

# Rancho Mastatal Updates

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## March 2005

*We're doing our best to get caught up with our newsletters. We do realize that it's almost June and here you are just now getting your March update. We lead rather full and busy lives making the publication of a monthly newsletter at times a bit challenging. In the future we may have to go to a bimonthly format. We'll see. Please let us know if you have any thoughts regarding this and as always thanks for your patience and continued interest in our projects. The meteorologists say that the rainy season still hasn't begun. They have obviously not been to Mastatal lately. The early green season has been wet, wet, wet. Susan's rain gauges tell us that it's been the wettest March and April since we arrived to Mastatal. It's been pretty awesome, though the roads have been taking a beating. We went out a few weeks ago to dig some drainage ditches along the road to prevent further deterioration. There's been a ton of excitement in the community as of late, a lot of it generated by SUSAN's UW students. They are involved in a plethora of community and other projects, including the painting of the interior of the community center, free Spanish classes for all interested, and the construction of some ping-pong tables for the youngsters. A crew of volunteers recently applied a natural lime plaster to the local bus stop that Susan and her students designed and built last year, and there have been many volunteers and guests staying with local families as a part of our homestay program. We're looking forward to the community cleanup coming up in a few weeks, and the "Clean Up Mastatal" poster contest that the UW students are organizing. There are some great prizes for the winners. There's a lot more to write about but I think that we'll have to leave it at that for now. It's all a bit overwhelming at times; so many wonderful people coming through the community, sharing their ideas, and inspiring so many with their skills, ideas and way of thinking. It's a good time to be a part of the Mastatal community. Hope to see you down here in the near future.*



Solar Hot Water Installation

This month's update includes:

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### **RM Program News: St. Pete's College**

We hosted a wonderful group of students and educators recently from St. Petersburg College in St. Petersburg, FL. The trip was organized by Holbrook, an organization based out of FL that organizes educational trips throughout the world. SANDY DOSS, Vice President of Academic Offerings for Holbrook, accompanied the group led by JIM WALLACE, an associate professor in natural science at St. Petersburg College, TOM MCDONALD, owner of Tropical Adventures in Education (TAE), and CAROL VOLK a long-time advocate of Rancho Mastatal and PhD candidate at the University of Washington. We'd like to thank all of the participants of this course for their contributions and energy during their stay in Mastatal. And what a great party to wrap the week up! Thanks to all of the volunteers that made it truly a night to remember.

### **Conservation Update: Conserving Our Soils**

As we are so fondly reminded this time of year, the extremely heavy rains of the wet season can wreak serious havoc on our local soils in the form of erosion and leaching. Rain, especially falling on naked soils, will leach minerals from the soil, washing them downward into the deeper soil layers or out of the soil altogether. Exposed tracts of steep land slowly get washed away as the abundant and fast falling water pounds our hillsides. Mudslides are common, often times closing our roads and washing valuable topsoil in to the rivers on its way to the Pacific. There are many ways to prevent these events from happening. One method of course is to leave the natural vegetation standing. This may be the best of our options, but as we know, the people living amongst the tropical forests of our world need to make a living somehow. This often times results in the felling of our forests to make way for agricultural crops, cattle, and buildings. At present, development and destruction seem to be "winning" the scale game. It seems though that we have to devise ways whereby the balance is more weighted towards our soils and forests. In areas already disturbed it is possible to plant vetiver, "caña india" or many of the other plants that grow well and quickly in poor soils and that help to keep the earth where it should and needs to be. Ideally these plants would be nitrogen fixers so as to improve the quality of the soils while preventing erosion. One other method that we have been implementing lately in poorly vegetated areas is called swaling, a technique used in Permaculture design. Swales are long, level excavations that are intended to store water in the underlying soils or sediments. This helps prevent the effects of sheeting, a phenomena that takes place on open, sloped areas during very heavy rainfalls. Regardless of the implemented techniques, the preservation of the rainforests valuable soils is imperative to the long-term sustainability of tropical communities and their forests.

### **Building Report: Cob, Cobbin' Away**

The walls are on their way up. Most mornings at the Ranch these days consist of various hours of stomping on and slinging mud. We have begun to raise the walls of "La Choza". It's a gratifying site each day at noon as we inspect our slow progress to the roof. The going is by all means slow, but definitely steady. We're estimating about 6 weeks of unremitting dancing before we reach the roof. As the walls rise, we are mounting "gringo blocks", lintels, sills and shelves. The "gringo blocks" serve as anchoring points for screws, nails and other hardware. The lintels, which in our case are mostly old hardwood fence posts, will span the open spaces that will make our windows and doorways. The shelves, fashioned by the incredible ROGER, will be the future home to

knickknacks, mugs and other personal items. It's been absolutely incredible so far and we all look forward to our little morning cob sessions. We have so many ideas flying around the Ranch these days about future cobbing and other building projects. A timberframe/cob library, the new Ranch classroom, a little community theatre, various projects in houses throughout the community. We expect that we have a good 10 years of building projects ahead of us. Maybe one day we really will live in Hobbitville. It's so damn exciting. So much great stuff going on with regards to natural building. The plaster revolution has only just begun. So much to do, so much to learn, so much to feel right about.

### **Volunteer/Guest Gossip: Enjoyments**

Top ten enjoyments in Mastatal for the month of April (not in order of importance)

1. Coconut oil. After two days of serious relationship building with coconut, three and a half cups of oil are made, which results in a little soap.
2. Tim, Robin, Roger, Nico and ALL the volunteers that I have enjoyed so many Imperials with (let's not forget the ROCK ICE too) over dominoes, The Office, after dinner conversations, whiffleball, and most recently The Simpson's.
3. Cooking. I've spent more time in the kitchen in the past month than in the past year. Who knew food could be so good.
4. Susan and the UW ladies who know how to keep the gossip juicy and provide laughter.
5. Trips to waterfalls and rivers that keep us relaxed, sane, and "tranquilo".
6. Tom and Center School students who remind you why screaming sucks, but that the process of learning and growing is a beautiful thing.
7. Cobbing. Some good music, good conversation, and questionable dancing can lead to a house slowly coming to life.
8. All the Rancho Mastatal employees who work hard and make us smile.
9. The "pulpería". Amen.
10. Learning the true value of coconut oil just before leaving. Chuck brings a press that takes a bit longer, but intends to yield more coconut oil. Unfortunately after deepening the relationship with coconuts with two more days of my life, we learn there is something about coconut oil that simply eludes us. While learning to make many things from scratch has been empowering, I will only BUY coconut oil from here on out.

Renée Carrier

### **Community Facts/Stories: New Local Government**

The community recently hosted an "Asamblea General" to elect new people to the local government. Chepo was voted in as the new president, Lorena as vice-president, Marcos continues to be the treasurer, Don Tino the "fiscal" and Laura the secretary, and Juan Luis, Billo and Cesar round out the new government as the new "vocales". There has been a lot of activity and excitement coming from the local community government office these days as the new administration has been moving and shaking in an effort to move our "pueblito" in the right direction on the heels of a presidency that was mired in controversy, infighting and general ineptitude. We are extremely keyed up and have high expectations for the new "gobierno". May 28 marks the coming out party for the new "Asociación" when they will be playing host during a big dance and soccer games. We are doing everything within our power to assure that it's a successful

event and are all working hard to help the local government work their way out of their current debt, a heavy weight that has been sitting on their shoulders for almost 2 years now. So, with this written, we would like to congratulate and welcome all of the new members of the “Asociación de Desarrollo Integral de Mastatal”!

### **Comida Corner: Moosewood Sour Cream Gingerbread**

This is a moist, rich crowd-pleaser that doesn't last long amongst hungry cobbles.

Ingredients: (Makes one whopper gingerbread)

7 large eggs 1 ¾ cups sour cream (we use yogurt) 1 ¾ cups molasses 1 ¾ cups brown sugar (we use "tapa dulce") 1 ¼ quarts pastry flour 1 tsp. salt 1 Tbsp. ground ginger 4 tsp. baking soda 1 ½ cups (we use half butter half soy oil) melted butter ½ tsp. ground nutmeg

1. Preheat oven to 350°F (180°C). 2. Lightly beat the eggs. 3. Mix in the sour cream and eggs. 4. Combine the dry ingredients. 5. Add the dry ingredients to the wet ingredients, beating until smooth. 6. Add the melted butter, mixing just until well blended. 7. Pour the batter into an oiled baking pan (the book says 18 x 12 inch) and bake for about 35 minutes, until the centre springs back and a toothpick tests clean. 8. You can dust the top with confectioners' sugar or whipped cream.

Buen provecho!!

From 'Moosewood Restaurant, Cooks for a Crowd' by The Moosewood Collective.

### **Inspirational Impressions: Action**

“Action is the antidote to despair”.

-- Joan Baez

See ya.

Abrazos,

Tim and Robin