

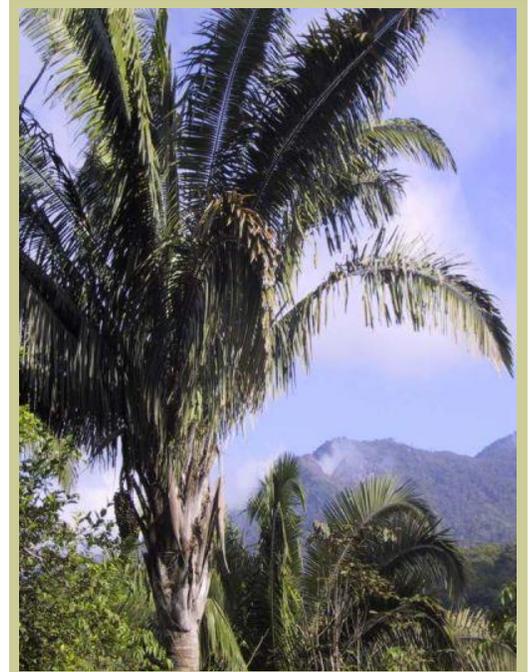
# Rancho Mastatal Updates

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## Nov/Dec 2007

*Rancho Mastatal UPDATE for the months of NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2007.*

*Here we are reporting once again from our lovely home in Mastatal. This is the first time since writing our first newsletter almost six years ago that we have missed a "deadline", I think. As a result we have combined the months of November and December for our first dual-month newsletter in the history of this highly acclaimed publication. We regret that this is the case but unfortunately our growing commitments have not allowed us the time or energy to stay on task. We may soon again consider making this a bi-monthly mailing, something that we've somehow managed to avoid to date. Regardless, this combined edition should help get us back on schedule for the New Year. We made it back safe and sound to Costa Rica with five of Tim's family in tow. His brother KEITH and niece KATIE made their first ever trip to the Ranch to see with their own eyes what has been going on in Mastatal over the past six years. Tim's mother BONNIE, his sister DEBBIE and her husband DAVID were all returning to take in the changes that have occurred since their last visits.*



*A tropical palm, with a view of La Cangreja Park in the background*

*photo by Ana Cohen*

*The holiday season in Mastatal was amazing. The community baile, Christmas Eve pizza party, Secret Santa (thanks ANNE!) Christmas sushi and Boxing Day shenanigans were all easy highlights. The group that shared in this season's festivities was remarkable. We'll bring you up to speed on all of this next month. Otherwise, we're getting geared up for one of our favorite courses of the year, our annual Wilderness First Response Certification with Dave McEvoy and Aerie School for Backcountry Medicine. Ian Woofenden's Solar Energy International Renewable Energy in the Developing World workshop will follow that closely. The quieter December days will soon come to an abrupt end as we enter into one of our busiest months of the year. We're looking forward to keep you informed. All the best to everyone out there during the New Year.*

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*A handmade broom*

*photo by Ana Cohen*

### **RM Program News: Reflections on Ranch Sitting**

Looking back, I think the pivotal moment was... (no, wait. I probably shouldn't talk about that. Better to leave the names out of this...) After a month or so reflection on my two months spent Ranch sitting, what can I say? It's an experience I highly recommend. Especially if you only know a medium amount of Spanish, with no vocabulary that pertains to normal, everyday life. That adds the touch of adventure when a local shows up and starts asking you rapid-fire questions about which you understand about one of every three words. I found the best way to deal was to stroke my chin thoughtfully, look at the ground, and mutter "Sí, sí..." as if I were contemplating profound questions of the universe. Then, I would say, "perhaps it would be better if you asked Chepo. Unless it was Chepo asking the questions. Then I would usually just go with the "Sí, sí..." part...

All right, it wasn't nearly as bad as that. Actually, it wasn't bad at all; I had a great time being called "*el Jefe*" at the pulp and hearing "yes, my boss" constantly from Kattia and Laura. I got to live in the Choza, which is the sweetest pad this side of the Taj Mahal (despite my best sales job of how Timo & Robin would absolutely love living in the Hankey, they didn't go for it and kicked me out when they returned...).

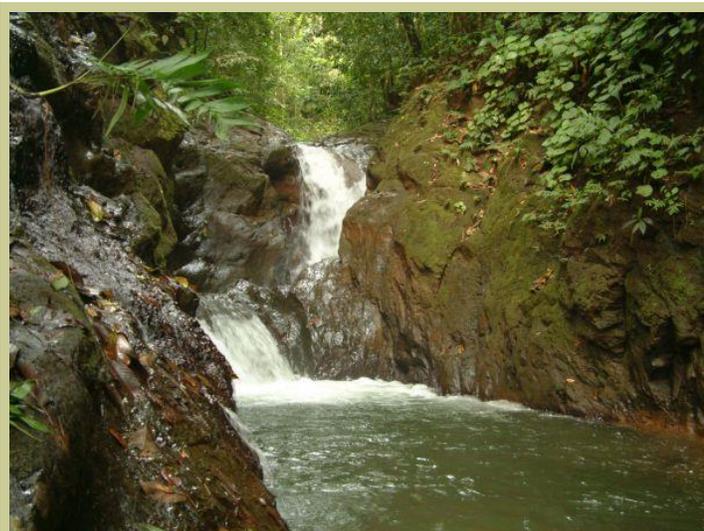
It helped immensely that I had a great group of fellow vols helping out - and my eternal thanks go out to JOEY, SINEAD, TOM, RACHEL and MAT for being such a hardworking skeleton crew for October - with such a small group, each person spent about half of each day either cooking or cleaning. It was a wonder that we had time for anything else, and with 45 inches of rain falling in one month, it was a wonder we didn't get washed away...

November saw the arrival of garden and kitchen superstars ERIN and REBECCA, who arrived on Halloween night when the vols had gone to Ciudad Colón for a Halloween party at the University for Peace, and LILY, thinking I would be by myself, had cooked me dinner. I gave them a quick kitchen tour, apologized for leaving them alone, and promptly did just that. With a reinforced crew (and the rain starting to finally let up), the group (led by flooring experts Tom, Erin and Rebecca) tackled finishing the Hankey floors and the Cuña (the gazebo-ish extension added this spring). After over a week of sanding, a light coating of cedro dust compensated for the lack of tanned skin from no sunshine... Four coats of oil later, the beautiful grain that was hidden under a summer's worth of dirt and wear was finally allowed to shine through. Of course, it being the rainy season, it took another three weeks for it to dry enough to move in...

I have to give a shout out to all those who joined in the efforts, especially during the final whirlwind week before Timo, Robin and family returned. In addition to the usual Ranch chores,

these guys built a new entranceway to the kitchen bodega, made a bamboo and shade-cloth seed starting shed, cleaned both trucks to showroom standards, reinvigorated the gardens, made a new shower underneath the Hankey, built a stellar bookshelf for the cookbooks in the kitchen, cleaned & organized Robin's workshop, made a roll-up screen for movie nights in the library, re-organized the books in the library, rebuilt the laundry lines outside the main house, and generally cleaned everything in sight twice, including Chingo (and we all know how long that lasted). Those are only what pops into my mind; I'm sure I'm leaving things out, so please forgive me - I'm an old man now, after all...

What makes all of that more impressive is that during most of this, I was on the other side of town (doesn't have quite the same implications in Mastatal, does it?) working on Tiburon's house. These guys really took the reins in their hands and jumped in with both feet. My eternal gratitude goes out to those mentioned above, as well as RAE, JESS, ASHLEY, ADRIAN, ANNE, LOUIS, KJI, DANNY, and all those who I may have left out. And, last but certainly not least, a great thank you to Robin and Timo for trusting me enough to place their home in my hands. I have such a greater appreciation for all the day-to-day travails that they go through on a daily basis, especially all the little details that happen behind the scenes. I often felt like I had my hands full, and that was with just five of us... So I can only imagine the day-to-day chaos that comes with fifteen volunteers, a group, and of course the inevitable people who just swing by "to take a look around..." How they seem to stay so calm and relaxed is a miracle that should be bottled and secretly put into municipal water supplies... Cheers, guys!



*The waterfalls and swimming hole--on a hot tropical day, nothing beats a quick dip at this magical place!*

*photo by Claudio Pinzauti*

### **Conservation Update: Christmastime Blues**

The holiday season is generally a festive one here in Mastatal. It's a time when alcoholic consumption skyrockets, firecrackers and M80s dominate the evening air, and family from near and far come to spend time in the Costa Rican campo. This stretch of the year also unfortunately accompanies an increase in the environmental carnage seen in and around our small community. As has happened each year since we arrived to Mastatal, freshwater shrimp poachers recently poisoned our local waterways. We've also heard more gunshots in the surrounding forests than normal and have seen the street garbage increase dramatically. The influx of out-of-towners each holiday season that are apparently not

interested in seeing our community grow and prosper in a responsible manner has us up-in-arms while people talk about giving, compassion and the Christmas spirit. Through education and youth programs we work year-round to offer healthy alternatives for our local population. We expect the library, which we have raised thousands of dollars for over the last few months (thank you everyone out there that has made a donation!), to help kids explore alternatives to the cantina and the streets of Mastatal. We feel it important to assist in creating a new mentality in our community that is based on family, learning, compassion, conservation and sustainability. No small task for

sure. Wish us luck and please offer ideas if you have them.

### **Building Report: Help Us Name the Couple's Cabin**

Naming new buildings at the Ranch is a yearly task. With all of the innovative construction going on over the years, we've had our fill of coming up with catchy designations for our unique and beautiful structures. We've accomplished this through voting, contests, and on some instances by decree. We erected the frame for our newest building, a timber frame cabin for couples, almost a year ago now, yet for a variety of reasons, we have not been able to come to a consensus on an appellation for the small house.



*the beauty of timber framing*

*photo by Rachel Jackson*

Most people around the Ranch these days refer to the structure as the "Couple's Cabin", and most of us agree that we can come up with something more original than this mediocre moniker. Thor's F\*\*\* Palace and *El Nido* have both been shot down and we're at a loss to where to go from here. So now we'd like to ask you, our readers, for some help. Please offer us some suggestions on a wonderful name for our timber frame structure. We'll compile the names and vote towards the end of the month in our morning volunteer meeting. We'll let you know the winning label as soon as we can. And thanks so kindly for your assistance in this matter.



Jose & Moses, at a recent Mastatal medical clinic

## Volunteer/Guest Gossip: Some Thoughts from a Recent Volunteer

Like many travelers I generally work until I've saved enough money for a plane ticket and have as many adventures as possible until the money runs out and the cycle begins again. This past year however, I had some reservations about traveling that grew from a frustration at not having a specific purpose for travel, worrying about what kind of influence my presence as a white North American would have on wherever I ended up, and wondering if I would be, as a gringo, somehow tainting or corrupting the very place I love for its difference from my own home. Many folks seem to enjoy envisioning themselves as pioneers, going where no, or few gringos have gone before, becoming immersed and accepted into the local cultures. This attitude has caused some travelers to scoff at Costa Rica as "not the real Central America," or as nothing but a tourist trap that has been polluted by gringo influence and tourism. I was feeling very critical of folks, including myself, who travel to Central America taking in the culture and

environment without giving anything back.

Of course these concerns didn't stop me from buying a plane ticket to San José. Four months later I've ended up at Rancho Mastatal and seen that it is possible to give as much back to a place as you get from it. Places like Jacó and Tamarindo make it easy to think that all gringo influence has corruptive results, but here at the Ranch it is obvious that there has been a conscious effort invested in maintaining a balance between the positive and negative effects of gringo presence. Since being here in Mastatal I've seen the impact that volunteers can have, for better or for worse, on such things as night life at the *pulpería*, the temporary and lasting relationships with locals, the value placed on English language skills, community health, education and much more.

Many gringos come to Costa Rica to "invest" in things such as condos, hotels and beachfront property; and with gringos and time communities grow, develop, expand and transform with varying results. The investments that Rancho Mastatal has made have had some amazing outcomes. To name a few, the Ranch has provided the community with jobs, offers no interest loans, and helps to provide individuals with things such as cook stoves, bio-digesters, and solar panels. They help folks with home construction and repairs, community center construction, furniture and books for the local schools, serve as an informal community medical center and much more.

The "culture" aspect of Permaculture is never neglected in Ranch projects and the sustainability of each undertaking is always considered. For volunteers who come to Mastatal to learn and work the Ranch provides a space for personal growth. It is a space for developing communal living skills, cooperation and finding common connections of ideas and goals. Outside of the Ranch, volunteers

can work with community members to create positive impact changes and then take those learned skills to their respective homes throughout the world. Some are worried that Mastatal is getting too busy and growing too fast. The influx of gringo influence has transformative results indefinitely, and as change and expansion are inevitable, Rancho Mastatal has been an inspiration, showing that with enough work, it is possible to give as much back to a place as what you get from it.

### **Community Facts/Stories:An Unlikely Visitor**

With great reluctance, I embarked on a journey like none other. I say with great reluctance because I was leaving a family, travelling by means I am not entirely comfortable with, visiting a country that I understood neither the customs or language, and, most frightening, wondering if I could survive even three days on meatless, unpackaged meals prepared from scratch. In other words, why was a 42-year old attorney leaving his wife and two boys behind to fly to Costa Rica to spend a few days at Rancho Mastatal. Simple; to get a first hand view of his brother's way of life.

For the past five years I have spent two months out of the year visiting with Timo on my terms, and more importantly, my turf. That all changed for a few days in early December. What I expected was a few days of starvation surrounded by a few days of wonderful sunshine. What I received was a whole lot more.

After flying all day Dec. 5th (yes, I made it!) we landed in Alajuela at about 11:00 p.m. EST, finally getting to rest around midnight. Not much to appreciate at this point considering that the trip on the highway from the airport to the hotel (well, sort of) was little different than home. After all, we have KFC at home (not that big, though!), we have billboards and big planes at home. We have Taco Bell and Burger King and electronics stores at home also. Maybe this won't be so bad after all.

But wait, with sunrise came something remarkable. Never in my life (and I have been to the Grand Canyon and other natural parks) have I seen anything so remarkable. The mountains. The lush, green, forested mountains which endlessly shot upwards into, and beyond, the clouds. At 8:30 a.m. (Costa Rica time)I clamored for the front seat, taking this picturesque, postcard scenery in as we left the city. I don't recall how many times I snapped the camera, nor do I recall putting it down.

At our brief stop in Puriscal, it dawned on me (finally) that I was not home. It was not the warmth of the sun that led me to this conclusion, but the panoramic view of the valley, old buildings, and inability tounderstand a word. It was also at this moment that I realized we were traveling not over, not around, but ON that picturesque, postcard mountain. Incredible! Half the time I was taking in



*High in a flowering tree, a nest of paper wasps*  
photo by Ana Cohen

the sheer beauty of the hillside, the other half gripping the dashboard as we passed yet another narrow passage over a steep cliff. Having finally come to terms with the roadway to Mastatal, the road...just...literally...ended. I was now riding in a very nice, modern van on a less than very nice, less than very modern roadway. Not only was it dirt and stone, but at many locations along the way it was painfully obvious that last month ...last week...hell, yesterday, it served victim to a mountainside mudslide.

**11:00 a.m.** We made it. Rancho Mastatal. The place of many previously viewed photographs and listened to stories had come to life. What to do first. Well I was on vacation so it was natural to climb in one of the many low lying hammocks spread throughout the grounds for a brief nap but not after wandering in awe at the Ranch itself. Friendly volunteers were busy tending to lunch while a couple of fellow American transplants discussed their interest with Timo to visit in the future to enhance the activities of their bird watching club. A naturally made earthen oven was displayed at center stage, another sign of self-sufficiency, and another sign of if you don't eat here, there is no where else to go.



**Lunch time.** Oh boy here we go. What was I going to do. How was I politely going to decline a meal that was so lovingly and jointly prepared. How was I going to eat that trail mix my wife slipped in mysuitcase for this very occasion in front of all these people. Give it a try! OK. Wow! The main course was *tostados*, your choice of egg, bean or cheese. I choose cheese (two) and egg. Fabulous, and this ain't the cheese made by Kraft and it does not come in singles. I did it. Freshly prepared food made from the earth's gifts. It was great.

The rest of the day was spent checking out the entire complex. Timo's house was beautiful and the view from his backyard...ABSOLUTELY NO WORDS. Off to Jeanne's, where the guests stay dormitory style, and the workshop, the place that gives Mastatal life through the dedication and hard work of my brother and sister-in-law, as well as those who have followed their path. And behind Jeanne's rests a classroom that sits right in "the jungle". How is anyone really supposed to concentrate on learning with such a view. Don't ask me, I'm just visiting. Off to the Hooch. Geez, first visitors are educated with the rainforest as a scenic backdrop, and now the opportunity to sleep under such conditions. I can only imagine what type of bargains, deals and bribes are offered to Timo and Robin to secure these limited living quarters. And if you think the Hooch is cool, wait until you see the Hankey House. Unbelievable! Hold on, these unique living quarters are reserved for the volunteers (Hint: this is where you log on to <http://www.ranchomastatal.com> and register as a volunteer, if for no other reason than to be treated to one of these beds).

Back to the Ranch and a brief stop at the bus stop constructed by the Mastatal group for the local citizens. Not to get the bus, but there is no better view of the mountainside leading up to Leo's House (which is where I stayed). The best way to describe Leo's house is simple, the uniqueness of the rainforest, with a taste of the comforts of home. Leo's has three bedrooms, a kitchen, sitting area, wrap around porch with hammocks and rockers (really neat, you may want to bring one home) and, yes ... yet another view of that steep, lush, green hillside. Look carefully and you may just get a glimpse of the wildlfe. If you can't see it, you will at least hear it.

Dinner, reality was setting in as I passed on the Lentil chili and partook in the fresh bread. 1 for 2

on the meals. Long day, early to bed.

Good thing because I never realized that Leo's had a built in 6:00 a.m. alarm clock in the form of an obnoxious macaw. Actually, it was pretty cool. It not only woke us up, but allowed us to capture, by photo, its stunning beauty before fulfilling its duty of awakening us fully.

Back to the Ranch, on foot, and past some of Timo's neighbors. Fortunately, I ate a couple of Clif bars (yes, my wife put them in my suitcase as well) fearing that we may be having lentil egg soup of some sort. Much to my surprise, I gobbled up the wonderfully unique egg/toast. I can't remember which of the talented volunteers made breakfast, but it was delicious, as was the homemade granola that supplemented my meal. With my niece Katie and sister Deb off on a horseback ride, Timo showed my brother-in-law David and our mom Mastatal--the town. We visited all the structures, including the community center (Timo and the volunteers helped on a number of aspects of this construction), as well as checking out the hub of the town, the soccer field. On the way back, my mom and I were more than happy to purchase and bring home wood carved gifts from Timo's neighbor Jimmy. My only souvenir from the tiny town sits proudly on my end table today. I mean to say my only tangible souvenir because the remainder of the day was a souvenir in and of itself.

First, I became acquainted with two of Mastatal's youngest citizens, brothers Moises and Josue. Despite the fact they knew barely more English than I Spanish, somehow we were able to toss the football (American, that is) around with a pretty good understanding of each other. They learned to "spike" the ball, fumble, take a hand-off and punt. I learned how important it was for them to have people like Timo and Robin as neighbors. After cooling down, we embarked on a journey through one of the many trails that winds through the Ranch grounds, descending what seemed like 600 feet, across the small river to the waterfall. Once there, I chose the safety of the stream over my brother's cliff diving adventures. Back to the Ranch (much more strenuous, but satisfying) ascending the trail where I learned that my two new pals, despite their rural surroundings, were fans of Star Wars, Spiderman and Mickey Mouse.

**Lunch time**- oh boy! Oh boy was right, potato pancake/burger type patties. Tremendous. Three out of four meals. 75%. Maybe I would make it after all. The afternoon sunshine brought more American football, ping-pong, horseshoes at Timo's backyard, and some refreshing Imperial beer... In addition to, of course, that stunning, green, mountainside view which no more than a few moments would go by before I found myself gazing at once again.

**Dinner**, and for the first time no apprehension. Bean tacos. Absolutely delicious and most satisfying because I helped the volunteers with cooking the shells. Actually, I barely did anything but that did not prevent these selfless people from openly acknowledging my minimal contribution. As is custom before the dinner meal, volunteers, guests and Timo and Robin gathered around the table to express thanks and well wishes for all the hard work.

**Nightfall** approached as did the end of my sojourn to Latin America. My immediate family entertained ourselves with a game of Cranium and visitors, both local and from afar, came to the Ranch. A final night's sleep at Leo's before an early morning rise and back to the big city via Timo and Robin's trusty 1983 Land Rover. But not before my last Mastatal meal, avocado French toast and another helping of granola. What a send off.

As we once again traveled through the mountains, I again took in the spectacular view, perhaps more consciously as it would be some time before I will see it again. It also gave me time to reflect on my brief visit. Evident throughout my stay, I witnessed a true passionate calling in both Timo and Robin. What struck me was how the Ranch operates, people coming and going freely, spending their time on worthwhile endeavors, pursuing and acting on their faith and beliefs. Almost a perfect harmony. What was also evident over three short days was how the town has embraced Timo and Robin. If I was in England, I swear Timo and Robin would be the King and the Queen, without all the royalty possessions and limited access to the kingdom of course. What was most evident was that Rancho Mastatal is truly a place for passion, for people who are passionate about what is good and want to enhance that passion. I think to some extent we all have it, Rancho Mastatal lets us act on it. I strongly encourage anyone with a glimpse of adopting this calling to visit.

As we said our goodbyes in Alajuela, it was with great rejoice that I would be returning to my family, but with great sadness and a heavy heart that I was leaving Timo. I realized over the few days there that Timo and Robin really belonged where they were, and were extremely happy to be there. I further realized that his happiness with what he was doing and where it was being done separated us by not only many miles of land and water, but lifestyles as well. Nonetheless, as a baby brother would look up to his older sibling, this older brother could not be any prouder by the experience shared by his little brother.

TO all the volunteers at the Ranch, *muchas gracias*. To all the locals, Jimmy, Mario, Maria, Kendal, Kattia, Ion, and of course my *fútbol americano* buddies Josue and Moises, *muchas gracias*. And of course to Timo and Robin, thanks for sharing your little corner of the world to a most unlikely, but truly rewarded, visitor. *Muchas gracias*.

### **Comida Corner: The Story of Kefir**

Many moons ago, deep within the rugged landscape of the Caucasus Mountains, lived a group of nomadic goat herders. The herders lived a simple life tending to their goats as they moved along the steep alpine slopes and deep valleys of the region. They drank their goat milk fresh, and it was sweet and delicious. Although, sometimes there was more milk than could be drank fresh. This milk would often separate into curds and whey, which were also enjoyed.

On a hot afternoon a young man went out in search of a lost goat, carrying with him a goatskin pouch full of the mornings milk. He tracked the goat high upon a rocky ridge where he came to find not a goat but a strange man whom he had never seen before. The foreign man motioned towards the goatskin pouch hanging from the young mans shoulder. He had been taught to always give to others in need and he handed it over, even though he himself was tired, weak, and thirsty himself. Instead of drinking from it, the man placed something in it and told the young man to go back and share the drink with his people for it will make them healthy and happy.

After a very long walk, the young man returned confused, exhausted, and without the goat. His father asked him why he had returned without the goat. The young man did not have the energy to explain; he began pouring the goat milk from his pouch into drinking vessels as other herders began to gather round to hear what he might have to say. Finally, the young man spoke of the stranger and told those around him to drink. The drink was thick, tangy, and slightly effervescent. Smiles spread across the faces of those who tasted this tart drink and soon laughter filled the air. The lost goat was

soon forgotten as conversations shifted towards the amazing new beverage. Remaining in the pouch where sticky clusters (kefir grains) that smelled similar to fresh yeast. These grains were shared among the people as instructed by the foreign man, who was now rumored among the herders to be a prophet.

Recently, kefir grains came to Mastatal with a traveler from the Rocky Mountains of Montana. Although the story of how they came to the Ranch is less romantic and pastoral as the story of the prophet and the young goat herder from the Caucasus Mountains, it still is quite a miracle that these grains made it through level orange airport security and to the sweet milk of Mastatal. After a long day of travel by air, a night in San José and bus rides across the country, the grains quenched their thirst in a bath of delicious grass fed locally appropriated milk and commenced in producing more of this amazing beverage called Kefir.

Kefir is even easier to take care of than yogurt and can be used in all the same ways (in baking, smoothies, pancakes etc). Put the kefir grains in a large jar with fresh milk and a cover that allows air out and bugs from getting in. Leave it alone for 24 hours or until thick, strain the grains out with a colander and add them to new milk for another batch. The process is perpetual and the grains are always growing, so share them with a friend (or a goat herder).

The word kefir is derived from the Turkish word *keif*, which roughly translates to an overall feeling of wellbeing. So get yourself some kefir grains, and make some kefir; its easy! Better yet, come to Mastatal and drink some kefir with us!

### **Banana/Patanga Kefir Smoothie**

- 1 quart of kefir
- 1 cup of pitted *patangas* (Suriname cherries in this case or any fruit that you have handy)
- 2 ripe bananas

Blend the ingredients together and enjoy! Try adding any of your favorite fruits, honey, and coconut oil!



## **Futbol Follies: Nuevo Campeonato**

Still on a high from last year's *campeonatotriumph* at the end of 2007,

this year promises new stories of red cards, penalty kicks and golazos. Los Galacticos of Mastatal have recently entered into a local tournament in the lowlands of La Vasconia, an area that's home to some solid fútbol and flat, beautiful pitches. We'll keep you updated on los Amarillos progress in future newsletters. In the meantime, we hope that you're enjoying the Premiership and other fútbol in other parts of the world.

*Timo whining about a bad call, surrounded by his fellow Los Amarillos*

## **Inspirational Impressions: Christmas**

*"There's a schizoid quality to our relationship with animals, in which sentiment and brutality exist side by side. Half the dogs in America will receive Christmas presents this year, yet few of us pause to consider the miserable life of the pig – an animal easily as intelligent as a dog – that becomes the Christmas ham".*

--- Michael Pollan

*Abrazos,*

The Ranch Crew