

Fourth Quarter 2014

As Christmas advertisements bombarded every corner of our lives in the US a few weeks back, we were gearing up for another sensational year at the Ranch. I believe that I speak on behalf of our entire team when I say that we expect this season to be the most fulfilling and exciting yet. After a few months stateside we're rested, motivated and ready for a season full of challenges, improvements, laughter and invigorating projects. Our calendar is filling, our apprenticeship full, and our project list long but achievable. We hope to continue to focus on the mantra of "less is more" as we continue to eradicate systems that aren't working for us and refine and improve systems that are. Thank you for making "word of mouth" our most successful form of marketing. We rely greatly on our incredible network of supporters. We wish you all the best in the coming year and hope you enjoy this final update of the year.



Greenwood College School

This month's update includes:

[RM Program News](#): The 20% Rule

[Building Report](#): The Art and Practice of Tadelakt

[Conservation Update](#): EcoEmprendedores Mastatal

[Farm Facts](#): Permaculture Site Establishment: Phases of Abundance

[Community Stories](#): Homebrewed Hooch

[Apprentice/Guest Gossip](#): First Week

[Comida Corner](#): Treats

[Inspirational Impressions](#): Helen

RM Program News

: The 20% Rule

"The 20% rule?!" I exclaimed puzzled by this rather odd concept that NATE SANDER had just suggested. We were sitting around the dinner table at Round the Bend farm in Massachusetts and as was quite common shooting out ideas whilst digesting another delicious farm to table meal. Nate had spent several years working for the public school system in a pretty high up role and in my eyes was well-versed on business terminology and strategy; something which was totally alien to me as I spent a good proportion of the year working at the Ranch with little to no communication with the outside world let alone the latest business strategies that FTSE 100 companies are employing to increase productivity. I was intrigued though as I valued Nate's opinion very much and asked him to embellish on this "20% rule". As he explained the concept it began to make a lot of sense. Google



Nic with chainsaw

had discovered that if their employees spent 20% of their time, for instance one day a week in a 5 day working week, working in a totally different department on projects that had nothing to do with their normal job description, their productivity increased significantly. It turns out that during these periods over 50% of Google's new products were discovered and developed. This by far outweighed the "reduction" in efficiency that you would expect if people spent 20% less time doing their normal job. I mulled it over in my head thinking about how we could make it work at the Ranch. Rancho Mastatal has been my home for several years and during this time quite a core group of people have emerged as key players and contributors to the farm day to day workings (above and beyond the work of TIM and ROBIN), SCOTT & RJ look after all agricultural aspects, LAURA looks after all food related areas, and I try to look after the building projects as best I can! We were never really assigned these jobs and they have never been officially designated, we just fell into them knowing what our strengths are and it makes sense for us to work in this way. But maybe as NATE suggested if we spent 20% of our time working in each others fields it may lead to some earth shattering new discoveries or innovations. After all we are all great friends and the thought of spending time working with each other for a change, instead of managing our apprentices and interns sounded quite appealing! Not only is working with my colleagues alluring, but also doing something different is always beneficial as it gives you some great perspective. After all I got into this lifestyle because I am interested in everything that is sustainable living; per se I enjoy cooking, nursery work, fermenting, planting cover crops etc... I just don't get to do them much anymore!

Fast forward two months and we are all back in Costa Rica together, LAURA and I have finished our three month stints at Round the Bend farm in MA with GEOFF and DESA, SCOTT has finished working with Grant Schultz at Versaland in Iowa, RJ is back from Boston, and we are all back in country, on the ground at our shared home. With the apprentices not due to arrive for another month and the first group not due in for another two weeks the madness is yet to ensue and I have, what seems to me, plenty of time to do all these side projects that I never seem to have time for during the height of the season. When I say side projects I mean the opportunity to actually do the 20% rule, not just think it could be a cool project. It's a Friday afternoon and I am helping LAURA prepare the dinner. As seems to be more and more common there are a number of Gluten free people staying with us at the moment and that means no wheat flour (which we are trying to eliminate anyways as it is imported from the US). In order to make the Korean pancakes sticky we are going to need another type of flour. Rice flour is the current flavor of the month and it is grown by local farmers and we can easily get our hand on it. Laura gets out the hand mill she brought down from the US this past month, it's a rather small fragile looking thing and I wonder how long it is going to take to grind 10 cups of flour. We start talking about the issues with the flour grinding; we generally need to grind our nixtamalised corn which needs one specific type of mill as it's

a wet grind and dry flours which requires another type of mill. This poses quite the conundrum as that would mean a huge investment to get two decent mills to do the two jobs. This new flour mill looks painfully slow and as I turned the crank discovered that it was probably going to take about an hour to grind the 10 cups we needed. There must be a better way! I inspected the handle and unscrewed the bolt that was holding it on, the handle popped off... I looked at the mechanism and pondered how you could mechanize this piddley little mill. I had seen people who had rigged their corn grinders up to old electric motors and wondered if the same thing could be done. Unfortunately, we didn't have any electric motors lying around and definitely none of the components required to attach belts and pulleys. Popping over to the local hardware store was out of the question too. That was the moment though that the 20% rule started to pay dividends. I rushed out of the kitchen mumbling something to Laura on the way out about having an idea and went and got a few parts from the workshop including: the C clip out of the chainsaw, the electric drill, 1/2" socket and driver bit. I came back to the kitchen and announced that I think I have a plan, as I rigged up the drill to the mill LAURA got excited as the realms of possibilities started to appear in front of her eyes, "if this works....." she said," we could make green banana flour, peach palm flour, and ojoche flour on a large scale! We could source nearly all of our flours from on the farm... It would be a game changer."

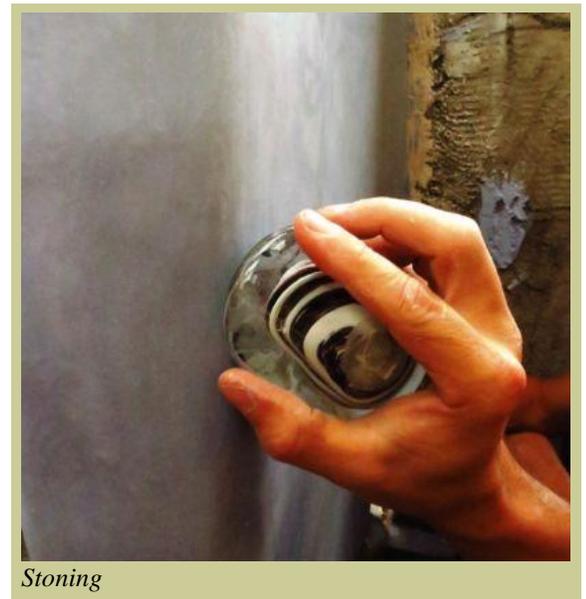
As it turned out the drill did work, there were a few adjustments that had to be made, it definitely took longer to grind that first batch than it did successive batches and dinner was late that day (my bad!!!), but the excitement that it generated was tangible, the 20% rule had already started to pay dividends even on day one and we look forward to many more game changing moments that this new inspiring rule could make. Thank you Google, thank you NATE and thank you LAURA.

Building Report

: The Art and Practice of Tadelakt

The following is an article written by Scott Gallant for the Permaculture Research Institute.

The art of Tadelakt has for centuries been steeped in mystic and wonder. Few who leave the fantastic halls of the Marrakesh palaces or the beautifully reconstructed Riads will fail to notice the glimmering monolithic plaster that twinkles in the light as it seamlessly extends over these proud buildings. Tadelakt is a plaster finishing technique historically used in north Africa to protect earthen structures. It is specifically valued for its function of providing a water proof seal. Marrakesh, a wonderfully unique city that has remained virtually unchanged for centuries, provides insights and inspiration for this technique as it is re-discovered throughout the natural building community.



Stoning

The climate-appropriate buildings of Marrakesh feature huge 6ft thick earthen walls, which tower up into the relentlessly hot desertTo read the entire article, please go [here](#) .

Conservation Update

: EcoEmprendedores Mastatal

About a year ago, a handful of town members began to meet to brainstorm ways to facilitate positive development in our community. We collectively felt that our local government was not representing us well and that there were numerous needs in Mastatal that were not being addressed in any organized manner. Those initial meetings led to the birth of a new community organism called “Ecoemprededores Mastatal” and recently became a recognized entity by the government of Costa Rica. The organization can now officially lobby our local government, seek grants, and legally represent itself at official gatherings and events. Ecoemprededores' mission is to create healthy, responsible and sustainable opportunities for those living in Mastatal. We hope to address environmental and social justice issues and plan to work to make our town safer, cleaner and more economically sound. A recent donation to the organization has allowed Ecoemprededores to engage in its first official initiatives. With these initial monies, the organization helped to coordinate the region's first official bird count (273!) and began regular maintenance of Mastatal's futbol pitch. We hope to continue to enhance recreational opportunities in town in an effort to give our youth a healthy outlet for their abundant energy. Boredom in small communities such as ours can oftentimes lead to destructive behavior. We hope to support Ecoemprededores in the coming years in the hopes that it becomes a pillar of positive community development in our community.



Certified

Farm Facts

: Permaculture Site Establishment: Phases of Abundance

This is an article written by Scott Gallant for the [Permaculture Research Institute](#).

Five years ago I had the opportunity to join a land-based project (Rancho Mastatal Sustainable Education Center in Costa Rica) already eight years into operation. At my arrival I found a site that had focused on infrastructure and program building over its initial life span. This was an important leverage point in building a financial base as an education center, but it meant that some aspects of the campus were still in their infancy, such as the agricultural and food preservation systems. I arrived during a shift in focus to the latter systems, which enabled me to participate simultaneously in different phases of site establishment. □

In addition to Tim O'Hara and Robin Nunes, the owners/founders, the Ranch was populated by a long-term crew of returning community members, many of whom had been helping to build the site from the first few years onward. They narrated stories to me of the rustic lodging, tight tiny kitchen, and general inefficiencies of the infrastructure establishment years. The classroom turned into a bedroom at night, the tools were stored in the only secure building far from the workshop, and one (quickly filled) five gallon bucket served as the main house composting toilet.



Abundance

What luxury I felt to have joined in during a phase of infrastructure abundance. To have a private room with my partner, a large fully operating kitchen, workshop and library at our fingertips; it all came together to create an ideal learning environment.

The pattern emerges

Over the last few years I have seen dozens of projects in various degrees of site development, and I've begun to recognize a pattern during these stages of establishment. With each stage there are various skills, choices, and design considerations that stand out as most pertinent. Through use of pattern recognition and application, permaculture designers can use this information to organize resources, forms of capital, and people's skills more efficiently. For example, if you know a certain stage of establishment requires a specific dedication to organizational skills, then you can look for this in the team you build around yourself and invest in the proper.....

To read the rest of the article, please go [here](#).

Community Stories

: Homebrewed Hooch

In my opinion there is nothing better than a crisp, fresh, homebrewed IPA after a long hot day of work. After working at a local brewery in Colorado I really began to enjoy and appreciate the technique and passion of perfecting a brew. Before coming down to the Ranch last year I was a little concerned with how I was going to get that relaxing fix at the end of the day, knowing that I would be living in a small town in the middle of the rainforest that definitely would not have a good source of drink. But to my surprise as I arrived at the Ranch one of the first questions I was asked was, "would you like a glass of Hooch?" As I was poured a bubbly, cold glass of homebrewed Hooch my worries fled, and the exhaustions of a long day of travel were set at ease as I sat in the rocking chair with a refreshing brew. In the following months at the Ranch I became very interested and involved in the brewing of the Hooch, and after returning this year we have come a long ways on our brewing process.



Hooch

Hooch is what we call our homebrewed alcohol here at the Ranch. It is a natural, pro-biotic, medicinal drink (yes we use this to justify our drinking habits) that we are able to make with local ingredients. Either using SCOBY bugs (symbiotic colony of bacteria and yeast) or wine yeast, water, and local tapa dulce (unrefined sugar cane) we are able to brew an alcohol that is anywhere from 6% to 12%. Since it's the tropics and the temperature and humidity are so high, the fermentation process can happen in less than two weeks. After the first fermentation process we then can flavour the Hooch with fruit juices or herbs. Flavouring can become a fun experiment, playing around with different ingredients to come up with that favourite combo. Some of our favourites here at the Ranch are Starfruit, made from the juice of harvested starfruit from the property, and a Mojito, using a combination of our limes and mint.

Up until this year we had been brewing in bidones which made the process of bottling long, messy, and requiring a lot of fridge space for all the bottles. Also the issue of brewing in plastic became a problem for obvious reasons such as sanitation, proper cleaning, and started to turn a lot of our batches bad (smell and taste wise). This year thanks to Nic and another one of his inventive ideas we have begun brewing in large food grade buckets that we can then siphon into a keg that we purchased from a Costa Rican brewery. This keg then sits for a day to

carbonate, is placed inside our large chest fridge and has a pump to allow easy access in filling up your glass straight from the fridge! This new system has been revolutionary in our Hooch process, no more hassle of bottles, a lot less mess, a lot less time, a lot easier to clean and keeps our sacred Hooch cold, bubbly, and easy to get to!

We end most of our days here with an intense game of ultimate Frisbee, walking back from the plaza dripping in sweat discussing the game and that epic pass Timo threw to win the last point, it's become a habit to walk straight to the chest fridge and pour a crisp, fresh, homebrewed glass of Hooch.

Apprentice/Guest Gossip

: First Week

Just like the peaks and valleys that make up Costa Rica, so too was my first week. Moments of euphoria, culture shock, reassurance, and insecurity. The unpredictability of what's to come is at times the toughest to deal with, and I'm sure I will have many more days, weeks and maybe months of this feeling of uncertainty to deal with. But in the end the reasons for being here and certain expectations were validated for the time being.

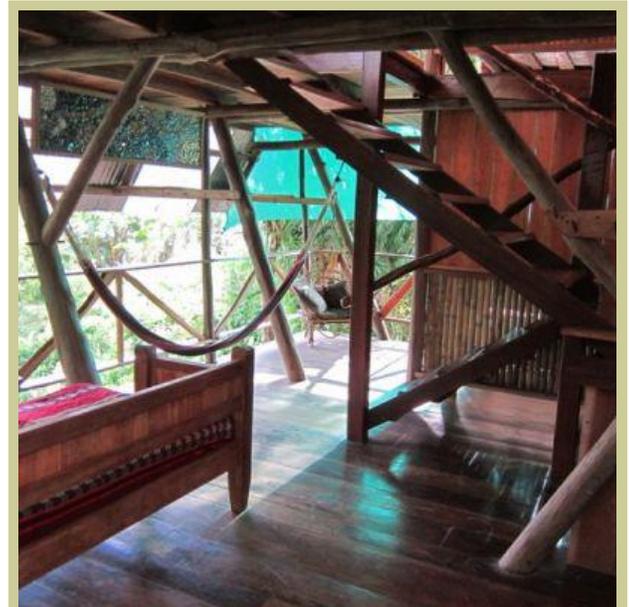
Leaving the valley of San Jose was quite the sight. Rolling hills filled with what looked like quiet affluent suburbs, neighbouring with beautiful undeveloped green hills, along with white and grey clouds spread throughout the valley and mountains. Looking back into the valley of San Jose, it was surprisingly a big city, and I feel I didn't give it a fair shake in my original assessment. It left me wondering what the city was like, considering I only explored a few kilometres. I wish I was able to take a picture. Unfortunately, me and the rest of the interns were some of the last to board our bus, and seats let alone good seats were scarce. I ended up sitting beside a local tica, who was none to pleased to sit with me. (Costa Ricans refer themselves as ticos or ticas.) Not sure if she knew I wasn't local or if it was because I was with dirty gringos, as they seem to think all Caucasians are smelly. Nevertheless we got to our first stop, the town of Puriscal.

A couple of hours later we boarded our next bus to our final destination of Mastatal. Again we were one of the last to board the bus, and seats were scarce. Not to mention, we boarded an old school bus retrofitted to have five seats per row, three to the right, two to the left, leaving a very tiny claustrophobic isle. It was quite an uncomfortable ride, especially when the road turned to gravel, and the width of the road decreased at points to dangerous proportions. It was quite concerning, and stressful, not knowing if this piece of shit bus was going to make the turn or fall off the edge of the mountain. On the other hand the view was beautiful but again no justice in describing without a picture.

Two and a half hours later, we get to Rancho Mastatal. We are greeted by the owner of the ranch, Tim. He showed us to our living space, a 5-bedroom structure called the Hankey House. Insert lame cheesy joke here.

It somewhat resembles a tree house, but I can assure you that it is not. Walking into the house it looks and feels like you are on a tree over looking the jungle. I was amazed at this view, and every morning I woke up and saw this view I was blown away.

I lucked out in getting this somewhat private space. The ladies were battling over getting the rooms upstairs, and I quietly went down to what is called the annex and claimed my space.



Hankey

We had an orientation and had a tour of the ranch the next day. The property is an amazing place to walk around. Besides the various living spaces throughout the property, there are numerous herbs, fruits, and leafy edible plants densely populated. Not to mention the colourful foliage. Most plants you walk by can be consumed.

It was an adjustment of sorts to get to know and prepare myself to live with my new roommates. They are all younger than me, but much more versed in sustainability than I am. It had kind of a “what did I get myself into” moment. Made me second guess if this was thought out correctly. Then trying to relate and understand the cultures they came from, and if I fit in brought out some frustrations and moments of doubt. The frustration side, kind of felt like a contestant in a reality show like big brother or the real world, having a difference of opinion or just being annoyed by how a certain individual behaves added to some of the negative feelings and experiences I was feeling. However an important lesson I learned a long time ago was to forcefully empathize with others, and take advantage of opportunities at their right time to get your point across. Living this last week with the rest of the interns, every night after dinner we went back to the Hankey, and got to know each other. Eventually we discussed about ourselves and each other and hashed out our opinions and expectations of each other, as well as our goals, philosophies, and perspectives. It was a great reassurance.

In closing, every day at dinner, we hold hands and have a blessing. As strange as this felt, there was a great feeling of connectedness. We start off with silence for about 20 seconds, and that alone brings on a great sense of belonging and security. Like you are really part of community that is here for the greater good. Not sure how else to describe it. Then someone says a few words of what they are grateful for, and others are welcome to join if they choose to. Once all has been said we all say “buen provecho” meaning eat well. Besides eating the meal, the blessing is something quite soothing and important for well being after a good or bad day. Helps to look at the grand scheme of things, and appreciate much more why I am here.

----- Shehan Wijeyeratne

Comida Corner

: Treats

Who doesn't love a special sweet treat after dinner? Well here at the Ranch we pretty much all have that sweet tooth, which is usually always treated by the local chocolate man that comes by twice a week selling his delicious family grown and made chocolate. But, on occasion a little something different is appreciated by all. We have made a big push to stop using wheat, as we can't buy it locally or even from within country, and want to stop supporting the large, corporate, GMO wheat. This can pose making treats kind of tricky. But leave it to the Ranch and the genius team of people here, we have found and invented some delicious new recipes for those craving some sweets.

□□ Laura has been experimenting with ojoche, a local tree nut that can be dried and ground into flour and used in similar ways as wheat, she has come up with this absolutely amazing cookie that tastes like chocolate cake. Top this cookie with a chocolate mouse, thank you Bonnie for introducing us to this recipe, which can be made from ingredients sourced locally or from our property. The combo of these two is a delicious, healthy dessert! Enjoy!

Laura's Ojoche Cookies:



1 cup lard
6 eggs
1.5 cups grated tapa dulce
6 cups dried ojoche flour
1.5 Tablespoons baking powder
3 Tablespoons vanilla extract
Pinch of salt
Milk or water if necessary

Mix dry ingredients together. Beat eggs with the lard. Mix everything together. Form into cookies and bake on a greased sheet for 12-15 minutes.

Buen Provecho

Inspirational Impressions

: **Helen**

"When one door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has been opened for us."

— Helen Keller

Abrazos,

The Ranch Crew

