



BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY



THERE IS SOMETHING SPECIAL IN THE
ROLLING HILLS OF ROUND TOP, TEXAS.

WORDS BY **SHELLY BROWN** / PHOTOS BY **PHIL KLINE**

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twice a year, designers, artists, and treasure hunters gather along an 11-mile stretch of Highway 237. It is one of the largest and most reputable antique displays in the nation. While the crowds meander through aisles of antique farm tables and untraditional art, Sheila Youngblood gathers her team to prepare an experience for the creative community flocking to her beloved town.

Founded in 2009 by owner Sheila Youngblood, Rancho Pillow grew from what was originally meant to be a family retreat, into a tight-knit community headquarters for creative souls. Amongst grassy pastures and acres of cattle ranches, Sheila's gravel driveway feels special as soon as you pull in. The eclectic nature of Rancho Pillow is an authentic extension of its owner. Sheila attributes her style to her late Grandma Nellie. "She was a big influence and a true cultivator of my artistic expression," says Sheila. Growing up, Grandma Nellie found expression in painting and music, doing it all while dancing the jitterbug in turquoise chiffon kaftans. Days spent after school with Grandma Nellie were filled with drawing, singing, and playing. They recorded songs from *Dr. Zhivago* on cassette tape and dressed up to sing Broadway tunes while Nellie played the pipe organ. Sheila's childhood was filled with these creative memories. "She invited me into a deeper place creatively at a young age, a place that has never left me."

The grand host of Rancho Pillow knows how to invite her guests into that feeling. Adorned in a striped kaftan, covered in jewels, and sporting an exaggerated top hat, Sheila sets the stage even before you walk into one of the cabins of Rancho Pillow. The unique bohemian style that Sheila has created bleeds through every inch of the property. Bright orange

painted walls, Mexican folk art, vintage rugs, and neon signs mingle together in this creative dwelling.

Even more authentically cultivated than its esthetic is its purpose. After its construction was complete, a music producer had contacted Sheila about using the ranch as a getaway for a band that was running into creativity blocks. What was supposed to be a weekend away from studio walls turned into several weeks of revamping an entire album. The creative haven that Sheila had created allowed the musicians to rediscover their sound as well as each other. "I drove up the gravel drive one night and saw the fiddle player rehearsing on the porch as the sun was setting. I thought, This is it. This is why." She knew there was music to be made here, and creative walls to be broken down. "This place invites your heart to open up," Sheila says.

This type of creativity and self-expression is not always easy to find, nor easy to celebrate. Part of the dream of Rancho Pillow is to be an example of cultivating healthy, creative communities around the world. "In communities where creativity is valued and celebrated, there is a healthy culture first among the groups of creatives themselves," Sheila says. "When there is competition and judgement and criticism, we shut each other down instead of lifting each other up." As we watch creative flourishing being replaced with moral legalities, Sheila had been able to show her children a different perspective. In the same way that good values and manners start at home, so does flourishing creativity. When asked about her own children, Sheila shared, "They have been enveloped in the chaos and the comfort that comes from the spirit of people who are living an artful life. Their eyes have been wide open." Sheila believes that establishing creativity early on causes the whole world to look different to a child and opens up limitless opportunities.

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Left Page: Decorative Porch at Rancho Piflow; Current Page: Bedroom inside the Tower House, Living Room in the Red House.





Future Editor-in-Chief Shelly Brown, Rancho Pillow Owner Sheila Youngblood, & CEO Laura Quick ; Interior of one of the shops involved in the 11-mile antique market



Attending a dinner at Rancho Pillow is like attending a sacred gathering. Mismatched china, colorful glasses, and cascading florals all rest under cafe lights around a family table that must have been 100 feet long. The glow of Rancho Pillow's famous neon sign becomes art as it mingles with the ambience of a Texas sunset. Sheila is known to fly chefs in from all over the world, and give them the freedom to create their edible art however they choose. This is, after all, a place that is meant for creativity to flourish and bellies to be filled. Sheila opens up the evening by welcoming guests and blessing the meal with a selection from John O'Donohue's *To Bless the Space Between Us*. The evening's meal ranges from good ol' Texas pot roast to a selection of pickled vegetables with Moroccan seasonings. Served family style, you are immediately engaged with the people around you. While most people are there for the antiques shows, you don't hear much about them in conversation. The

open and loving atmosphere causes its guests to mirror that in conversation. Families, traumas, future plans, and recipes become topics of conversation at our section of the massive table. A gorgeous dinner, homemade chocolate chip cookie, and great conversation, all under the glow of that neon light. Family legacies are often talked about through the ideas of a trust fund, name, or perhaps even bad habits. Rancho Pillow creates a beautiful reminder that legacy can be so much more. Legacy is in small choices that we make every day. To paint and dance with our kids after school instead of watching TV, and to create a safe place for the wildest creativity to flourish. It reminds us that great meals with great people are part of life's most fulfilling moments. It's a legacy that you can feel as soon as you step onto the grounds of Rancho Pillow. A free-spirited legacy passed down by free-spirited women in kaftans. □



Clockwise from top: Masked musicians leading guests to dinner; One of the courses served; Artist robes on display

