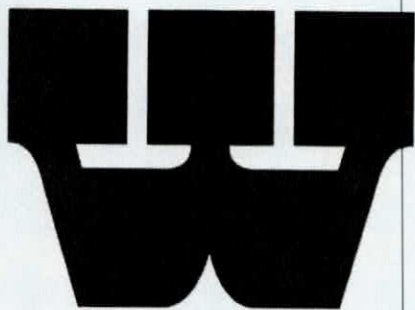
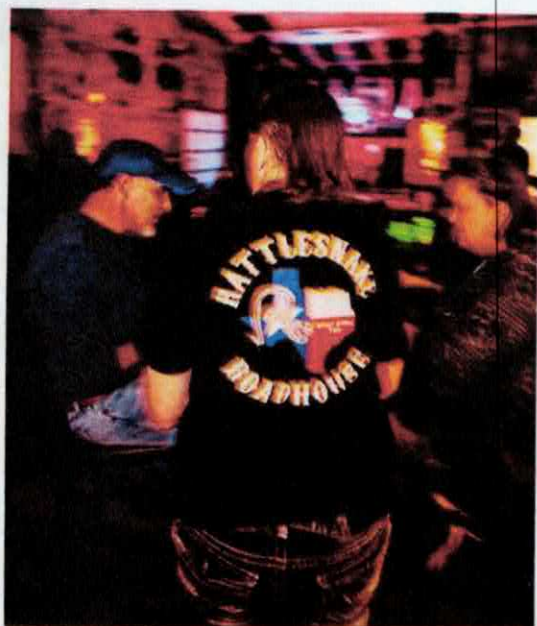


RATTLESNAKE ROADHOUSE

WALNUT SPRINGS, TX



WHEN YOUR NAME IS LAURA BUSH and you're not married to a man known simply by the West Texas pronunciation of his middle initial, a nickname is necessary. Laura "Spydie" Bush got hers from the three-wheeled Can-Am Spyder that she made sure to keep in her divorce. She felt she'd earned at least that after 23 years of marriage.



The biker life suited her. She enjoyed her newfound freedom and friends. But it brought tragedy, too. Her best friend was killed in a motorcycle accident, as was her brother Greg. He died in 2017, after he hit a black cow that had wandered onto a country road at night.

To honor his next birthday, Bush organized a memorial ride. Her plan was to lead friends and family to a restaurant in Walnut Springs where Greg had come for a steak dinner the night before his accident. They'd have a beer in his honor and then continue on to the Trinity River Distillery in Fort Worth, where Greg had done much of the boiler work and there was a barrel of Silver Star whiskey aging in his name.

The day turned out to be so hot that most everyone bailed on the ride, opting instead to head straight to the distillery. But Bush had heard that the restaurant owner had a property up for sale, and she wanted to talk to him about buying it. Since her divorce on the cusp of her 40th birthday, she had worked hard to rebuild her life, going from a part-time job as a volleyball coach with the Boys & Girls Club of Hood County to a corporate gig as a lifestyle director for a senior living facility. At one point she'd studied at the Culinary School of Fort Worth. But she knew she didn't want to be stuck in the kitchen or behind a desk. Her boyfriend told her she should open a bar. She figured it was either that or run for Granbury City Council.

"I knew that I could not try to open a business and run a campaign at the same time," the civic-minded Bush says. "One would fail miserably. So I backed out of running."

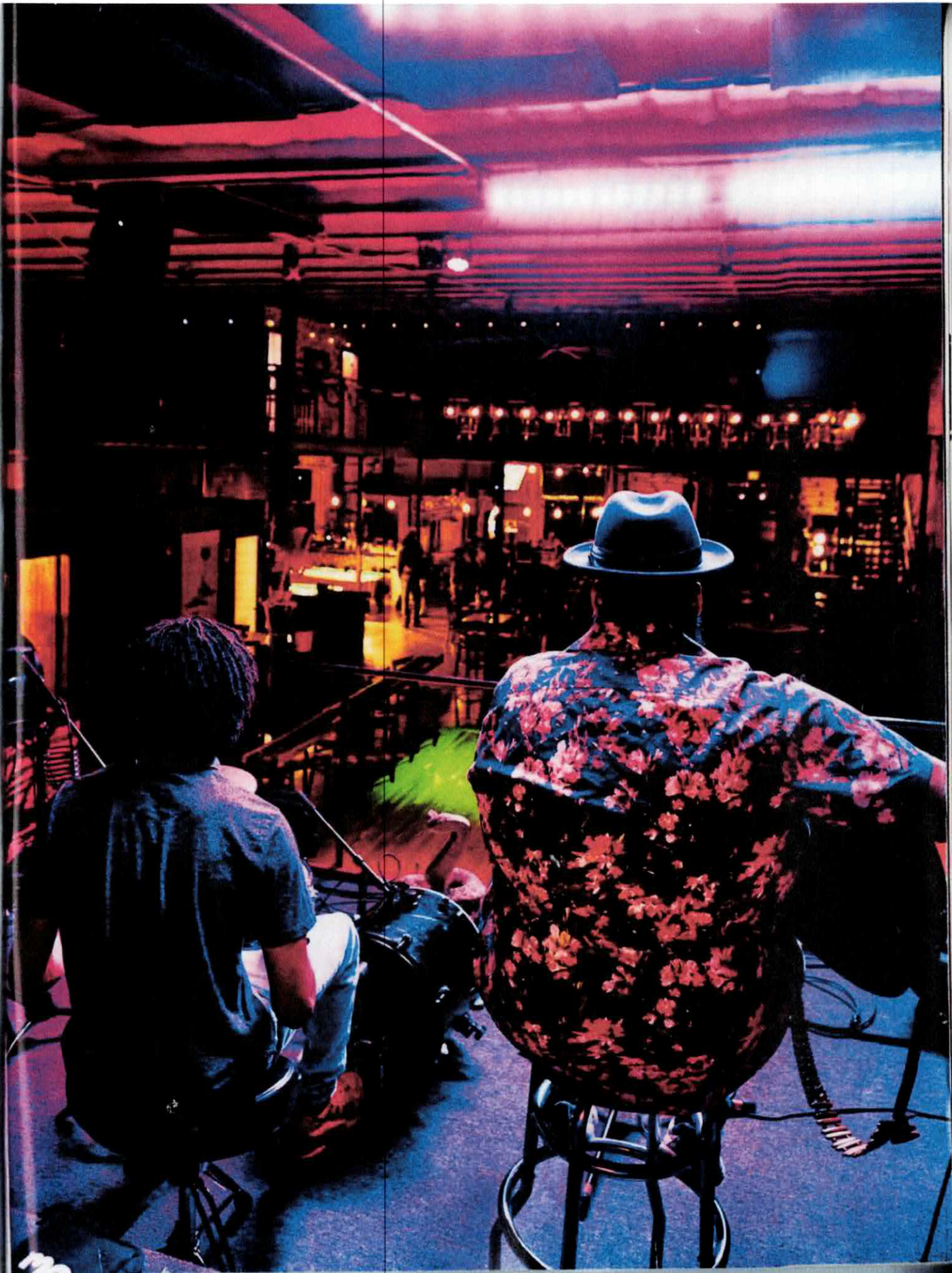
The property she was initially interested in wasn't available, but the landlord offered to show her the place next door, the former Rattlesnake Ballroom, which was available for rent. "It was also my brother's birthday weekend," Bush says. "He and I used to go to the Rattlesnake Ballroom all the time and listen to music." She didn't need more of a sign.

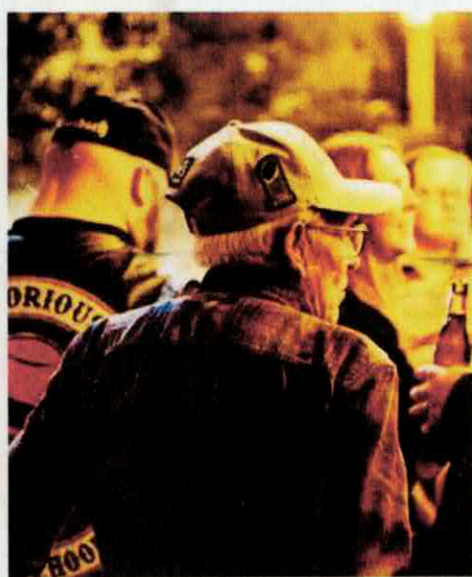
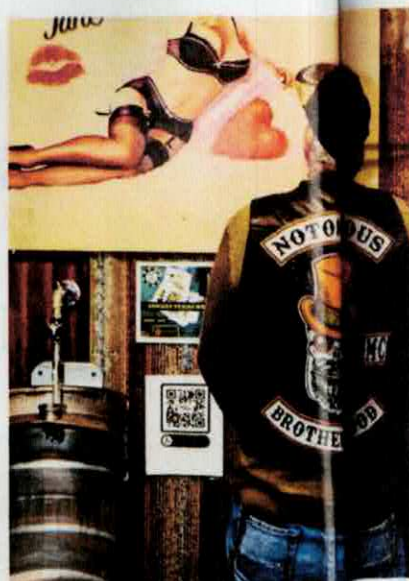
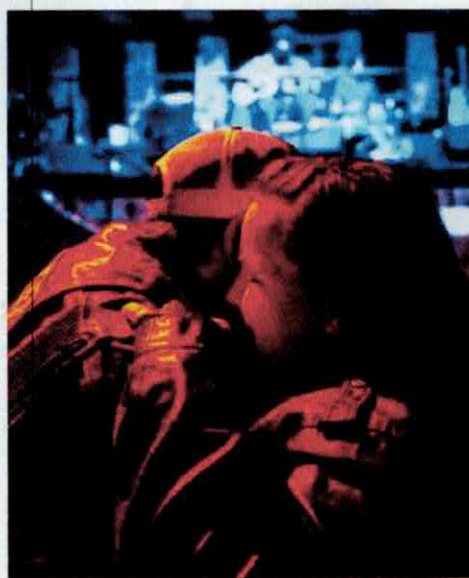
She opened the doors to the Rattlesnake Roadhouse in August 2018, and then, at the end of 2020, she bought three adjacent properties down the block and moved the bar. "This was a railroad town, and when the railroad left, people left," Bush says.

"Some buildings were destroyed by fire, some by tornado. So what you see standing today is all that has survived."

She converted the northernmost building, a former abattoir, into the kitchen. The middle building

SLITHER HOUSE:
(this page) Be sure to place your order early for Tuesday steak nights. (opposite) Mineral Wells musician Zak Webb performs; this room had no ceiling when Bush bought the bar.





was missing interior walls and a roof, but Bush saved the façade and finished out the rest, adding a second floor with a balcony, dance floor, stage, and pool room. For now, the theme seems to be mostly vintage pin-up posters, exposed plywood, and cable spool tables.

On a Tuesday night, the place starts filling up as soon as the doors open at 5 for Bush's weekly steak night. Those in the know have reserved their fillets in advance. She buys a whole beef tenderloin, hand-cuts the fillets, and grills them to order. When they're gone, they're gone.

The crowd is about half cowboy hats, half trucker hats. But the vibe is so West-with-a-capital-dubya that it almost feels more Tombstone than Texas, with feathers in hatbands and fringe on jackets. Bush says there are more than 200 working ranches in the area, and it certainly looks that way.

The surprise is the dogs. A silver-haired couple has some kind of tiny terrier on a leash, and Bush's daughter is holding a French bulldog named Mable. A guy wearing Cinch jeans and square-toed boots stands by the pool tables with a Spaniel over his shoulder. From Bush's telling, she's helped raise six figures or more for causes close to her heart: kids, vets, dogs. She sits on the board of the Bosque Animal Rescue Kennels (BARK), a no-kill shelter in Clifton, which helps explain the four-



DOGS AND HOGS: (opposite, top left) Musician Zak Webb, a frequent performer. (bottom left) Owner and chef Laura "Spydie" Bush, whose commitment to canine welfare is readily apparent. (this page) Steaks are cooked to order.

legged nature of the crowd. Before the music starts—the internet radio station Texas Red Hot Radio is broadcasting live, with Lacey Ingram and Scotty Isaacs onstage—I head to the bar to get a drink, figuring the obvious choice is a Dos Equis from the large galvanized tub of ice in the center. The two bartenders, Jennifer and Jill, are clearly pros with no time to spare. They take dinner orders and sling drinks in a choreographed two-step that

never slows. Then my idiot friends step up.

One asks for an Old Fashioned, and the other demands a "spicy margarita with fresh lime juice, not a mixer." I look for the nearest biker to bounce them out the door, trying to act like I have no idea who these tone-deaf Dallasites are. But then Jill, hard to age in her dyed-black pigtail braids, looks at them with a smile and says, "Is ghost pepper tequila spicy enough for you? We only use fresh lime juice. And I'll have to get Jennifer to make the Old Fashioned—she makes the best one."

Without a word, Jennifer takes a glass, muddles some sugar and bitters in the bottom, adds ice, pours in some T-X Whiskey, and tops it with a curl of orange peel and a Luxardo cherry. She's at the opposite end of the bar, taking another steak order and popping the cap off another beer, before we can thank her.

Bush briefly emerges from the kitchen to touch tables. Dressed in chef reds, her brown hair in a thick braid down her back, she doesn't look like a biker. But as she makes her way around the room, greeting regulars and petting dogs, she could easily pass for a cruise director.

She always knew she wanted the bar to be a music venue, but she also understood it was in the middle of nowhere. Early on, she went to a local bed and breakfast association meeting and presented an opportunity for the members to become lodging partners. She found a vet who drives canoe shuttles in Granbury during the day to run shuttles to and from the roadhouse at night. In addition to the biweekly live radio show, she's booked honky-tonk legend Mark Chesnutt, and the Bellamy Brothers are putting on a show at the end of February. She's even started getting calls from Nashville and around the country from bands looking to book gigs.

"It's still growing, and it's still building," Bush says. "It's been the wildest ride of my life."

Rattlesnake Roadhouse, 4173 Third St., Walnut Springs. 817-269-0554. ★ 1.5 hours from Dallas

SNAKES ON THE PLAINS

When Spydie Bush first took possession of what would become the Rattlesnake Roadhouse, it was missing walls and a roof. "But I was hellbent on a mission, because the first weekend in March is the biggest day of the year for little 'ol Walnut Springs," she says. "It's the Rattlesnake Roundup, a fundraiser for a local nonprofit youth organization, Walnut Springs Business for Youth in Agriculture, which takes me all the way back to my Boys & Girls Club roots. I told 'em, 'It's gonna be an ugly opening, but the drinks will be cold and the music will be loud.'" The annual weekend festival includes snake-handling demonstrations by The Good Ol' Boys, "The Southwest's Largest Snake Exhibitionists." *Walnut Springs Rattlesnake Roundup, March 3-5.*

SPEND THE NIGHT

The rustic Tailgate Ranch Airbnb conveniently sits about a half-mile north of downtown Walnut Springs. It's an upside-down house, with the kitchen and living room upstairs to optimize the sunset views. Depending on the size of your party, you can also rent a couple of campers, each of which has a pickup truck outfitted with pillows and blankets if you choose to sleep under the stars. For a casita on the Brazos, check out Casa de Milagros in nearby Rainbow. Both are lodging partners with the Rattlesnake Roadhouse. *Shuttle service is available from Brian Bayne by calling 682-262-0925. rattlesnakeroadhouse.com*

THE MORNING AFTER

At the Big Cup Eatery in Glen Rose (about a 15-minute drive away), the only thing bigger than the coffee cups are the biscuits, which take up an entire salad plate yet are somehow lighter than air. In addition to country breakfast basics, they excel at chilaquiles. *226 S.W. Big Bend Trl., Glen Rose. 254-897-3841.*