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TRAVEL

## Growing art in Johnson City

### Benini Sculpture Ranch a wonderland of art set against backdrop of Texas Hill Country

By Rona Distenfeld  
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JOHNSON CITY — Texas ranchers have used their land for many things; cattle, ostrich, goats, bison and exotic game. Hidden in the Hill Country, just west of here, the Beninis are growing free-range sculpture.

From the moment you drive onto their land, even before you pass the gateposts adorned with blue stars, huge creations of stone, steel and glass are there to greet you. And it just gets better.

Whether it's your first visit or your 50th, your first stop at the Benini Foundation Galleries and Sculpture Ranch is always the Studio Building. This is where you sign in, pick up a printed list of the works on display and find out what's new.

But the short drive to there can take a while. It's not unusual for first-time visitors to keep stopping to get out of their cars, get closer to a sculpture and take pictures. Each piece seems to take pride in showing itself against the trees and sky and welcoming visitors with a taste of things to come.

Once you arrive, there is a good chance that Benini — he's known only by his last name — and his wife, Lorraine, will be around. Benini is not a large man, but his energy is larger than life. If he has time to talk, he will tell tales of a fascinating life, from growing up in fascist Italy to seeing his work hung in the White House.

Benini's paintings fill the gallery. Other artists' works also are displayed here, and the overriding theme is one of color, texture, light and life.

The Benini Sculpture Ranch is not a manicured garden where nature has been civilized and made pretty around the art. This is the Texas Hill Country at its native best.

The art itself catches your eye and surprises you when rounding turns on the driving trails. To earn a place here, a piece must be powerfully built to withstand the strong winds and storms. And it must be 10 feet or

taller to have a presence in the hills.

As you leave the Studio Building and drive up the hill, you can't miss "Aspiration," a giant hand reaching out of the hillside as though trying to touch the sky. Near it, another hand seems to clutch the ground. They are huge, starkly white against the sky and the earth, and strongly compelling.

You can drive all the way up to the Beninis' house, built on the highest hill in the area. There is more sculpture here, and a fantastic view, made even better by the creations of stone and steel that gather in clearings and peep from behind trees.

### **If you go ...**


The Benini Foundation Galleries and Sculpture Ranch, 377 Shiloh Road, Johnson City. (830) 868-5244, [www.sculptureranch.com](http://www.sculptureranch.com). Hours: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesdays-Sundays, Mondays and Tuesdays by appointment.

Every two months, the Beninis host a free, weekend-long Arts Encounter series. You can come Saturday, Sunday or both days to hear visual and performing artists, critics, philosophers, healers and others share their thoughts and answer questions. Arts Encounters and daily admission are free. The next one is May 31-June 1.

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