



Town of Hye boosted by Hill Country wine boom

By Richard A. Marini



People come to Hye Hall from all over the Hill Country to eat, dance, drink and socialize with friends they might not see otherwise. (Photo: Josie Norris | Express-News)

HYE — The scene here at [Hye Hall](#) one recent evening was as Texas as the iconic image of James Dean in cowboy boots and a hat, sitting languorously in the back seat of an open roadster from the classic film “Giant.”

As the band [The Lost Sounds of a Texas Honky Tonk](#) played on stage, about a dozen couples two-stepped across the hall’s wooden dance floor.

Others, who’d come from as far away as Marble Falls, listened, enjoyed a buffet dinner and visited with one another at long tables scattered throughout the building.

start early and end early so you can still go to work the next day. And this is a good crowd. It's not a bar scene."

Open for about two months after sitting abandoned for decades, Hye Hall quickly is becoming the beating heart of Hye, located between Johnson City and Fredericksburg on U.S. 290 in the Hill Country. It's a place where people come to hear music, enjoy dinner and socialize with friends and neighbors they otherwise might not see.

But the dance hall represents something more than just a place to drink, dance and eat. It's the latest indication that this unincorporated town (population 105 reads a painted sign nearby) is on its way back after years of being not much more than a bump on the highway on the way to wine country.

Like a lot of small towns in this part of the state, Hye is benefiting from the ongoing explosion of wineries and, to a lesser extent, distilleries and breweries in the area that has made the Hill Country the second-fastest growing wine region in the U.S., according to a recent survey by online travel company Orbitz.

More than 1 million people visit the area annually to sip and nibble and take in the surrounding countryside, according to January Wiese, executive director of the **Texas Hill Country Winery Association**.

And downtown Hye — which consists of not much more than Hye Hall on the north side of U.S. 290 and both Hye Market & Bistro and the Hye Post Office, which share a building, on the south side — is smack dab in the middle of the action.

It's right down the road from **Garrison Brothers Distillery**, which claims to be the oldest legal whiskey distillery in Texas; it's next door to **William Chris Vineyards**, which produces wine from Texas-grown grapes and was picked as the best Hill Country winery in the 2019 San Antonio Express-News "Top 100 Dining & Drinks" guide; and it's a short drive from **Hye Rum**, one of a handful of rum distilleries in the state.



Celebrating a weekend without kids, Travis and Betsy Hensley enjoy glasses of wine as they look out on the William Chris Vineyards. (Josie Norris /Staff Photographer | Express-News)

And if you're looking for something a little different, **Hye Cider Co.**, nearby distills something called cyser, a little-known blend of apple cider and mead.

On ExpressNews.com: [Sleep outdoors in style at these six Hill Country glampgrounds](#)

The history of Hye

The area around Hye first was settled by whites in 1860, growing steadily over the next two decades with the influx of German and Anglo families. In 1886, Hiram G. Brown established the Hye Post Office — Hye was his nickname. He replaced that structure with a new building in 1904. In 1966, the building was designated a Texas Historic Landmark.

Legend has it that at age 4, Lyndon B. Johnson mailed his first letter from the post office. Years later, in 1963, he announced he was running for the presidency from the building's front steps.

The post office has been in continuous operation since it opened, and the store has gone through several permutations as a mercantile, feed store and package store.

Hye Hall, which Brown also built, wasn't as lucky. It closed in 1950 and was left abandoned.

No one really knows when it was built. Oliver Deike, who today owns the building, said he thinks it probably was around 1916.

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In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson used the front porch of the Hye Post Office as the setting for his appointment of Lawrence F. O'Brien as U.S. postmaster general. O'Brien later went on to serve as commissioner of the National Basketball Association. (Staff File Photo | Express-News)

Through the years, the town enjoyed several heydays. Cotton was king during the 1930s and '40s; later, there was a huge turkey industry in the area.

“At the height of the turkey business in the 1960s, approximately 1.5 million turkeys were grown annually around here,” Deike said.

His father, Levi, and Uncle Frederick supplied most growers through their feed store. Several silent feed silos are the only remaining signs of the business.

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Eventually, it was purchased by Fritz and Lena Deike, Oliver's grandparents.

On ExpressNews.com: [Area dance halls are the real Texas](#)

The Deikes and their kin were, and perhaps remain, the first family of Hye.

Fritz and Lena Deike raised two girls and nine boys — enough to field their very own baseball team. As a promotional stunt for a coffee company, that team of Deike brothers once traveled to Waukegan, Ill., to play another team made up of nine brothers.

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Madison Boudreaux pours a glass of wine in the William Chris tasting room. The winery produces about 35,000 cases of wine and hosts 60,000 visitors annually. (Josie Norris /Staff Photographer | Express-News)





Visitors try William Chris wines (Josie Norris /Staff Photographer | Express-News)

“When I was young, there were 28 people living in Hye, all with the last name Deike,” Oliver Deike said.

Now 74, Oliver Deike said he remembers his grandmother running a beer tavern from a lean-to adjacent to the dance hall, and his brothers and friends listening to music and running and sliding across the hall’s slick floors during the bands’ breaks.

“We’d get in trouble if we did it while the adults were dancing, though,” he said.

Eventually, however, the cotton gin closed due to a boll weevil infestation. Later, more than 40 turkey growers in the area went out of business when, according to Deike, the local turkey processing plant was bought by a Chicago company, which shut it down then promptly reopened it only to offer growers one-fifth of what it previously paid.

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The recently reopened Hye Hall is the latest sign that this Hill Country town is on its way back.

Mike Fisher/Staff artist

Hye now sits smack dab in the middle of the ongoing explosion of wineries in the Hill Country. (Mike Fisher/Staff Artist | San Antonio Express-News)

Wine: A new hope

Then slowly, steadily, the Texas wine industry took root. Initially concentrated around the Fredericksburg area, it eventually reached Hye.

The first winery in Hye, **William Chris Vineyards**, bottled its first vintage in 2008 and opened its first tasting room in 2010.

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producing wine with 100 percent Texas-grown fruit.

They couldn't afford the \$10,000 an acre for land around Fredericksburg, where wineries such as Becker Vineyards and Messina Hof Winery already were making a name for Texas wines. But they wanted to be as close as possible and somewhere along U.S. 290. Hye, at \$8,000 an acre, fit the bill.



Hye Rum business partners James Davidson, left, and Stephanie Houston walk to the tasting room in Hye. Established in 2017, Hye Rum currently makes five different artisanal rums and is one of only a handful of rum distilleries in the state. (Josie Norris /Staff Photographer | Express-News)

“Back then, everyone said Hye was too remote,” Burndrett said. “But we always felt like it was great to have the first winery coming into town.”

On [ExpressNews.com](#): [San Antonio's No. 1 Best Hill Country Winery: William Chris Vineyards](#)

Over the past decade, Burndrett and Blackmon have watched with satisfaction as more wineries, as well as distilleries and breweries, began opening in the area.

“It shows we knew what we were doing when we moved out here to what everyone thought of as the ‘boonies,’” Burndrett said.

Today, William Chris produces about 35,000 cases of wine and hosts 60,000 visitors annually. William Chris also has taken over the nearby five-bedroom [Hye-Way Haus Bed and Breakfast](#), a 1924 Victorian-style home where Oliver Deike’s father and 10 aunts and uncles grew up.



“Now when people come to see what we have here, they don’t have to leave at the end of the day,” Burndrett said.

Where there’s wine ...

In 2012, Jason Cook, with 19 years of experience in the corporate food world, took over the package store that was operating alongside the post office and slowly transformed it to a high-end sandwich shop where everything is house-made down to the butter and where only Texas-grown wine is sold.

Hye Rum was established in 2017. The company makes five different artisanal rums, about 7,000 bottles per month. Most of that is sold through the tasting room.

The decision was made to open the business in a two-story 1980s home on U.S. 290 primarily because the area attracts so many visitors.



Photo: Josie Norris /Staff Photographer

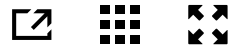


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Kelly the dog keeps watch as The Lost Sounds of a Texas Honky Tonk band plays at Hye Hall.

“We get people all the time who come in and, if it’s, like, two couples, three of them will be wine snobs and they’ve been visiting wineries all day,” Davidson said. “So they’ll visit us because the fourth wants to come here to taste something different.”

On ExpressNews.com: [The Top 10 Hill Country Wineries near San Antonio in 2019](#)

Hye Hall gets its shot

While all this development was going on, Hye Hall still sat vacant and unused. A 2018 photo of the building shows it almost completely hidden behind trees and underbrush,

Enter **Texas Dance Hall Preservation** Inc., a nonprofit with a mission to preserve these historic buildings, their culture and music, according to Deb Fleming, executive director.



Hye Hall, the beating heart of the small town. Media: Richard A. Marini

“These halls have traditionally been the center of their communities,” she said. “We want to restore the ones that have fallen into disrepair and help them serve their communities again, to act as an economic generator.”

With a \$23,000 grant from the Texas Historical Commission’s Preservation Trust Fund, matched by a like amount from Fleming’s group, they hired a preservation architecture firm to survey halls across the state, whittling that list down to nine they deemed historically significant.

The funds were used to develop individualized plans to, as Fleming put it, “mothball and stabilize” the buildings to prevent them from deteriorating further in the hope that someday, someone would come and restore them.

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Hye Hall was one of the nine. In 2018, Fleming met to discuss the program with several members of the Deike family, including Oliver and his wife, Mary Alice, along with Cook, who long had been intrigued by the vacant building across the way from his market.



The western view of U.S. 290 from Hye, located between Fredericksburg and Johnson City. (Josie Norris /Staff Photographer | Express-News)

“They agreed to our plan but, within a month, I was getting photos of the work they’d done, cleaning the inside of the building and outside it, too,” Fleming said.

Led by Cook, they stabilized the building, leveled and resurfaced the floor, built a stage and small green room, fixed the leaky roof and regraded the area in front of the building.

The two-month job cost “well over \$100,000,” said Oliver Deike, who split the cost with Cook, who now runs the Hye Hall operations.

"It looks good and feels great to have a part of my past back," Deike said. Jason's "a good promoter."

Cook has kept things as historically accurate as possible. The building's not air-conditioned, and there isn't a sign out front because the old building never had one.

On ExpressNews.com: [Pub Crawl: Grown-ups cut loose at Lucy Cooper's Texas Ice House in San Antonio](#)

Hye Hall, which hosted its first dance in October, charges \$7 admission on Wednesdays and \$10 on Fridays and Saturdays — more if a big name's playing. The bar serves beer, wine and \$4 setups, and there's usually a food truck outside.

In addition to music, Cook has more plans for the hall, including wine and beer seminars as well as educational classes on topics such as land management and what he calls "life management," and Saturday morning yoga followed by brunch in the Hye Market. He also hopes to bring in wines from Europe and elsewhere to pair and compare them to local vintages.

Until then, the people of Hye are happy just having someplace to go at night.

"It's great to have the hall operating again," said Ellen Felps, 78, who serves as the front door greeter. "We get all kinds of people. RVers, winter snowbirds, people from Waco, San Antonio, Austin. Nobody's a stranger when they come to Hye."

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