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 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 blood and I’ve never been petite … or blood,” 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...
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, and wondered 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 bountiful 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 built a huge audience through her blog. 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 escapist liveliness to Ree’s Pioneer Woman series,” says Allison Pang, senior vice president of programming at Food Network. “Ree has a warmth and charm that is inviting, giving viewers a unique look into rural life.” On that ranch, Thanksgiving is a very big deal. After all, it’s one of just two days that Ladd and his brother Tim (who owns the next ranch over) get to experience. “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—Aly, Paige, Ali, Bryce, and Told, nine—rall around like puppies on the grass, throwing a football. Inside, Ladd and brother Tim (who owns the next ranch over) watch a blog or join the kids tossing the ball. Football, like Thanksgiving, is very big with the Drummonds. “A large 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 Told, 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’s 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. On the living 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 bassett hound, and turkey. Ree says that one year, Todd gave thanks for Iron Man. She laughed. “Whatever brings you happiness in life.”

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 River 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.

HEN 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.

“Thanksgiving is when the family celebrates. A large 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’s 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. On the living 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 bassett hound, and turkey. Ree says that one year, Todd gave thanks for Iron Man. She laughed. “Whatever brings you happiness in life.”