 160-acre spread, called Spanish Oaks Ranch, is a city kid's paradise, with rolling fields and giant oak trees with thick sprawling branches perfect for climbing. There's a small lake for fishing, and every now and then, cattle from a neighbor may wander through, but mostly it's a serene place with a big



SHIPLAP AND SIMPLE NATURAL MATERIALS ARE PART OF THE MODERN FARMHOUSE STYLE IN THIS GUEST ROOM AT JASON FERTITTA'S AND COURTNEY HILL FERTITTA'S BRENHAM RANCH.

TOP LEFT: HOUSTON INTERIOR DESIGNER COURTNEY HILL FERTITTA.





THE FERTITTAS BOUGHT A SMALL HOME ON 160 ACRES IN BRENHAM AND LATER ADDED THIS GUEST HOUSE TO ACCOMMODATE FRIENDS AND FAMILY.

blue sky and fluffy white clouds.

When the Fertittas were contemplating a weekend home within easy driving distance they decided it would either be a lake house or a small ranch, said Courtney, principal at Courtney Hill Interiors in Houston. The ranch became available and they jumped on it.

Jason, who recently left Morgan Stanley to launch his own wealth management firm, Americana Partners, grew up visiting a his family's vacation home in Chappell Hill, where he and his brothers rode horses, swam, ate s'mores by the fire and looked up at the stars in the night sky.

He and his wife bought the farm in 2010, when their eldest daughter, now 11, was a baby. Twins — a son and a daughter, now 8 — followed. Their big extended family is in Houston, and they have friends in Austin — all welcomed invitations for weekends in the country.

"It's our time away from Houston with each other as a family," said Courtney, 45. "With both Jason and myself working, it was a way



THE GUEST HOUSE PORCH LOOKS OUT OVER THIS SHADY PATIO WHERE THEY INSTALLED AN OUTDOOR PIZZA OVEN.

to get out of town and spend quality time with each other and as a family. The kids have grown up here, and it's interesting to see how their activities out here are different from in the city. Here they go looking for wildflowers and explore. In Houston, it's more fast paced, they're with friend and they're outside but they do different things."

"It sounds crazy, but as busy as we all are in our city lives, you go out there and one day feels like two days in terms of time passing," said Jason. "Your blood pressure goes down the second you drive onto the property."

Returning home

Courtney and Jason were sweethearts at the former Lee High School in Houston, and their romance lasted through college in different schools — she at the University of Texas and he at St. Edward's University, both in Austin.

During a summer internship with contemporary interior designer Victorian Hagan, Courtney fell in love with her future



THE MASTER BEDROOM IN THE MAIN HOUSE HAS RUSTIC CEILING BEAMS. THE HOME WAS BUILT ABOUT 30 YEARS AGO IN THE STYLE OF “SUNDAY HOMES” COMMON IN CENTRAL TEXAS IN THE EARLY 1800S.

career and with New York City. The couple moved there for six years after college before the terrorist attacks of 9/11 prompted their hometown return.

Jason was working at Lehman Brothers and Courtney — anticipating an eventual return to Houston — had shifted from working for Hagan to a similar job with Greg Jordan, a more traditional interior designer with Southern roots. They married on Sept. 1, 2001, and 10 days later, two airplanes flew into the twin towers of the World Trade Center.

“I was walking through the lobby of the World Trade Center 10 to 15 minutes before first plane hit. I was next door, at 3 World Financial and was on the 50th floor when the first plane hit,” Jason said. His employer told everyone to stay put, but when another plane hit the second building, they headed down the stairwell.

The Fertittas lived a 45-minute walk from where he worked, but it was the only way to get home that day. He headed up the West

Side Highway, able to stay out of the falling ash that blanketed much of the city.

“By the time I got home, both towers had fallen. It was a really scary time and not a great place to be that morning,” he said. “Our CEO said we could never go back into the buildings because they were damaged. He said anyone planning to move to a branch in the next year are leaving today.”

The newlyweds bought a Land Rover, packed what they could and drove home to Houston. Today they keep that vehicle at their Brenham farm.

Back in Houston, Courtney needed to find a job quickly and decided to launch her own firm — Courtney Hill Interiors — which is now 18 years old. She’s now part of a team of four who design homes all over the city and elsewhere, with classic style and a fresh, contemporary edge.

In the years they’ve been back, they’ve nurtured their careers and their family, and buying the vacation home was part of that effort.

Accommodating friends

Within a few years of buying the ranch it was clear that the sweet little two-bedroom home couldn’t accommodate everyone they wanted to bring with them.

They planned a big party barn with a guest suite, a catering kitchen and room for the couple’s Airstream recreational vehicle and Jason’s small car collection — including the Land Rover. Deciding that would not be enough for overnight guests, they added a guest house to their construction plans and made their rural oasis one they can share with plenty of people.

The guest house — a modern farmhouse design — has two bedrooms and bathrooms, plus a living area with a tall fireplace on one end and a kitchen on the other. A big slab of dark gray leathered quartzite covers a large island that has a deep, farm-style sink and plenty of built-in storage. Perimeter cabinets are topped with stainless steel.

The barn is bright, white and covered in shiplap. Casual luxury is the guiding principle

THE GUEST HOUSE LIVING ROOM HAS RUSTIC TOUCHES, SUCH AS ANTLER SCONCES, COWHIDE PILLOWS AND A TALL, STONE FIREPLACE. COURTNEY HILL FERTITTA WORKED WITH C2 ART ADVISORS TO FIND UNIQUE TEXAS PHOTOGRAPHY FOR THE HOME.







EVEN A FARMHOUSE BATHROOM CAN HAVE LUXURIOUS FINISHES, SUCH AS THE WALL MOUNT FAUCET FROM FIXTURES & FITTINGS.



A CUSTOM RANGE HOOD AND DECORATIVE SUBWAY TILE BACKSPLASH BY ANN SACKS IS THE JEWELRY OF THE KITCHEN.

in this building, found in little things such as the detailed trim around the edges of subway tile in the kitchen, layers of window treatments in the bedrooms or high-end plumbing fixtures in the bathrooms.

In the main home, where the Fertittas stay when they visit, Courtney bought new furniture but didn't need to do much else.

This building, which Brenham residents call a "Hale House," comes with its own story. It was built nearly 30 years ago by C.W. Hale, who mimicked the early 1800s "Sunday Houses" in Fredericksburg. German immigrants were enticed there with cheap farmland and a small lot in town, where they eventually built tiny, utilitarian houses where they'd stay on weekends when they ventured in to load up on supplies on Saturdays and attend church on Sundays.

Hale Houses are sprinkled throughout Washington and Fayette counties, and they're considerably smaller than their city home in River Oaks, but the Fertittas love it for its "just enough" space and charm.

Rustic exposed beams still line the ceilings, and the original wood floors, windows and shutters have had plenty of care over the years. The screened-in porch at the back of the house gets a lot of use, when they sit out there in front of a warm fire in the winter or catch the breezes in spring and fall.

The kitchen has shiplap, and old wood beams provide a structure for the wood-plank ceiling above them, from which hangs a deer-antler chandelier. A simple, stone-topped table brings a modern touch to this end of the house.

The master bedroom is a simple rectangle, but it's big enough to hold a king-size bed and two nightstands, a dresser, comfortable chair and a footboard bench. There's a small powder room elsewhere, but the master bathroom is where all five in the family clean up.

"This is it, and it's perfect," Courtney said.

A second bedroom is a place for the kids to sleep, but most often they tumble up the stairs to the sleeping loft, a large open space that feels more like summer camp with its twin

beds and bean bag chairs. "Wherever one sleeps, that's where all three sleep," she said.

Having fun

A nearby rancher rents some of their land, so it's not unusual for cattle to wander through, grazing on the tall grass. The Fertitta children have been around the animals so long they treat them like pets, giving them names and acting as if there's a new member of the family each time a calf is born.

Sometimes they fish for perch or bass in the 5-acre man-made lake not far from their home. Jason speculates that the farmer stocked it with bass, but he also wonders if ducks who drop in have inadvertently brought some fish eggs with them.

"I'm not a big fisherman, but I do enjoy it. I fish with the kids, and at their age, it's me trying to keep them from hooking themselves. That's full-time work," he said.

He likes to play golf, too, and has set up a tee box and putting green so he has to tee off



IN THE GUEST HOUSE, THE KITCHEN IS THE FOCAL POINT, AND A LARGE ISLAND IS COVERED IN DRAMATIC LEATHERED QUARTZITE WHILE BACK CABINETS HAVE STAINLESS-STEEL COUNTERTOPS.

over the small lake to land on the green. It's just a 65- to 70-yard chip away but Jason laughs at the number of balls that are likely on the lake's bottom.

There are plenty of ways to relax, and one the Fertittas love most is cooking. Jason's Italian family has many food traditions — including "Sunday Sauce," a tomato sauce that might have any number of ingredients in it. Jason (who is not related to Landry's owner Tilman Fertitta) describes his version as like a

bolognese, but with more meat.

"When we have people here or in Houston, there's a menu. This is not steaks and baked potatoes. There are appetizers, pasta, protein, salad, the yummiest garlic bread ever, desserts. It's a lot," Courtney said. "Jason loves to cook, and his family has always had a tradition of the men in the family who on Sundays will make lunch together and they will sit and catch up."

Their outdoor patio in Brenham — between

the main house and guest house — has a big pizza oven, so that's often on the menu, too.

It's not uncommon for the family to invite friends over for New Year's Eve, where three or four families with children of different ages all celebrate.

Not far away is the celebrated Truth BBQ, owned by pitmaster Leonard Botello IV. Jason and restaurateur Johnny Carrabba are both investors in Truth's Houston outpost, which opened in the Heights in January. The Fertittas are such fans of the smoked meats — not to mention their sides and towering cakes — that Jason now sends smoked turkeys and briskets to his clients during the holidays.

Modern landscape

The Spanish Oaks Ranch spread feels completely natural, just the way landscape architect Lanson B. Jones planned it.

When he met with Courtney, his charge was to give the landscaping a modern feel, working in rectangles and terracing places around the buildings where there were elevation changes.

Dwarf olive trees serve as hedges, and Silhouette sweetgum and Mexican sycamore trees stand in lines along the sides of the buildings. Jones said they opted for sweetgums because they're tall and straight, but also because they're deciduous and mark the change of seasons when they drop leaves and later bud out again.

He created walking paths framed with Corten steel and filled with gravel, crushed limestone in walkways and blackstar gravel in tree beds.

Jones helped them install synthetic turf for the emerald green tee box and putting green, and since the Fertittas had synthetic grass in the backyard of their River Oaks home, they wondered about adding some to the ranch.

Jones' goal was to make the areas with synthetic grass seem like works of art, so he created them in L-shaped rectangles around the home. Those rectangles are trimmed in the Corten steel and are slightly elevated.

Jason's man cave — the party barn — got some attention, too, with large concrete pads that were given a rock-salt finish. He wanted to be able to roll his cars out of the barn to wash them, but didn't want to create a mud puddle.

Jones described the technique as one in which chunky rock salt is sprinkled on top of the wet concrete and after the concrete dries you spray off the salt, which dissolves and leaves little pits. This is also called a European finish, and Jones said it's often used in modern-style landscaping projects.