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Meet 'Martha Stewart' Of Dillsburg

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DILLSBURG (York Co.) — The aroma of pumpkin spice and chocolate mingles in the farmhouse kitchen of Ronda Merritts.

Known as the "Martha Stewart" of Dillsburg, Ronda is already at work preparing holiday gifts for friends, coworkers, and relatives.

While she works, she glances out the spacious windows that overlook Diamond 7 Ranch and Arena. It's where her husband Jim is busy preparing for one of the 40 horse shows the farm hosts annually.

Although Ronda serves as a registered emergency technician (EMT) for the horse shows, works as a claims examiner for Blue Cross Insurance Company, and helps with duties on the horse farm, she said, that she is happiest in the kitchen. She keeps the family, which includes Cassandra, 17; Jessica, 15; and Travis, 12, satisfied and energized with homemade meals. After the evening meal is finished, Ronda doesn't relax. Instead she cans in-season produce, decorates wedding cakes for clients, or experiments with a new recipe.

This time of the year finds her preparing holiday gifts. She estimates that she gave away 40-50 cake-in-the-jar presents, 50 smelly jelly gifts, and numerous gift baskets packed with apple-butter, salsa, and other homemade goodies.

"I'd rather give a homemade gift than a store-bought one," Ronda said of the personalized effort behind the presents. "I get so many ideas and recipes from *Lancaster Farming*."

"I've been intrigued with cooking ever since I can remember," said Ronda, who grew up watching her mother and grandmother cook and preserve food.

At age 17, Ronda was decorating wedding cakes. At age 23, she was teaching cooking classes in a local kitchen specialty shop.

Ronda is alarmed that many women no longer preserve food or prepare meals from scratch.

"I'm afraid cooking is becoming a dying art," she said. She encourages novice cooks to follow established recipes in the beginning.

"After you feel confident, you can step out and experiment," she said. "One thing I learned is that it doesn't hurt to change a recipe."

Ronda said that many beginners are afraid to try. She counsels, "If you burn something, throw it away and keep going."

I don't think there is anyone who can't cook, if they keep trying."

It is reassuring to have a friend or relative to consult for cooking advice. Ronda said, "I remember calling my grandmother late at night if something didn't turn out right. It took me six batches to produce monkey bread that tasted like hers."

Some of her favorite foods to can are peaches, pears, tomatoes, salsa, and spaghetti sauce.

Although she maintains a garden, most of the that she processes is purchased from farmer's markets.

"Jim and Travis go to hay sales where produce is being sold. They bring things home at the most inopportune times, but that's how it is when you can and freeze. You need to do it (produce) when its ready, not when its convenient."

Ronda has always made an effort to teach her own children how to cook and preserve food. This summer, Ronda was pleased to see her 15-year-old daughter teach a friend how to can peaches.

"Jessica is the one most likely to follow in my footsteps," Ronda said of her "Martha Stewart" reputation.

Patience and calmness are virtues to which Ronda lays claim. Although both traits are assets in the kitchen, they are even more beneficial as a mother and EMT. A few months ago, these traits were in demand when the Merritts' son's thumb was ripped off during a rodeo roping incident.

Travis, who earned the state designation as all-round cowboy when he was only five years old, participates in numerous roping events. But on Aug. 24, his thumb caught in the rope, a common injury among rodeo ropers, according to Jim. They immediately stuck his thumb in ice in order to enable doctors to reattach it.



Jim and Ronda Merritt, with children Jessica and Travis, operate Diamond 7 Ranch and Arena, Dillsburg.

Ronda explained that the thumb was basically amputated by the accident, which required all nerves and arteries to be reattached during surgery.

Travis said that he felt no pain from the accident. While in the emergency room, his first question was "When can I rope again?"

After a six-day stay at the Philadelphia Children's Hospital, doctors determined that the reattachment was a success and sent Travis home.

Although brave and calm during the ordeal and his subsequent four-day stay in the intensive care unit, Travis recalls that three weeks after the event, he almost passed out.

He wears a bandage on his thumb, but everything seems to be progressing well, and Travis is again working with the horses.

"It was top-hand surgeons and faith in the Lord that brought us through," Ronda said of the successful reattachment.

The Merritts own Diamond 7 Ranch and Arena with Jim's parents, Jim and Connie Merritts. Jim grew up breaking saddle ponies, roping, and working cattle. It seemed a natural progression to buy the 160-acre property seven years ago. In addition to growing hay on their own acreage, they also rent additional land for that purpose.

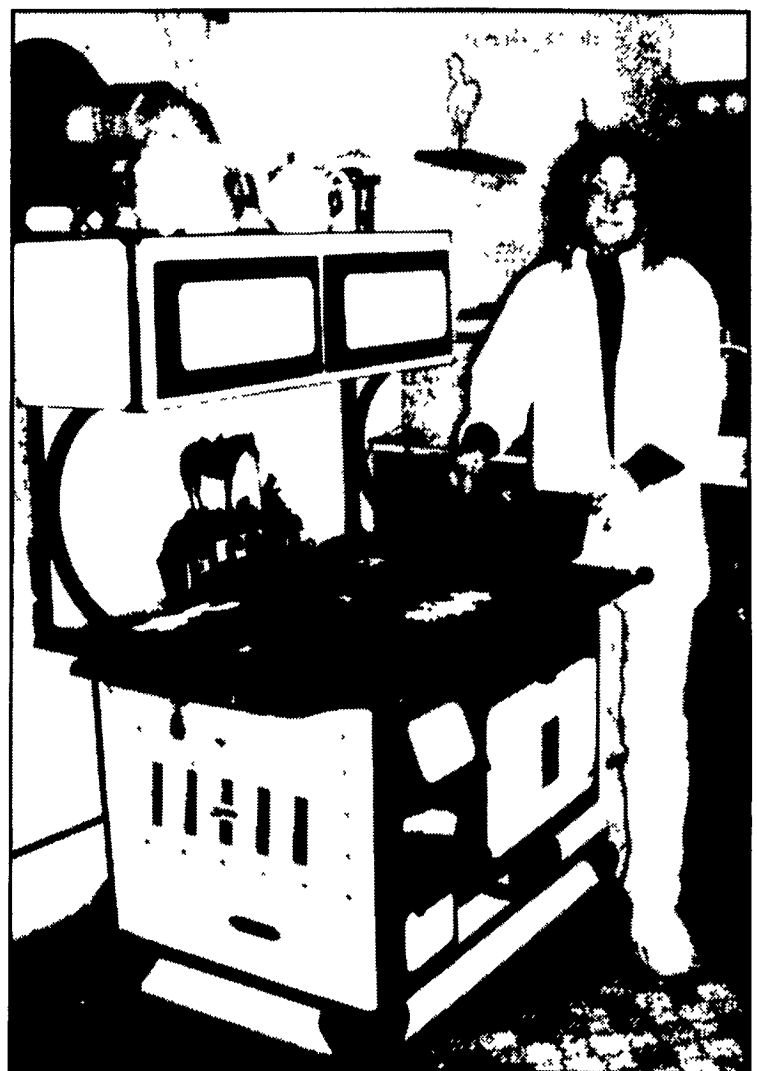
The Merritts horse show facility includes 215 stalls and a show ring. They also have 56 recreation vehicle hookups available for participants.

"People come from as far away as Florida and Colorado to compete in the shows," Jim said.

For the most part, Merritts rent out the grounds to horse clubs and associations for shows, which means, the Merritts are responsible for preparing the grounds and clean up, but not for the actual planning of the shows. The first year in business, they held three shows; this past year, 40.

"Like everything else, horse show business depends on the economy," Merritt said.

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In winter months, Ronda enjoys incorporating this South Bend cookstove into her cooking ventures. Last year, she prepared the family Thanksgiving dinner in it.