Monkeys and Moonshine in Costa Rica

At a new eco-resort where guests learn how to make everything from screen prints to artisanal cheese, an artist finds inspiration in a bottle of contraband booze.

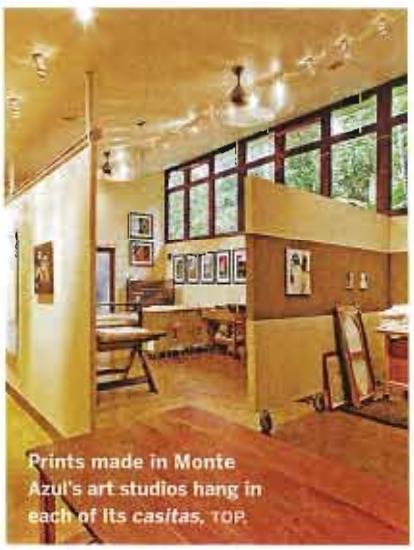
BY JENNIFER RUBELL

AS AN ARTIST WHO OFTEN USES FOOD as a medium, I've spent a lifetime building a memory bank of meals and food experiences to draw on for my work. I've erected a 60-foot wall with more than 1,500 doughnuts screwed to it for viewers to remove and eat. I've made a series of "drinking paintings," giant blank canvases with a spigot in the center of each one that viewers press to dispense cocktails. I've cast my own head in Fontina cheese, pointed heat guns at it and let it drip outo a pedestal of crackers.

All of this somehow led me deep into the Costa Rican rain forest, where I found myself milking a cow to make cheese, then learning how to mold the cheese into a perfect cylinder. I was staying at Monte Azul, a new eco-hotel in a 125-acre private nature preserve near Chirripó National Park. My editors at F&W had sent me to Monte Azul because it was a place for visiting artists to stay, work and teach workshops to hotel guests. They were curious to know what, if anything, would inspire me.

When conceptualizing a new project, I usually look to art history and art institutions, rather than vacation, for inspiration. I was less interested in Monte Azul's

Jennifer Rubell creates large-scale interactive installations, often using food as a medium. She has a show at the Stephen Friedman Gallery in London in February.



Prints made in Monte Azul's art studios hang in each of its *casitas*, TOP.

Fun at Monte Azul can ent making cheese or zip-linin in the rain forest. LEFT.

artist-run paper-making and screen-printing workshops and more intrigued by the local, artisanal classes, like cheese-making. My teacher, Wilberth Mata Zúñiga, has traveled to Switzerland to compare techniques with his Alpine counterparts. His operation is so sustainable that he converts the dung from the cows into gas to heat the milk.

Monte Azul is the vision of two men: Carlos Rojas Jara, a compact and enthusiastic Costa Rican who used to own an art gallery in San Francisco, and his partner, Randy Langendorfer, a lanky Indiana-born son of a steelworker. Randy and Carlos opened their dream retreat in 2009, hiring locals to help construct Monte Azul's four *casitas* along the banks of the Chirripó river and Casa Palo Alto, a two-suite villa with lots of windows and a pool. My *casita*—Casita Verde—was decorated in a style one might call San Francisco tropical, with original prints made in Monte Azul's studios, multicolored tiles and a terrace shaded by dense foliage.

On my first morning at Monte Azul, Randy and Carlos joined me in the open-air restaurant for a typical Costa Rican breakfast—*gallo pinto* ("spotted rooster," a phenomenal fry-up of rice and black beans), irregularly shaped tortillas, eggs and vinegary hot sauce. All were exquisite and either homemade or locally produced.

While monkeys fought over bananas just 10 feet away, Carlos and Randy asked me to describe my work. Their quizzical looks assured me that they'd never hosted an artist of my kind at their property. I explained to them that I use objects—I call them "prompts"—to create an unavoidable, irresistible call to interaction inside traditional art-viewing environments. My goal is to question and ultimately subvert the idea of a museum as a holy place of don't-touch, don't-taste reverence.

I told them I'd been mulling over some ideas for an upcoming gallery show. Most of my art is sculptural and functional—and usually involves food or drink. That's really the only constant. For every 30 ideas I have for a show, 29 end in my reject pile. A new experience may or may not lead to a brilliant next project. I was in Costa Rica to think, and to look at people doing things differently than I do them: more artisanally, less self-consciously. I enjoy seeing the solutions people come up with when their concerns are purely practical.

Randy informed me that the Costa Ricans he knows aren't entirely focused on purely practical concerns. "The parties are not to be believed," he told me in the bemused, mock-exasperated tones of a 1920s expat in Paris. "Grandmothers! Babies! The 'Talivan' disco truck that drives from town to town installing lights and giant speakers in the local dance halls. And the music is outrageously, awfully loud. You can imagine—the girls all wear supertight dresses and pour *contrabando* out of two-liter Coke bottles."

"*Contrabando?*" I asked.

"Costa Rican moonshine."

One of the Coke bottles appeared, and I took a taste: clear, slightly bourbony, just this side of gasoline. Suddenly I knew exactly what kind of artisan I wanted to learn from.

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Artisan Workshops at Monte Azul

LEARN NEW SKILLS ON VACATION IN COSTA RICA. DOUBLES FROM $190; MONTEAZULCR.COM.

1 COOKING
Villagers helped develop cooking classes featuring simple, local dishes like *arroz con pollo* and yucca chips.

2 SOAP MAKING
Randy Langendorfer teaches guests how to make delicious-smelling soap from oatmeal, honey and goat's milk.

3 CHEESE MAKING
Guests milk cows to make Swiss-style cheese. It takes three months to cure, but Monte Azul offers to ship the finished product to guests.

4 ART
Two studios are dedicated to screen printing, paper making and etching.
—*Jen Murphy*

Artists in Residence

SOME VISITORS TO MONTE AZUL:

1 HAI ZHANG The Chinese-born photographer shot images of Costa Rican villagers for works like *Tough Boy*, which is on display at the hotel. *oceanmate.com.*

2 HENRY JACKSON A San Francisco painter who teaches monotyping at Monte Azul. Monkeys inspired his *Primates, No. 12. henryjackson.com.*

3 MEG BROWN PAYSON The colors of the Costa Rican rain forest influenced the Maine-based artist's acrylic painting *Grace 704 2. megbrownpayson.com.* —*JM*

Adrian Martínez, the manager of the hotel, is a local so rooted in the community that nearly every person we passed on the street was related to him. He promised to ask around. The next day, he had found us a lead. One man, Horacio, apparently had the *contrabando* market cornered. Adrian would ask Horacio if we could visit.

That night, over *contrabando*-spiked Azultini cocktails, word came that Horacio would take me to the still at 10:30 the next morning. We were to pick him up at the local *soda*—something like a cross between a bistro and a bodega—and he would show us the way.

In the morning, I had a hearts-of-palm frittata before Adrian drove us to the appointed spot. Horacio wasn't there. We kept driving down the road. We saw a motorcycle and a pickup truck and some men talking intently to one another.

"That's him," said Adrian, pointing to the man in the center of the conversation. Horacio was wearing a Ford Mustang T-shirt with the slogan RIDE THE PONY on it. He got in our car with a tall man with dark hair and a fishnet tank top. They directed us up the mountain—past a church, several houses and a man walking a donkey—to a town where the road became impassable. We got out and continued by foot. Below us were roads that had slid down into the valley, the result of deforestation and single-crop planting.

A washed-out road ended at a pigsty. Actually, a former pigsty. First I saw the burned remains of many fires. Then I saw the still itself. It seemed shockingly small for a producer who provided the majority of booze consumed in this area. It was a collage of oil drum, copper pipe, hollowed-out trunk, flour paste and rubber hose.

"How did you know how to build it?" I asked Horacio.

"We've always known how to build these things," he said. "For generations."

Horacio walked me through the functional details, showing me the dark, dirt-floored fermenting room filled with blue plastic barrels, loosely covered in cut-up garbage bags, where corn, brown sugar and water bubbled. He explained how much of the fermented liquid to put in the oil drum over the fire and how to control the heat—it should be high at first, then reduced so the mixture simmers. "Like a soup?" I asked. "Yes, like a soup," he answered. I photographed everything I could, including Horacio, who was surprisingly unconcerned about posing next to his masterpiece.

On the flight home to New York, I thought a lot about Horacio. To my knowledge, making and selling moonsbine without a license is as illegal in New York City as it is in Costa Rica. I liked this fact. It meant that if I was interested in doing a project that involved building a still, I was going to have to figure out a way to make the liquid it produced *not* be moonshine. I would need to change that liquid in some way, conceptually move it from consumable to collectible, from liquor to legally bottled substance. Could calling something art make it not illegal? Interesting question. I was thinking of creating a piece whose very existence was proof of the transformative power of art.

Here was my brainstorm: I'd build a still. I'd ferment barrels of mash. I'd produce 500 bottles of moonshine. I'd seal, sign and number them. On each bottle would be a warning that, if opened, they would be automatically de-authenticated. They would not be Jennifer Rubells. They would not be art at all.

I started thinking about a lawyer to work on Horacio's visa (not his real name of course). I sketched out the fermenting room, the still, a gallery lined with individually numbered bottles.

I arrived home. I slept.

By the time I got back to my studio, the whole hooch-making-as-art project seemed a little trite, simple, not quite magical enough. It moved from top of mind to the top of the reject pile. I might use it as the germ of a future project, or not at all. For now, it was one of those ideas you have on vacation that doesn't quite work back in the real world. Unless you're Randy and Carlos, and your dream is Monte Azul. •