

# P E R A L T A

## HACIENDA HISTORICAL PARK

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### PRESS RELEASE

#### **For Immediate Release**

Now through November 10, 2007

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- What:** Premiere of *Community Recipe Book*, a museum exhibit at Peralta Hacienda Historical Park
- When:** Saturday, November 10, 2007
- Time:** 2 pm to 4 pm
- Where:** Peralta Hacienda Historical Park, 2465 34<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Oakland, California 94601
- Admission:** Free to the public

Outside the restored Peralta house in Peralta Hacienda Historical Park in East Oakland, Mien women from the mountains of Laos tend a small vegetable garden. Close by, many African American kids hang out with their friends. The two groups use the park more frequently than anybody else in the neighborhood. They seldom exchanged greetings, and did not know each other's names, until a program focusing on sharing food, recipes and their life stories brought them together.

The Community Recipe Book, a museum exhibit at Peralta Hacienda Historical Park, uses photos, recipes and life stories to document the process in which the elders and youth began to communicate with each other, as they participated in the park's Landscape of Stories programs. The exhibit will premiere Saturday, November 10, from 2-4 pm in the Peralta House, 2465 34<sup>th</sup> Ave, near the corner of Coolidge and Hyde in the vibrant Fruitvale District. The event will be a Community Banquet, with Mien and African American food for all. Highlighting first person stories by the Mien elders and neighborhood youth, the Community Recipe Book was conceived and written by Holly Alonso, with photographs by artist Ene Osteraas-Constable. Chapters with other neighborhood cultures will be added in the future.

The California Council for the Humanities gave seed money to Friends of Peralta Hacienda Historical Park to interview the Mien elders and neighborhood youth, and for Community Banquets. In this first stage of the project three years ago, Alonso and Osteraas-Constable created outdoor signs in the garden showing the Mien and the kids among the amaranth, mustard, bean and corn plants that flourish there.

The Mien brought seeds when they were flown here in the early 1980s from Thai refugee camps. They had fled to Thailand years before, pursued by the Pathet Lao (Laotian Communists). They had cultivated these crops for centuries and considered them integral to their culture. As Nai Sieuw Saelee articulated, "We plant these seeds so the species from home won't die. Without these plants, our way of life will disappear." Their strongest hope is that the Mien culture will survive.

The project expanded thanks to the Walter and Elise Haas Fund's grant for a weekly program, matched by funds from the Alliance for California Traditional Arts. Tracey Cockrell, dedicated and inspired artist educator, drew the kids and their family recipes into the mix, teaching them about germination, watering and the tender loving care necessary in cultivating both plants and community, with the Mien elders mentoring the efforts of the youth. This year, filmmaker Shannon Petrello has elicited stories from local middle school youth of many cultures and the Mien in Story Circles in the Peralta House. These Story Circle have elicited identical folktales and parallel personal stories from opposite sides of the globe.

African American youth in the program found common ground with the Mien within the agricultural traditions of their own families. Kadeisha Young brought her mother's favorite recipe for collard greens and cooked them with the Mien, slow-simmered in the garden at one of the program's outdoor events. Some kids made their favorite foods, such as Richard Armstrong's franks and links, and shared them with the Mien. Marcus Jones, whose family came here from Somalia, invented a pan-fried peach cobbler for his family's camping trips, which Finh Luang Saelee helped him keep from burning. All became conscious that their families and ways of life are linked to the traditional cooking and farming methods of their cultures.

As an outgrowth of the program, community leaders are being nurtured: 18-year-old Nai Saelee, daughter of one of the gardeners, is now working with UC Davis, through Peralta Hacienda, to study how traditional arts can improve mental and physical health of immigrants who have undergone extremely traumatic experience as wars have thrust them across the globe. These women lead their families through the jungle, many with their own infants dying in their arms after watching their villages burn and close family members being shot, suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome.

The ancient farming techniques of the Mien have much in common with cutting edge organic farming. Another story embedded in this one, is that many of the offspring of the Mien elders at Peralta Hacienda have become organic farmers in California's burgeoning market for fresh organic produce. Their tie with the land is mystical; a core Mien belief is that they were chosen at the beginning of the human race by the divine king to be farmers. The community garden has deep meaning for all of them.

Alonso, and volunteers Soo Han and Tom Hutcheson tape recorded and videotaped interviews. Cockrell and Petrello held frequent story circles in the garden and in the 1870 historic house at the site, which is on the National Register of Historic Places. Kids learned about the various types of vegetables the Mien grow as they learned their life stories in lively gardening sessions, and planted their own crops. Every two months, community banquets to which the whole neighborhood is invited, take place, where the kids and the Mien elders harvest, cook and share their foods.

Alonso says, "Peralta Hacienda is about encounters across barriers of 'them and us.' Fruitvale, in its diversity, potentially, could be a model for the world. On a more immediate level, I am so happy to see people separated by age, language, culture, dress, and background begin to discover what they have in common, and to say hello to each other."

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