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### La Fiesta en Palo Verde

I woke up extra early to ask Father Mario, the Monte Carmelo resident expert on herbal medicine, a few questions relating specifically to my paper. Father Mario is probably around his seventies, a wise priest who was part of a religious brotherhood that dedicated themselves to the service of others. He prides himself on his knowledge of natural medicine, medicinal herbs, and a healthy lifestyle. He has lived in Venezuela for over thirty years, but he is originally from Italy. As a founding member of the Las Lajitas cooperative, Father Mario feels it is imperative that the unwholesome diet of many Venezuelans contains almost no nutritional value and a high caloric intake. In his lecture to the group about health, nutrition, herbal medicine, and the corruptive nature of capitalism, Father Mario discussed the reason behind illness. He attributed most sickness to stress, weak immune system, poor hygiene, bad nutrition, and illicit substance abuse. As aforementioned in previous blogs, arepas, unleavened bread made from corn, are a staple of the Venezuelan diet. Although consumed at breakfast, lunch and dinner, they contain no essential nutrients. This was an example used by Father Mario as one issue of the Venezuelan diet. Instead of being made from refined flour, arepas should be made with whole grain.



Father Mario displayed the good and bad energies contained in food with an experiment, called muscle testing. He asked Claire to fully extend her right arm while holding a pesticide-laden tomato in her left hand. With the tomato in her hand, he was able to easily

push down her flexed arm. However, when holding an organic leek in her left hand, he was unable to force her stiffened arm downwards. He performed the same experiment using refined flour and whole grain pasta. The result was similar, with the whole grain pasta resulting in a strong arm. He also lectured on reflexology, and the interconnectedness of the human body as well as herbal remedies. He guided the class through a series of “pressure points” on the hand which indicated problem areas within the body. In addition, Father Mario provided recipes for several herbal remedies:

#### **Prostate/ Uterus Cancer Cure**

- 1 meter of leaves of a five year old or older aloe vera plant
- Cut the leaf in a dark area
- 1/2 kilogram of honey
- 55 cc's of whiskey
- Blend, and take one spoonful of substance three times daily

#### **Hemorrhoid/Anti-Parasitic/ Bad Circulation Cure**

- 1 piece of yellow papaya
- 30 papaya seeds
- Skin of papaya fruit
- Blend with water and add honey

Although there may be several skeptics, it is worth a try!

While a fascinating teacher and a knowledgeable individual, Father Mario, like many other Venezuelans has a knack for being very verbose. It's a funny thing coming from the US into Venezuela, as for the most part, Venezuelans really don't care about time. A 3:00pm appointment means anything from 3:00-4:00pm and a short lecture can be anything from 10 minutes to 4 hours. While this may sound negative, it's just one of the many cultural differences that we have experienced since being here.

That being said, after Father Mario's talk it was time to travel to Palo Verde for a cookout, solar water heating system installation and the creation of a children's garden. Palo Verde is a small town on the outskirts of Sanare, about 20 minutes from Monte Carmelo. We traveled down the mountain in classic Venezuelan style, in the back of an open air pickup, crammed in like sardines. Along our way we talked with Jose Antonio, the son of the pickup driver, and a medical student in Havana, Cuba. He provided a fascinating perspective on the socialist medical system as well as giving the perspective of a young Venezuelan. He receives a free, six year education, and also receives a living stipend from the Government, so that family members do not have to support him. Because Cuba has a premier reputation for medicine, Jose Antonio will emerge from school, a well trained doctor ready to serve his home community.

The cookout was located at the house of an ex-patriot, Lisa. After moving to Venezuela more than 20 years ago, she raised a family of three in the barrios, notorious slums on the outskirts of Caracas. A former Mary Knoll missionary, Lisa currently works as a coordinator for a children's music program and for a non-profit which discourages Latin

American leaders from sending military personal to the School of the Americas. Lisa was a vivacious and warm host who welcomed us as if we were her own. Her house, a gorgeous villa with a breathtaking view of the mountains, provided a perfect afternoon for relaxation.

The group split into two, with half working on a new solar water heater for the household showers and the other created a garden for local children to learn basic agriculture. The solar water heater was quite the production. The night before, Matt had purchased black tubing which was then affixed to the roof where the water would be heated by the sun. Then combined with the cold water of the municipal water system, Lisa and her family were provided with a sustainable way to heat water.



After a sweaty team effort on the roof of the house, we all enjoyed a barbeque with local produce. Sitting in the newly built pavilion, we discussed Venezuelan politics and the dependency of the Venezuelan people on Hugo Chavez. It was a great experience to connect with Venezuelan youth and gain a perspective on the issues studied thus far. At the conclusion of the evening, it was treat to listen to live Venezuelan revolutionary music as well as the sounds of Van Morrison's "Brown-Eyed Girl," drift up into the mountains.

