

Mudslinging: Workshop sparks a fervor for outdoor earth ovens

<http://www.westhawaii.com/sections/news/local-news/mudslinging-workshop-sparks-fervor-outdoor-earth-ovens.html> April 20, 2012

Approximately 20 Big Island residents and visitors spent Sunday squishing mud, sand and straw between their toes at Hawaii Preparatory Academy Village Campus in Waimea.

Some mudslingers did the Chubby Checker twist, Riverdance-style moves or tango-like steps while delightfully stomping the wet contents inside a giant tarp. Once the right consistency was obtained, others carefully packed the mud with their hands into wooden frames, later removed, revealing perfectly formed adobe bricks.

These bricks, stacked and left to dry for about 2.5 weeks, are the start of a future earth oven at the campus' Ulumau School Garden. The oven will be used by HPA students, staff and their ohana to bake breads and pizzas, as well as to cook vegetables grown on site, said Koh Ming Wei, HPA's sustainability curriculum facilitator.

Roughly 250 students in kindergarten through eighth grade attend the Village Campus, all of whom will lend a hand or foot in making the approximately 1,000 bricks needed for the oven. Still in the planning and design stages, the oven is expected to be completed at the end of summer, Koh said.

HPA puts a great emphasis on helping students see a process from its source to an end result, striving to provide a sense of connection and continuity that goes beyond daily lessons and the school, as well as links with the traditions and environment of the community and other cultures, Koh said.

The oven is part of the micro steps that comprise the school's holistic seed to table program. From agriculture methods to culinary skills, students look at the big picture of how all these steps fit together in an ongoing, self-sustaining cycle, she said.

"An earth oven is one of the most simple and long-used cooking structures, very much like a Hawaiian imu," Koh said. "Earth ovens have been made and used all through history and all around the world, from ancient Mesopotamia to adobe ovens in the southwest of the USA. The method of using on site available materials to build the oven is a sustainable, artistic, and enjoyable practice."

Sunday's workshop was one of two community events, hosted by HPA, in celebration of Earth Day. The next event is an Earth Day celebration beginning at 9 a.m. April 21 at HPA's Upper Campus, where demonstrations, workshops and presentations on topics, such as bamboo construction, vermicomposting and aquaculture, will be held.

"HPA is blessed to have access to so many great resources," Koh said. "As a school, we feel its our responsibility to share those resources with the public, especially our island community, for the benefit of our future."

The idea of constructing an oven at the Village Campus and having a workshop derived from Ulumau School Garden Coordinator Noah Dodd. Sunday's workshop was taught by Pahoehoe-based Integrated Living Systems owner Skye Hoefke, a natural builder and earth block mason who also does consultation and instruction. Hoefke introduced participants to natural building, earth architecture and earth block construction. In particular, they learned brick making methods from different parts of the world, the geometry of arches, and the importance of laying a strong foundation, Koh said.

Earth has been in continuous use in various guises, including mud bricks, throughout history and on every continent for thousands of years. The word adobe has existed for roughly 4,000 years. It can be traced back to a Middle Egyptian word, meaning sun-dried brick, and was introduced to the Americas, along with the technology itself, by the Spanish, Hoefke said

The process was free-flowing and organic in how it all came together Sunday. There were no blueprints, high-tech training or stringent measurements, just simple instructions and constant encouragement. The brick building was also very communal.

HPA Hawaiian studies teacher Kuwalu Anakalea appreciated how the process included everyone's mana. For her, the oven will serve more than tantalizing delectables. It cooks up a sense of community and value for building techniques by indigenous cultures, she said.

Kalapana resident Connor Butler has an ambitious goal. He wants to create a self-sustaining restaurant with a zero carbon footprint. Butler has been a chef for 15 years and grew up in Vancouver, BC, where he was blessed with access to various community gardens and nature's unbelievable bounty. He believes we are responsible for our impact on the environment and the restaurant industry sometimes has a brutal impact.

Butler called Sunday's workshop "pretty cool." He enjoyed how the brick construction was so simple and based on a tradition proven over thousands of years. He hoped to build an earth oven at his home, saying he could imagine the taste of fresh baked bread and pizza.

At the day's end, Hoefke said he wanted participants to take away a sense of confidence, a fun memory of getting muddy, as well as a skill set that empowers their living situation and their community.

For more information about earth ovens or natural building, call Hoefke at 965-6247.