



This page: Part of the author's final exam was cooking a peach cobbler with a lattice pie crust. Opposite page: Kent Rollins presented me with my diploma and the Gold Medal Award for using the most flour and keeping the flour company in business.

Chronicle of a Cowgirl Camp Cook

Participating in Kent Rollins's chuckwagon cooking school, I learned a little about cowboy etiquette, a lot about Dutch-oven cooking, and some unexpected lessons about life.

Story and photography by JENNIFER DENISON



COOKING FOR A COWBOY CREW is something I've wished to do for many years. There's something gratifying about satisfying the appetites of hungry cowboys who wake up before dawn and devour a hot breakfast, and who, after a long day of working in the elements, appreciate and look forward to a home-cooked meal, no matter how tired or dirty they are.

I wouldn't consider myself a bona fide "foodie," and definitely not a gourmet. I have, however, enjoyed cooking with pantry staples such as sugar, flour, cinnamon and baking powder since I was a young girl starting dinner before my parents arrived home from work. I've prepared lavish holiday meals for family and friends, helped cater weddings, and even hauled slow-cookers filled with barbecued beef and baked beans, packed tightly on the floorboard of a pickup, from ranch headquarters to the branding corral. Yet I've never cooked off a wagon for a large crew. So, when chuckwagon cook Kent Rollins invited me to participate in his cooking school last October, I accepted with a zestful "yes!"

Most would not consider cooking three meals a day over sweltering coals, slinging grub onto cowboys' plates, doing dishes five times a day and sleeping in a muddy, flooded cowboy teepee a vacation. But that's what makes those of us who crave the Western lifestyle unique. We appreciate the chance to get away from technology and modern conveniences, and return to old-fashioned ways. Rollins's cooking school is all about using traditional techniques and utensils, mixing simple ingredients, and learning common-sense lessons about cooking over coals—lessons that sometimes also apply to life.



RANCH CAMPUS

Rollins holds cooking schools twice a year, coinciding with spring and fall works. I attended the fall session, which was held on the Boddy Ranch, a cow-calf outfit in Henrietta, Texas, owned by Macon Boddy and settled by his ancestors more than 100 years ago.

The school started on a Wednesday evening with an informal orientation and steak dinner prepared by Rollins. I was greeted by Rollins and his wife, Shannon, at the turnoff for a deep two-track road that I followed to an open pasture shaded by an umbrella of mesquite and pecan trees. Five cowboy teepees—one for each student and our instructors—were erected in a little village. At the heart of camp was the Rollinses' Red River Ranch wagon, attached to a large wall tent.

Kerosene lanterns glowed from the tent, and my fellow students were gathered around the largest camp stove I've ever seen.

"Meet Bertha," Rollins said with his Oklahoma twang, introducing me to the stove before anyone else. "She has taken me to places I've never dreamed of going. I've cussed at her, but she never lets me down."

Weighing more than 300 pounds, Bertha is a stout stove made by Texas cowboy Jimbo Humphreys. Bearing a rusted patina and a few dents from 23 years of use, she has four burners, produces plenty of scorching coals, and adds welcome warmth on cool fall mornings and evenings.

Joining me in the class were Shannon's sister, Bridget Skeller, a college student studying silversmithing and jewelry making at Metropolitan State College of Denver in Colorado; returning student and the Rollinses' friend Rod Lake, a stay-at-home dad from Allen, Texas, who came for only a couple of days; and Tom Faulkenberry, a psychology professor at Texas A&M University's Commerce, Texas, campus. Though diverse, the "class" had a

From top: Cooking for local ranchers and their families was a rewarding test of our skills. • Kids couldn't wait to finish their food so they could play. • Bridget Skeller mixes the fixings for sourdough biscuits.

Opposite page top: Justin Hensley was among the cowboys who showed up to eat our meals. Bottom: Sourdough cinnamon rolls start as a tube of dough that is rolled, sliced into individual spirals and then placed in the Dutch oven.

couple of things in common—a love for ranch life, and the desire to preserve ranching heritage and perpetuate traditional cooking methods under Rollins's tutelage.

Named the official chuckwagon cook of Oklahoma by the state's governor, Rollins hails from Hollister, a small town in the southwestern portion of the state, only a few miles from the Texas border. Raised on a ranch, Rollins learned a variety of skills, from carpentry to cooking.

"Daddy wanted us kids to know how to do more than cowboy," he says. "We raised wheat, built fence, and Mother taught me to cook, clean and sew. She said I'd need all of those [skills]."

Rollins cowboied some, but his primary interest was cooking for the cowboys. His first major culinary gig was with an outfitter in the Gila Wilderness, north of Silver City, New Mexico. Through the years, the 54-year-old camp cookie has worked on ranches in Kansas, New Mexico and Oklahoma, and on large Texas outfits such as the Swenson Ranch and the JA Ranch. The longest time he has spent on the wagon was 3½ weeks.

The camp cook is sometimes the deciding factor in whether or not a cowboy hires on an outfit for seasonal works. When he hears Rollins is the cook, he usually joins the crew. Rollins is known for making two fresh batches of bread a day and two desserts, and never leaving a cowboy hungry.

"If you keep a crew fed well and happy, they will work well," Rollins explains. "I try to pamper cowboys; they can't wait for supper."

Besides cooking for cowboys, Rollins has also prepared meals for a general and celebrities. His reputation has earned his wagon the Will Rogers Award for Chuck Wagon of the Year by the Academy of Western Artists. He has made appearances on the Food Network, most recently in 2010 in a surprise "Throwdown" with Bobby Flay,





Above: If cared for properly, cast iron will last a lifetime. Left: Kent and Shannon Rollins with their restored 1870s Studebaker ranch wagon and rescued camp dog, Bone Head.

where his chicken-fried steak was judged better than Flay's.

While Rollins still enjoys cooking for cowboys, he and Shannon also run Red River Ranch Chuck Wagon Catering and a mail-order business carrying Rollins's signature steaks, seasonings and cookbook. He also entertains groups with tales from the wagon, based on his real-life ranch experiences and colorful cowboys he's met.

"I always tell Shannon that we go out about every Saturday night," Rollins says. "We just don't eat out, we cook out."

A LITTLE HEAT GOES A LONG WAY

I woke up well before dawn on Thursday morning to lightning shattering the night sky, thunder rumbling as loudly as a herd of Longhorns stampeding through camp, and rain pattering on my canvas teepee. Peeking out of my bedroll, I could tell it was going to be a cold, damp day. That was confirmed when I stepped off my cot into a large puddle that had formed on the nylon floor. I'd placed my clothes under my bedroll and slept on them, which protected them from the moisture and kept them toasty.



At the wagon, everyone hovered around Bertha, sipping camp coffee. It looked like Bertha was going to earn her weight in coals, because there was no way we were able to build a fire or cook outside with all the moisture.

Handing each of us a can of biscuits, a Dutch oven and a fork to keep in our back pocket for the entire class, Rollins

wasted no time giving us our first assignment.

"Cook these; we have cowboys coming for breakfast in 30 minutes," he said in his matter-of-fact manner. "And don't burn the biscuits! No cowboy likes burnt biscuits."

At that moment, I felt like I was back in school and had missed a class or hadn't done my homework. I was ashamed to admit I had little experience with camp cooking other than heating a can of stew, roasting hot dogs on a stick and toasting marshmallows. I watched my peers and followed their lead, putting coals under and on top of the Dutch oven. I even thought I was smarter than them and pushed coals higher under my oven. Big mistake. When it was time to bring our biscuits to the table, I proudly presented mine with golden tops. When Rollins lifted the biscuits with his fork, however, he exposed the charred bottoms that resulted from the direct underlying heat.

With that, I set such a low baseline for myself that I could only improve. Plus, I learned my first literal and metaphorical lesson: If you put your biscuits directly over the fire, they're going to get burnt.

The rest of the day offered ample opportunities to hone my biscuit-baking abilities. We made two kinds of biscuits—sourdough and Angel Flake, the latter a recipe from Rollins's grandmother. We also made a delicious dump cobbler, thus named because you dump all the ingredients into the Dutch oven and let it cook.

Beware: Cooking school is not designed for a carbohydrate- or gluten-restricted diet.

After we finished each bread and dessert, we'd bring our Dutch oven to the table for Rollins to evaluate our efforts. He'd break open the baked goods, looking at their consistency and color, and then he'd taste them and tell us how we did.

We spent our morning sampling what we baked and preparing meals for the cowboys coming in for breakfast and supper, and then we did it all again for our evening meal. We helped Rollins with the main courses and side dishes. The fare included upside-down pizza, sparkling potatoes, green chile-hominy casserole, baked bean casserole and grilled pork chops. Between cooking lessons, we did a lot of dishes, drank a lot of coffee and visited—and ate bread and desserts until even collard greens sounded good.

The highlight of each day for me was seeing the cowboys relish the meals we made.

LESS IS MORE

The sun broke through the clouds the second day of school, allowing us to shed our jackets, still cold and damp from the day before, and dry out our boots and bedrooms. After serving breakfast and doing dishes, we baked more bread. The first recipe was for sourdough cinnamon rolls.

Using the basic sourdough biscuit recipe from the day before, we made the dough, rolled it out to about a half-inch thick, sprinkled cinnamon and sugar on it, and then rolled it up into a long tube. Next, we sliced the dough



Allen and Bridget serve the meal we prepared to one of the guests. Sharing food with friends is what cooking is all about.

COMMON MISTAKES

Below are five common mistakes that Kent Rollins says beginning Dutch-oven cooks make:

1. Using not enough or too many coals.
2. Placing the coals underneath or too close to the oven.
3. Removing the Dutch-oven lid and placing it in the dirt or ash.
4. Washing cast iron with soap and water.
5. Overworking the dough.

FEEDING LARGE GROUPS

Keep these tips in mind when cooking for several guests:

1. Cook 1 pound of dried beans per 10 people.
2. Purchase 1/3-pound of uncooked meat per person, in general, keeping in mind that brisket has the most shrinkage when cooked.
3. Allow meat to come to room temperature before cooking to hold in moisture.
4. Cook potatoes ahead of time and wrap in aluminum foil. Store potatoes in an empty ice chest and they will stay warm for up to eight hours.
5. Raw vegetables can be sliced ahead of time and stored in water to keep fresh.

into spirals, put them in our Dutch ovens and cooked them outside, over the coals. When finished, we iced them and gave them to Rollins for grading.

The cinnamon rolls came fairly simple to me, as did the yeast rolls we made after that. However, the afternoon lesson of making cherry turnovers from pie crust is one Rollins will never let me forget. Every student had his or her quirks. Bridget was known to check the contents of her Dutch oven often, which slowed cooking time, and she was usually the last to bring her oven to the table. Tom was a natural, but I will remember him most for becoming so attached to the fork he kept in his back pocket that he'd forget to take it out of his pants before bedtime and would wake up with it still there. I became infamous for my pie-crust folly.

Rollins read the pie-crust recipe to us as we took turns adding the ingredients to our white enamelware mixing bowls. When the flour came around, Rollins said to add three cups. I took what appeared to be a one-cup measure and added three to my bowl. As I mixed the dry and wet ingredients, I noticed my dough was very dry, so I kept adding liquid to it until it reached a moist consistency. By that time, Bridget and Tom had rolled out their crust and were starting to cut out their turnovers.

Looking into my bowl, which was larger than the other students' bowls

and full of dough, Rollins began to tell me the story of how he once had a student mistake the two-cup measure in the flour for a one-cup measure. My stomach sank. Just as Rollins can tell time within minutes based on the sun's position in the sky, he can predict the mistakes students will make at cooking school. Nevertheless, I had enough dough to make turnovers for every cowboy in Clay County.

A habitual overachiever, I proved again with pie crust that more is not necessarily better. I hear these words often from my coworkers. Rollins offered a similar piece of advice: "You can always add flour, but you can't take it away."

THE FINAL EXAM

Saturday saw the ultimate test of our Dutch-oven cooking cognition and skills. My fellow students and I were assigned to prepare a full meal—bread, sides and desserts—for a group of local ranch families and friends who Rollins invited to dinner that evening.

"Every day is a holiday, and every meal is a banquet," he reminded us.

We began with cakes. I made carrot cake, and Tom and Bridget teamed up to bake a layer cake. Baking a cake in a Dutch oven is a little tedious, and we required some guidance from Rollins. I silently kept repeating to myself his advice to "rotate your oven and lid to

heat things evenly.” In other words, chuckwagon cooking is all about checks and balances.

Once the cakes were baked, cooled and iced, Rollins gave us our meal assignments. Tom and Bridget each were to make a kind of bread and potatoes. I was given the task of making Angel Flake biscuits and peach cobbler. The kicker was that the cobbler would be made with a lattice pie crust. I concentrated so much on adding the right amount of flour that I almost forgot how much baking powder I’d added. I still ended up with excess crust, but this time it was a reasonable amount. By this point, we could bake biscuits in our sleep so that went smoothly, as well.

Throwing a little salt over my left shoulder for luck, I placed my three Dutch ovens on trivets centered between the coals.

Guests started arriving as our outdoor kitchen began heating up. Between the three of us, we had eight Dutch ovens cooking, which generated extreme heat.

I can’t estimate how long it took for us to cook the meal, but things sure seemed to happen fast. The heat of the moment could have caused panic, but we all worked as a team and had dinner ready just in time—and without burning anything.

We served our guests cafeteria-style, which allowed us to chat with them as they passed through the line. As I watched everyone enjoy the cooking and camaraderie, as well as ranch kids running around the pasture playing with the Rollinses’ camp dog, a beagle named Bone Head, I realized that the past few days were about more than cooking or earning a diploma. They were meant for sharing, becoming a family, preserving traditions and gaining a little wisdom we can apply to our daily lives.

Come springtime, I am now prepared to help cook for a crew on a friend’s wagon. But Rollins’s voice will echo in my mind: “Don’t burn the biscuits!” and “How much flour did you add, ma’am?”

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