

Rancho Mastatal Updates

November 2005

Happy New Year once again from Tropicdise. We hope that this latest newsletter finds you all warm and well. The next few updates may be coming at you rapid fire as SPARKY has been spending some unforeseen extra time writing since the recent and unfortunate knee injury he sustained during his epic “Parrita March” with DAN. Please send him some extra love and healing power as he works to get his body back to its usual sparkling form. Even confined at times to his new stylish cubicle on the back porch, he’s been amazing, as usual. A creative composing and editing machine with an unbelievably promising future, quite possibly in film. He’ll sadly be leaving the Ranch in the coming weeks with his eyes set on a job and graduate school. He plans to work and save his pennies to be able to purchase a new camera and Apple laptop so that he can begin to build up his portfolio. At school he expects to perfect his filming techniques before setting out to make the world a better place one motion picture at a time. He is even threatening to do a small film about the Ranch in the coming years which will with a bit of luck precede and be a part of Rancho Mastatal’s first annual sustainable film festival. Sparky dreams big just as we do. It’s been the perfect marriage. We are looking so forward to see how our common futures evolve. Watch out.



*Wasps feed from the blossom of an Estacoca flower
photo by Delfino Cornali*

While on the topic of All-Stars, MR. ROGER WHALLEY’s long-awaited return to Mastatal has become a reality. We scooped him up at the airport on January 2nd and made the wearing trip back to the Ranch arriving well past midnight. After staying up until the wee hours receiving the New Year and then repeating his late-night performance the following night packing for his countries-crossing haul, Roger arrived severely depleted of rest and energy. He spent the better part of the 3rd finding his Mastatal-feet again before hitting the ground running here at the Ranch. He’s returned with yet more calcified knowledge about lime and it’s wonderful qualities and set out to prove that Portland cement does not have to have to a place in our building paradigm. He is playing around with various mixtures of wood ash, clay, sand, gravel and lime in an effort to find the perfect combination so that we can begin making our own lime concrete. The idea is thrilling.

He’s also been sieving his most recent batches of lime putty in preparation for the plastering party that will soon commence at the “choza”. We anticipate beginning applying the manure/clay “scratch coat” in the coming weeks. Two layers of lime plaster will follow. We’re brimming with stimulation and excitement. Par usual, we have a spectacular gang of collaborators and co-workers as we continue to make progress at the new classroom, break ground and set the

foundations for our newest construction, the Hankey House, which will impart luxurious lodging for long-term laborers, and carry on at the “choza”, in the nursery, and at the woodshop. The weather’s been perfect, the mood positive and upbeat, and the food as delicious as ever.

With that said, we’d like to welcome LAURA BADILLA, a local woman with two energetic and entertaining kids, to the Ranch’s cooking crew. She’s further alleviated the pressure off of Robin to keep the bar raised on our world-famous cuisine. By the way, the cookbook is about 10 steps closer to becoming a reality. Thanks to KRTISTEN TJERANDSEN and others for that. Once again, we’re looking forward to seeing many of you in the coming months, including TYLER (the original), AARON WESTGATE, TOM MCDONALD, SUSAN, BETH, DAVE MCEVOY and FAMILY, IAN WOOFENDEN, JEREMIAH EANES, ALAN SMITH, DELFINO CORNALI, CAREY PULVERMAN, IVO POLACH, SKIP and LIZABETH, and many more. We’re also excited to meet many of your friends and family for the first time.

I’ll wrap this up by letting you all know that TIBURON’S cancer’s officially in remission. He has a 70-90% chance of full recovery. That is of course reason to be cautiously optimistic and hoist an Imperial but also reason to continue to send him your wonderful energy and curative prayers. We can’t wait to see you in February Tom. And to the rest of you, have a wonderful winter, make some turns, and enjoy the snow and rum totties.

This month's update includes:

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RM Program News: Jennings HS

For three amazing weeks, the Ranch was lucky enough to host a group of students from Jennings High School in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area of Minnesota. Not only did they finish an unbelievable amount of work in a three-week stint, but they did it in the wettest rainy season we’ve seen here at the Ranch (as the wonderful SUSAN BOLTON’s rain gauges tell us).

Thank you to JESSE, GARETH, SAM, SAM, SAM, PHIL, JON, JIMMY, TOM, GEORGE, NATE, DAMIEN, RAY, DON, MARINA, BECCA, LISA, DORTHY, NECE, SHAWAVIAN, ALLYSSA, ASHLEY, LIZZIE, and SARA for everything you did for us. Through wet and sloppy conditions, they managed to do some beautiful landscaping at the community center and “pulperia”, bring our stone paths at the main house back to life, clean the school walls to reveal their true colors, create the first-ever haunted Ranch for the community children, cook some delicious Costa Rican meals, walk to Zapatón (to the amazement of the locals) to learn more about indigenous culture, ride horses, hike about eight million miles (including the Cangreja peak), befriend many of our local friends, present a local family with a solar cooker, present locals with new soccer balls, visit the high school in La Gloria, learn about ecotourism, sustainability, sense of

place, and biodiversity, stretch out with some yoga, fly high with big splashes into swimming holes next to our waterfalls, run everyone up and down the field in ultimate, and so much more. They even managed to get some individual projects underway studying natural medicines, local crafts, the always entertaining Mario, natural building, cooking (solar and traditional), snakes, spiders, and many more topics that we hope to hear more about.

Thank you also to JEFF, ELLIE, JONATHAN, and ED for paving the way for such a dynamic group. Your leadership made it easier for everyone, and we thank you again for bringing such an amazing student group down here.

I can speak for many of us by saying that we feel like we've made a bunch of great new friends very quickly, and the group quotes will live on at the Ranch for years to come. Thank you all for being so open and honest and making us laugh uncontrollably for hours on end. The Ranch became a giant bubble of laughter that built up to one memorable last night that had us all exploding with chuckles and cheers. Sometimes, you can't help but let it all out. And Jennings High has left us all happily letting out our very own "SHOTS FIRED!"

Brian "Sparky" O'Rourke
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Conservation Update: A Fallen Tree, a New Era

Heavy winds recently brought a mammoth of a tree to the ground on Rancho property. On its way down, it caused a couple of other large trees to fall, as well as a great deal of smaller plants. This created an interwoven mess that blocked the trail from the new house to the main house. Machetes in hand, we cleared the area, so that the trail could still be used. Man-made trails may seem unnatural, but they can be very beneficial. By having designated trails, the surrounding area is then protected from trampling feet that may crush living plants (which may also be home to countless insects). In hiking areas, one narrow trail can actually do wonders to preserve life.

For many people, other questions then surface. What do we do with that gigantic fallen tree? Can't we use the wood for building purposes? The wood is a very strong wood, so we could use it for a variety of things. Isn't it worth something monetarily as well?

These are valid questions, but they ignore something else that outweighs these concerns. This fallen tree has left a gap in the forest. Something else will grow in its place, and this tree will decompose. It will only make the soil more fertile for new growth. Simultaneously, it is already creating food for insects that love to feast on dead wood. And guess what? There are tons of lizards and small animals that love eating insects. And guess what? There are also a lot of birds and snakes that like to eat small animals and lizards. This goes on in a larger cycle that makes up what we like to call "the food chain". Everything is interwoven, and the ending of one era is always the beginning for another. Taking away this fallen tree could be devastating for a new era of life (spanning across many varying species).

This mammoth will live on through other living creatures. Biodiversity is as interwoven as the mess we cleared on the trail. We do believe that our trails keep more of this life out of harm's way, and they protect growth more than they will eventually disturb. Our fallen trees will only bring more

life, and that life will do the same. New eras will be born, but they can not be distinguished from past ones. They are all made up of the same energy, and we must be mindful to keep that energy flowing.

Brian “Sparky” O’Rourke

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Building Report: Plans, Projects, and Possibility

The list is up, and it is full of possible projects for the slew of volunteers that currently inhabit the Ranch. As we head into the Christmas season, we are gearing up to take charge of a variety of ideas that have sparked with the arrival of Timo and Robin.

At the main house, some great improvements are on the horizon. An art space next to the bodega is being designed and will then be completed, complete with new tables, stools, shelves, and all of our favorite art supplies. A garden space is being designed for the area behind the art space. This will house all of our gardening tools and materials, making it easier to keep our landscape healthy, clean, and beautiful. All of the outdoor light fixtures are being covered by more aesthetically pleasing lanterns. Down by the occasionally odorously displeasing Banco (the composting toilet), designs are in the works for a new three-bin composting system. The always competitive, and sometimes controversial, ping-pong table area is being revamped with some extra love and care, including new benches for our spectators (and those waiting for their shot at Junior, the all-star).

In other areas, there is also some amazing work being done. Alex and Gilbert are still piecing together the classroom (everything they do is beyond perfection). The cob floor is in at la choza, and the ceiling is being put in place one piece at a time by Chepo, Junior, and Zen-master Dan. The entrance to la choza from the main road will also soon be highlighted by some new landscaping and a garden wall (which is currently being designed as well). The town’s bus stop will also be repaired in weeks to come and reinforced to protect it from the local high school kids’ boredom and curiosities. Long-term volunteers may also have another place to stay in the near future. Possible sites for a small housing structure are currently being considered, and plans are being drawn.

So many projects, but not necessarily so little time. We’re in Costa Rica, remember?! That means we can run on tico-time if we want to, and it’s ok! There is just so much going on, so many projects tend to overlap, and we’re all going to bust through it and amaze even ourselves just like we always do here at the Ranch. Why? Because everyone here has a little creative genius hiding somewhere in them, and the Ranch somehow tricks these little guys into popping out and working together toward something great. The results tend to make us all say “whoa.”

Brian “Sparky” O’Rourke

Volunteer/Guest Gossip: Dear Rancho Friends,

May I call you “my friends”? Usually the friends of my friends are my friends too. And there is one thing we already have in common: well, we all know Tim and Robin, don’t we? So I would like to tell you about my encounter with them and the Ranch through my French eyes. First, my presence here was not expected. Let’s say I was at the right place at the right time –plus thanks to Matt and Bonnie for having kept me! For those who did read the last newsletter would know about the group

of high schoolers that were here for three weeks in November, that was the main project at the Ranch back then, in the absence of Tim and Robin. I believe we did well and yet I would hear a lot about how much of a different place the Ranch is when the “owners” are here. Nobody of course used the word “owners”, only and always Tim and Robin. Rarely would come “Tim” without “Robin” and vice versa. But for me they were becoming some kind of a ghostly presence. The more I would hear about them, the more curious I would be. How did those people come to make this place? What is their story? How do those people share their home with such generosity? How? Something, some secret they possess, or maybe they just are some super heroes? Ironically, after spending a month and a half at the ranch without them, I then was the one to pick them up with their car from the airport. I did not even know how they looked like!!! Maddie was with me and so we all hugged when they finally appeared with tons of luggage. The following days it did not take me long to understand then what people had been telling me over and over. Everything was and is true and what could I add that is unheard about them? I try: Tim AND Robin are giving, warm, enthusiastic, funny, beautiful people. And here comes the “BUT”: BUT they are Americans!! How can it be?!! Aren't Americans full of themselves, the earth first polluters and most obnoxious people? Or was it the French..? Relax everybody, I am aware that 99.5% of the newsletter readers are Americans and I am not doing politics here, okay?! I just felt like raising your attention to that point. In fact, I am French. My Dad is Lebanese, my mum French but I grew up in France so French is my mother tongue and the culture I was born into. But before I am French I am a traveler. In my short life I managed to live two years in green Germany and two in melting pot England and spend time around in Europe; this marvelous enriching journey has brought me to the Ranch. Never before had I had a conversation with Americans, yet lived with any! I have learned more about your feeling of identity in 2 months than the past few years of fast food nation and terrorists target broadcast. I wished to write about this because it means a lot to me when people make the effort to be open-minded. Effort? It is to start with but then it is simple- just like slicing fresh pineapple. Thanks to everybody for being so great, so generous with yourselves. You give and give and give. We laugh so much; we work and live in team spirit. I never felt as positive about the planet's future as over the last couple of months, why? Because places like this make seeds with us. So many of us. From different places, going to different places. I don't mean you to spread the word about coming to the Ranch only and overbook Tim and Robin's hospitality but talk about it. Plant the seeds that you carry, you, your knowledge of a possible saved planet, transmit it, teach it. I confess, not only am I French but also a teacher. There you go! I think I am on the right way. What about you? Where will you be tomorrow? Whose life are you going to give a new insight to? Come to Europe, I can't do that part on my own! Et pour finir: encore une fois Tim et Robin, merci.

Vero

Community Facts/Stories: Happy Turkey(less) Day

Everyone was feeling slightly homesick as Thanksgiving approached. Family and friends back in the States would be gathering together for a giant feast, or at least wishing each other a happy holiday over the phone. Miles away with the closest phone being out of service, we had no such options. Matt, Bonnie, Dan, Jake, Maddie, and I could only guess at how the day back home would be (as traditional as the day may be). Vero, on the other hand, was just becoming acquainted with our holiday. Being from France (recently renamed “Freedom”), she had never experienced a Thanksgiving celebration.

Days before, Kristen received some fall leaves from a friend at home. It reminded us all of the season that comes at this time of the year for most of us, but one that we were lacking as summer approached here in Mastatal. Our trees here were full, and the ground was clear of fallen debris. One night (Tuesday night), Mother Nature decided to make us feel a little more at home. Almost everyone awoke to a loud crash that echoed through town as a tree cracked and fell to the forest floor. Winds swept through every house and even caused la troja (our old A-frame structure that was no longer being used) to collapse. In the hooch, mosquito nets were blowing so hard that they covered the next bed over. Sleep was difficult to come by, but morning sights would comfort us.

Early the next morning was cool with a slight breeze. Lawns, roads, and trails were all completely covered by fallen leaves. It felt like autumn! Vindas told us that it marked the onset of summer, but it felt like a beautiful fall day to us. It felt like Thanksgiving season. Kristen would leave that morning, but left us with some delicious bread and also the leaves she received from the States to decorate the table.

Thanksgiving Day eased in comfortably, but the kitchen morning would soon become a frenzy of hungry cooks with fire in their eyes and rumblings in their stomachs. Mashed potatoes, stuffing, satan (our turkey substitute), gravy, black bean salad, soufflé, pumpkin pie, and more of the most appetizing of foods teased us from the kitchen counter as we grouped together for circle. Everyone had something original to say, but there was also a very common theme. Everyone was thankful. Not necessarily for a holiday, but for the opportunity to be in each other's company on this day that just so happened to be a holiday. We were thankful for the fact that, even though we were all so far away from our roots, we felt so much at home. Our homesickness was swept away with the winds. It actually felt like a day with family. On top of that, it felt like a day of gluttony, and it was perfect.

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Comida Corner: Sparky's Beer Pizza

Feeling American today? Missing your frat or sorority days? Why not mix two of our college-day staples (and, for many of us, post-collegiate) into one delicious being? Exactly. There is no valid reason to deny your chronic craving. Get together with some old friends, crack open a couple cold ones, reminisce, and let a few slices of heaven take you back to your glory days.

Dough

Ingredients:

1 cup of your favorite beer (preferably dark, and preferably warm)

1 tbsp honey (or sugar)

1 ½ tsp salt

3 cups flour

Olive oil

1. In a medium-sized bowl, combine the beer and honey.
2. Use a spoon or whisk to stir in the salt and flour. Once it thickens, mix by hand. Knead the dough for about five to seven minutes. Add flour as needed to avoid stickiness, or beer to moisten.

3. Brush with olive oil and then cover the dough in a bowl. Let rise for about an hour and a half.

Sauce Ingredients:

4 large tomatoes
1 ½ tbsp chopped basil (preferably fresh)
1 tbsp chopped oregano (preferably fresh)
2 cloves minced garlic
Black pepper (~1 tsp)
Salt (~1/2 tsp)
Honey (or sugar) (~1/2 tsp)

1. Cut the tomatoes in half and squeeze out the seeds and liquid from center (usable for vegetable stock in soups). Place the tomatoes in a food processor and puree.
2. In a saucepan, heat the tomato puree on low heat for ten minutes. Add garlic, basil, and oregano. Simmer.
3. Add black pepper, salt, and honey to taste.

When you are ready to make the pizza, roll out the dough to the desired thickness (I like to go thin). Spread the desired amount of sauce, cover with grated cheese (mozzarella is best), and add any of your favorite toppings. Cook at approximately 450 degrees in a preheated oven. It should take 10-15 minutes, but you should cook to the desired crispiness. Also consider using hummus, pesto, or barbeque sauce in place of pizza sauce. Variety and creativity can certainly pave the way for the magna cum laude of pizzas.

Buen Provecho!

Inspirational Impressions: Leopold's Land Ethic

“A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”

-- Aldo Leopold

Abrazos,

Tim, Robin, Sparky, Vero, Roger and the Crew