

Rancho Mastatal Updates

September 2005

Happy Thanksgiving and salutations to all from blustery and snowy New York State! The leaves are finding their way to the ground as winter begins to lumber its way into this corner of the world for its elongated stay. Everything is going well here. Robin and I are finally officially married. The wedding was amazing and the honeymoon a blast. I admit that I've been getting my fill of baseball, football and college hoops. I'm stocking up in preparation for another 10-month drought from my beloved sports. Ah, we all have our weaknesses. With daily Internet access we have done our research and determined that the New York Mets, the New York Giants, Notre Dame Football, and Syracuse Basketball are the most sustainable teams in all of sports. Get on the bandwagon. Our eyes are now again turning towards our projects in Mastatal. I can't wait to get back to playing fútbol. Deportivo Mastatal, new uniforms and all, is reportedly registered for a "campeonato" that starts soon after our return. It may take a few weeks to get back in shape and drop the stone that I've added on to my frame since being in the States. Super Size me baby. We've been receiving sporadic reports from the Ranch caretakers over the past many weeks and from what we can ascertain, the place is still standing after two big group visits from Villanova University outside of Philadelphia and Jennings High School in Minneapolis. The latter was made up of low-income and troubled inner-city students and was led by JEFF HOLTE, a progressive and courageous teacher from MN who made the trip possible. From reports that we received from Mastatal the group was more challenging than most, and that says something, but the rewards much grander. "Life-changing", "unbelievable", "powerful" and "amazing" were a few of the terms that we heard used referring to the impact that this trip had on these kids. Jeff was able to convince the MN Department of Education to divert state funds to finance the trip. These same kids will be spending two months in Africa during their spring semester. Now that's giving kids a global perspective that this country's youth so lacks. We'd like to take this opportunity once again to thank all of those that helped to teach, organize, feed and guide this group in our absence; LIZ FALK, BONNIE AND MATT HECK, BRIAN O'ROURKE, KRISTEN TJERANDSEN, MADDIE STEVENSON, DAN DROUGHTON, RYAN FERESTER, and VERONIQUE. Their dedication and energy made a real difference in the lives of over twenty high school students that would have otherwise never had the opportunity to know another culture, the rainforest, or how to live sustainably the way we do in Mastatal. This is the kind of experience that truly changes our world for the better and we would like to commend all of those that took part in this magical visit. We will



Sunset at Rancho Mastatal

be returning to the Ranch in less than a week. Even though our trip has been absolutely wonderful, we're anxious to go back to our projects and we look forward to '06. Our calendar is once again chocked full. Thanks again to Brian and his little helper Liz for this month's newsletter. If it weren't for Brian, this newsletter would have become defunct months ago. It really takes a monumental effort to put this monthly bulletin together in the busy environment in which we live. I am more convinced each month that it's important that we keep it alive. Thanks also to Dan and SHERI DAVIS for their brilliant contributions. Have a fabulous Turkey Day, for those of you that celebrate it. Stay warm, and when you can't, head south to Mastatal. We love you all.

This month's update includes:

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RM Program News: Bamboo Workshop in February with Martín Coto

We'd like to take advantage of this newsletter to announce an upcoming bamboo workshop with Martín Coto, Costa Rica's most well-known bamboo builder and a good friend of the Ranch. Trained by the Taiwanese to build furniture with their *Phyllostachys* varieties, Martin has spent the last 25 years expanding his bamboo obsession to include large-diameter tropical varieties and the building of large structures. Martin is one of the most skilled craftspeople in all of Costa Rica and an absolutely amazing person to be around. His passion for bamboo is utterly contagious.

The course will run from February 19 through March 1. Martín will be joined for a few days by world-renowned bamboo architect, Darrel DeBoer, from the Bay Area. The course will cover bamboo joinery; bamboo construction; furnituremaking; and curing, cleaning and preparing bamboo for use in construction.

During the course we will be building a medium sized structure either at the Ranch in or in the community. We are also hoping to refurbish the kitchen/bar serving area at the community center. We will spend each morning and afternoon getting our hands dirty while building in either the workshop or outside. We will have discussions, slideshows, and presentations on selected evenings during the workshop. There will be one free day during the workshop so participants have the opportunity to explore our spectacular surroundings.

The workshop cost is \$900 and includes all food, lodging and workshop instruction. Costa Rican nationals pay \$500. Most students will stay at Jeanne's house.

For more information about or to register for this course, please contact Tim O'Hara at info@ranchomastatal.com.

Please help us spread the word about this workshop.

Building Report: ...And the Walls Came Crashing Down

Tim and Robin have been back in the States, so everyone has stopped working here at the Ranch. All construction has come to a halt. Their new cob house is melting back into the Earth as the rains break down the walls. The grasses at the main house have overtaken everything, creating a massive green hill that will leave future archaeologists in a state of confusion: "There are so many books on every subject imaginable in this place, giving the inhabitants a wealth of knowledge. They ate the healthiest of foods, giving them energy and life. They played the guitar, wrote stories, and mapped out plans for new structures. What happened to them? Why did they stop? The wise ones, their leaders and inspiration, must have left."

Luckily, this is only partly true. Our inspiration is spending some time back in the States, but they have created something here that can continue to breathe on its own (at least for a little while).

The walls of the new house are taller and stronger than ever. A couple of the hardworking locals have been summoned to the worksite to pick up our slack, and they power through the work like Toyota 4X4s on the worsening local roads. The main room could easily support the load of the roof as the walls have reached their final height. The waddle and daub walls on the front of the house are also hitting their mark. It is time to wait and watch them dry. Besides, we can't start plastering without Roger's expertise.

The classroom is also starting to take shape behind Jeannie's house. The foundation is set, the floors have been started, and the roof is almost in place. How many gringos does it take to lift a massive bamboo pole fifteen feet above our heads? About seven. And we definitely didn't make it look easy until Vindas rearranged us and magically turned us into a team of skill and grace. He and Alex, as they always do, are making an amazing project seem almost effortless. Archaeologists eat your hearts out, for now. It is time to wait and watch us rock your effin' socks off.

Brian O'Rourke

Volunteer/Guest Gossip: A Day in the Life at Rancho Mastatal

My morning alarm is the continuous buss of Cicada beetles that echo throughout the rainforest. What was once a shrilly intrusion to my ears is now a reminder of the unique and precious life that exists here. I have grown to love the natural sounds of this land, so rich with life. My eyes open and I find myself accompanied by fellow yawning, sleepy-eyed friends preparing to begin a busy day at the organic palace of Rancho Mastatal.

I get out of bed and head straight for the outdoor composting toilet. I never thought I would enjoy making a deposit outside until now. There is nothing more relaxing than to watch birds or look out onto the forest while carrying out my morning routine. My next task before breakfast is a rejuvenating rinse at the outdoor bamboo shower. Like the toilet, the showers are open to the lush rainforest. Both provide a relaxing and aesthetically pleasing atmosphere.

My classmates and I trickle up to Tim and Robin's house to feast upon a fabulous breakfast. I am never disappointed by the food served here. Every dish provides for a diverse array of mouth-watering flavors. One of my favorite items on the menu for breakfast today: egg-toasties, or as

Robin calls them, “toads in a hole.” Following breakfast, my classmates and I meet with Tim, Robin, and Professor Chuck Henry to discuss the progress we have made on our sustainable development projects. Some of these projects include a cob oven for the community center and a new drainage ditch for the soccer field. After our pow-wow session, we are ready to work.

There are many ways to contribute to the community. Many of us will make cobs for Tim and Robin’s new home while others continue to clean and cut bamboo for the new classroom. Other interesting projects are water quality in Costa Rica, rainwater catchment, and plant restoration. We spend the afternoon building, researching, and enjoying a mixture of sunshine and torrential downpour. I feel so fortunate to be part of such an amicable team, where all of our work is done with great humor and fun. We also have the unique opportunity to work with the local Ticos. As a result, many of my classmates have polished their Spanish-speaking skills and made new friends. We labor from 9am-12pm and break for lunch. Again, a satisfying organic meal is served to boost our energy and soothe our growling bellies. We go back to work from 1-5pm, putting finishing touches on our projects for the day. After completing a strenuous yet pleasurable day’s work, we head to Jeanne’s house to change out of our muddy clothing. After all, we don’t want to show up to dinner looking like we’ve just finished a wild mud-wrestling tournament (although I wouldn’t put that kind of activity past us:).

Dinner is the time where we all gather at the end of the day to bond and share our accomplishments. Candlelight, camaraderie, and relaxation are the appetizers before every dinner. It is lovely. And so we end our day with yet another delicious feast. Bagel sandwiches will surely cure our colossal appetites. Yum...

And there you have it: A day in the life at Rancho Mastatal. We work hard, eat well, form long-lasting friendships, learn about our natural environment, and live a pure life. I know now why Costa Rica’s motto is “Pura Vida.”

Sheri Davis University of Washington (Sustainable Development Program)

Community Facts/Stories: Tim and Robin’s Big Day

The days were gray and dreary in Vestal, NY. A cold rain pierced our skin and rattled our bones daily. We couldn’t see the changing colors of the leaves outside because the windows were fogging with breath desperate for warmth. Being outside is such a common feeling for us in Costa Rica, even in the rainy season, but “outside” seemed so far away this week. Outside. I almost never use that word at the Ranch because the open windows and doors create one uniform “side.” But this week, we were “inside.” Inside. It just didn’t seem right.

Tim’s mother walked outside across the deck to the clothesline that Roger had hung for her. She was thinking about an old Irish tradition, a remedy for rain on a loved one’s wedding day. She hung a set of rosary beads on the line, and we all sent out positive energy wherever we all desired, optimistic for a sunny next day.

The house was then flooded with visitors from all over the place. Not surprisingly, every single one of them entered the house grinning from ear to ear. First and foremost, each person wanted to see

Tim and Robin and give them a big hug, trying to convey through that brief moment of contact just how much those two really mean to him or her. Sometimes the words just do not exist to describe emotions, but no words were needed this weekend. You could feel it with every person. The weekend became a setting for the largest glowing conglomerate of positive energy I had ever seen.

Tim and Robin's families were extremely warm and welcoming from the start. Every one of their siblings is so much different from each other, but common roots are also obvious. It was also great to see how far their branches reached to accept others into that family. All friends were feeling at home. "Inside" was starting to seem pretty good. Instead of cold, it was becoming cozy and warm. Even though many of us were still learning each other's names, we were all one big family. One big loud family drinking free delicious beer from the Carolina Brewing Company. Hey, family knows how to party together.

As I woke up the next morning in Tim's brother's house, I felt a strange sensation on my eyelids. They felt warm. I opened them and spent the next five minutes struggling to keep them that way. The sun was out and shining brightly!

We all dressed up in our new sweaters and clothes, even Timo. He hated the idea of buying a shirt for one day's use, but it sure was appealing on him. Robin, on the other hand, had searched out the perfect dress for a fall wedding and could not have done a better job. They both looked great and would spend the rest of the day wearing perma-grins as well.

The pre-wedding set-up went well. Everything came together pretty easily. Robin's parents did all of her worrying for her. She was the most relaxed bride in the history of weddings, although she did crack the whip on a serious group session of napkin-folding. The wedding location consisted of a beautiful two-floor wooden house resting on a perfect green lawn. A quick stroll down the side yard would bring you to the actual spot of the ceremony: under a perfect shade tree overlooking a fishpond that reflected bright oranges, reds, and yellows off of the surrounding tree-covered hills. We all gathered around as they made their vows in a very natural and realistic wedding, binding their hands together with ribbon for each vow. They did not make promises as to being perfect beings throughout the rest of their time together. Instead, they admitted that they may have faults and may not be at their best at every second, but that they would still love each other deep down behind even their most ugly moments. Their marriage would be based on finding middle ground, not building obstacles too high to climb over or digging ditches too deep to climb out of.

The day was spent socializing with friends and strangers (everyone who made up this weekend family), eating delicious foods, breathing in the cool yet pleasant autumn air, playing frisbee or football, listening to live bluegrass tunes, drinking wine or freshly brewed hops, yelling through megaphones, gathering around a bonfire, and laughing. Laughing outside and inside. It didn't matter. The air was open and the sky was clear.

The next day, I had to head back up to Syracuse. It was raining again. A new friend of mine, of Tim and Robin's for years, offered me a ride since he and his girlfriend were flying out of the airport there anyways (thanks Mike). On the way, he told me a story about Tim at the wedding. Just before the ceremony, Tim had to use the bathroom. As he headed there, a child asked him what were in

two of the coolers sitting on the floor. Tim casually explained to him that one cooler was full of lemonade whereas the other contained iced tea. The little boy asked him if he could have lemonade. Instead of brushing him aside and rushing over to the wedding like so many other people would have done, Tim put his own drink down, grabbed lemonade, opened it, and handed it to the boy. "There you go buddy," he said with a smile. He then did his business and headed over to get married. It is this kind of thing that I see in Tim and Robin every day that I spend with them, and I think it is the kind of thing that everyone sees in them. Nothing is too important to them to brush others aside. That is why it feels okay to be inside or outside with them. Because it is all the same. They let us all come inside and help us to appreciate everything that is outside.

Now that they're married, everyday is going to be sunny for them. You can read it in their faces. I know all of us at the Ranch are anxiously awaiting their return. Mastatal is anxiously awaiting their return. Because even here, they have created "inoutside."

Brian O'Rourke

Comida Corner: The Bread that Dan Made

Zen-Master Dan concocted this superb squash sweet bread. With a dark "cerveza", this is perfect for the autumn season.

20 minutes to prepare. Yields 12 to 16 servings.

1 1/2 c butter or margarine, softened 1 3/4 c brown sugar 4 eggs 3 tsp vanilla 1 tsp grated lemon rind 4 c flour 1 tsp salt 1/2 tsp baking soda 1 Tbl baking powder 1 tsp allspice 2 tsp cinnamon 1/4 tsp nutmeg 2 1/2 c butternut or acorn squash, raw and grated 1/4 tsp fresh ginger, grated 1/4 c lemon juice or orange juice

Combine the squash and juice. Preheat oven to 350 degree F. Grease two loaf pans or one 9"x13" pan with oil or butter. Beat butter or margarine and sugar in a large bowl. Add eggs, one at a time, beating each one. Stir in vanilla and lemon rind.

Sift/ mix together dry ingredients. Add these to the butter mixture and alternatively, adding squash as you mix. Stir in ginger.

Spread the mixture into pan(s) and bake 40-50 minutes, or until ready.

Buen Provecho!!

Inspirational Impressions: Jimi

"When the power of love overcomes the love of power the world will know peace".

-Jimi Hendrix

Have a rockin' holiday.

Abrazos,

Everyone at the Ranch