

HOME ON THE RANGE



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IF YOU WANT TO UNDERSTAND WHY half of America seems to have fallen in love with Ree Drummond's life, have her take you on a tour of her family's cattle ranch just as the sun sinks toward the big-sky prairie horizon and the tall grasses are turning pinkish gold.

Drummond drives her red pickup truck fast, kicking up dust on the gravel roads. She's scanning the prairie for the wild mustangs that call the ranch home.

All the while, Drummond keeps up a running patter, pointing out the hay barn, stacked with bales for winter; the creek that her out-of-town brother once tried to ford in his

How does country cooking queen Ree Drummond celebrate America's favorite holiday? With lots of food, football, and gratitude for her family.

BY SARAH DIGREGORIO

new Saab; the pregnant, ridiculously rotund cows and baby calves, who stare at the truck, mooing mistrustfully. You can see so many stars out here, she says, that the night sky once crashed the stargazing app on a friend's phone. She describes how sometimes a cow will refuse to mother a calf and it will have to be bottle-fed, which she loves to do "now that my babies aren't babies anymore." Meanwhile, tall grasses swish by and the rolling landscape just keeps unfurling. When finally the herd of spotted mustangs appears—so majestic they hardly look real—Drummond laughs and says, "Now you know I wasn't making them up."

It's enough to make you want to drop everything and move to Osage County, Okla. Which is exactly what Ree

did. At the time, no one could have predicted that moving to the country would be what made her famous.

Drummond's blog, *The Pioneer Woman*, chronicles her fish-out-of-water tale of city girl turned ranch wife with a knowing blend of self-deprecating humor and go-get-'em enthusiasm, not to mention atmospheric photos of her four children, rugged rancher husband, two adorable basset hounds, and buttery country cooking. Launched in 2006, the site proved wildly popular, leading to cookbook deals, a memoir, a Food Network show, now in its sixth season, and a movie option, in which Reese Witherspoon is set to play Drummond. ("At first, I thought a mistake might have been made because Reese is so petite and

blond and I've never been petite ... or blond," says Drummond. "But of course I was honored.")

To her fans, the story is so familiar it's practically legend: Drummond, 44, grew up in a very different Oklahoma from the one she lives in now. She was raised in Bartlesville, about 50 miles north of Tulsa, where she lived in a comfortable home on the grounds of a country club golf course, along with two brothers, one of whom is developmentally disabled, and a sister. Her father is an orthopedic surgeon, and her mother cooked every day—homey dishes like chicken spaghetti and stuffed peppers. "Her cooking had a little bit of refinement and elegance," Drummond recalls, "but she

PRAIRIE HOME

1. Alex Drummond, 16, and her cousin, Caleb Drummond, 14, help themselves to turkey.
2. The 25,000-acre ranch provides Bryce Drummond, 11, and cousin Caleb plenty of room for football.
3. Walter the basset hound is known for his good looks, not his cattle-herding ability.
4. After the feast, the nap: Ree and Ladd Drummond relax on the porch.

still made really hearty food, comfort food.”

It was a fortunate childhood filled with dance and piano lessons and Thanksgivings spent at her grandparents’ nearby homes, plate piled high with turkey, mashed potatoes, and warm rolls.

Drummond attended USC and then settled in Los Angeles, working in marketing. She was a vegetarian, boy-crazy, committed urbanite. Then, in 1994, back for a visit to her parents before a planned move to Chicago, she went out to a bar and laid eyes on Ladd Drummond, whose family has been cattle ranching in her home state for four generations.

In her 2011 memoir, she describes the moment as akin to the scene in *West Side Story* when Tony and Maria see each other for the first time and the rest of the world fades away. She and Ladd were married in 1996, and Ree got pregnant with the first of her four children on the honeymoon. Cue the domestic bliss.

Well, not entirely. For one thing, life on a working cattle ranch isn’t all wild mustangs and sunsets. Ladd is usually up before daybreak; Ree homeschools the children, who also help out on the ranch. A day might include branding calves, driving cattle from pasture to pasture, or taking their temperature with a rectal thermometer. There are no sick days, and there’s definitely nowhere to call out for pizza.

It’s not a life of leisure, though the Drummonds are prosperous. The extended family owns a huge chunk of Oklahoma, and Ladd’s own ranch sprawls over about 25,000 acres, or nearly 40 square miles. This year, the Drummonds (collectively) are the 17th-largest landowner in the country. By comparison, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos ranks 25th and the Koch family is 39th. But cattle don’t care how much land you own—they still need to be fed. All 2,500 of them.

REE’S OWN CAREER WAS BASICALLY AN accident. She launched her website equipped with nothing more than a BlogSpot domain, a point-and-shoot camera, and a desire to keep in touch with her mother. She says she never saw the 25 million page views—that’s *per month*—coming.

“It was so gradual. I never had that Oprah moment, or a time when [Web traffic] went through the roof. Someone read it, shared it with their mom, and then she shared it with two people, and then they shared it with four people.”

REE DRUMMOND'S THANKSGIVING MENU



Brined, Roasted Thanksgiving Turkey

Giblet Gravy

Perfect Mashed Potatoes

Basic Thanksgiving Dressing

Green Beans and Tomatoes

Soul Sweet 'Taters

Broccoli Wild Rice Casserole

No-Knead Cloverleaf Rolls

Caramel Apple Pie

GET THE RECIPES FOR REE'S THANKSGIVING AT PARADE.COM/DRUMMOND.

The Pioneer Woman, as a character or a fantasy, may evoke an earlier, more rustic, family-centered time, but she could never have existed in another era; she’s a product of the Internet age. Never before could someone who lives such a profoundly remote life, surrounded by the unspoiled prairie, be so profoundly (if virtually) connected with millions of readers. You can visit Drummond’s site and see what she made for dinner last night, but it’s almost impossible to Google directions to her home because it’s so far from the main road.

Drummond ascribes her popularity to a number of factors. “Some read my blog for the agricultural component, some for the recipes, some for the basset hounds, some for the movie quizzes,” she says. “Most people who read my site have never seen a working cattle ranch in person—so it’s a slice of America that a lot of folks don’t get to experience.”

Food Network first approached Drummond in 2009 because she had already built a huge audience through her website. Her series premiered in 2011 and is now one of the network’s more popular daytime shows, with about 8 million viewers a month. “There is a sense of escapism linked to Ree’s *Pioneer Woman* series,” says Allison Page, senior vice president of programming at Food Network. “Ree has a warmth and charm that is inviting, giving viewers a unique look into ranch life.”

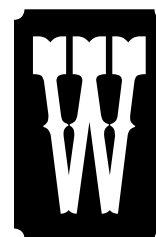
And on that ranch, Thanksgiving is a very big deal. After all, it’s one of just two days that Ladd and his brother, Tim, take off all year. (Christmas is the other.) It falls just after the autumn shipping, when the fully grown steers are sold. In ranch terms, the shipping is the harvest. Thanksgiving is when the family celebrates.

“Thanksgiving truly is one of the very, very few days a year when there is no work,” says Ree. “I mean, zero work. Except, of course, this meal I’m making.”

No pressure. Oh, and the supermarket is in Tulsa, nearly two hours away.

When Ree is hosting (she and sister-in-law Missy take turns), she plans the menu well in advance—it’s not like she can run out for a bunch of sage or a lemon at the last minute. As in many households, there are certain dishes she can’t mess with: She has to include her own brined, roasted turkey; her grandmother’s green beans and tomatoes; her aunt’s sweet potatoes; her mother-in-law’s rich mashed potatoes, giblet gravy, and all the trimmings; plus her own pecan and caramel-apple pies. She might try out one new side dish a year, but it’s not always a success. One year she baked a turnip gratin that the men pronounced smelly. Another, she made butternut squash puree. “They wouldn’t touch that with a 10-foot pole,” Drummond recalls.

The Monday before Thanksgiving, she gets in her pickup, triple-checked shopping lists in hand, and heads down the driveway, a five-mile stretch of gravel that winds its way through pastures. She turns onto Route 60 at Bacon Rind Creek (really), drives through the town of Pawhuska (pop. 3,589), and turns on Highway 11 through Barnsdall (pop. 1,243). Passing herds of sheep and belted Galloway cattle, she drives all the way to Highway 20, then to Route 75, and onward to Tulsa, where she shops all day, saving perishables until last.



WHEN LADD WAKES ON THANKSGIVING, his first thought is that he doesn’t have to get up. “It’s a little odd,” he says. “Taking care of animals is something I am doing and thinking about every day. It’s not an office job.” His second thought is to wonder if dinner is at 1 o’clock or 2 o’clock. If the former, he can go without breakfast. If the latter, no chance.

Meanwhile, Ree has put the turkey in the oven and is busy prepping green beans, baking sweet potatoes, and rolling out pie dough while watching a *Godfather* marathon, her private tradition. The children—Alex, 16, Paige, 14, Bryce, 11, and Todd, 9—roll around like puppies on the grass, throwing a football. Inside, Ladd and brother Tim (who owns the next ranch over) watch a game on television, or join the kids tossing the ball. Football, like Thanksgiving, is very big with the Drummonds.

When, finally, the family has gathered around the table, before the trash talk about fantasy football can start, someone needs to volunteer to say grace. If it’s Todd, the youngest, the prayer will likely revolve around football. If it’s an adult, they will give thanks for health, family, land, animals—and maybe football. Then, each family member takes a turn to say what they’re most grateful for.

This year, both Ree and Ladd are thankful for the same thing: rain. “We were facing a pretty dire situation,” she says. “Our ponds were dangerously

low. You see how tall the grass is?” It is waist height. “This time last year, there was no grass. It was very scary. And then in April, it started raining.” Her relief, her thanksgiving, is palpable.

Maybe that’s the real reason this holiday is so big on the ranch. Living on the land makes you acutely aware that the harvest is not a certainty but a gift.

In a family with four children, the conversation never stays serious for long. Other things the Drummonds give thanks for this year include horses, Charlie the basset hound, and turkey. Ree says that one year, Todd gave thanks for *Iron Man*. She laughs. “Whatever brings you happiness in life.”



JOIN REE TO TALK turkey on Tuesday, Nov. 19, at 12:30 p.m. ET at facebook.com/parademag. Plus: Tell us what you are thankful for this year at facebook.com/parademag.



Find Ree’s festive recipes for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and beyond in her new book, *The Pioneer Woman Cooks: A Year of Holidays* (\$30; HarperCollins).