



# Castanea Fellowship

COHORT 3

2023 / 2024



[www.CastaneaFellowship.Org](http://www.CastaneaFellowship.Org)

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# “Castanea is the fresh-air fund for the food movement”



After two years with Cohort 3 — the first cohort able to complete a full programming cycle — Castanea is proving to be a critical component in the food-, land-, and climate-justice movement in the U.S.

The stories from Cohort 3 about their experience are a testament to Castanea’s special sauce of curating mindful, restful, and hugely impactful gatherings, both in-person and virtually. Through their words, it is clear that Castanea’s objectives — bold ideas, narrative power, renewed leaders, liberatory shifts, and community — are manifesting in more ways than we could have even imagined. From deepening existing relationships and creating new collaborations or projects, to having breakthroughs in their leadership journey and finding new and exciting ways of creating change, the Castanea experience is cultivating reservoirs of resilience and solidarity for food-, climate-, and land-justice leaders.





# The heart of Castanea: In-person immersions

Our most important tool to awaken  
liberated leaders and build a web of power  
for justice is place-based immersions.

Far more than a site visit, immersions are week-long experiences we design together with global allies building food sovereignty in their communities. They allow fellows to travel, rest and stretch their imaginations, and build lifelong partnerships with the local food leaders we visited – from Hawai'i, to Ghana, to North Carolina.

**Each immersion had the weighty goals of providing both rest and restoration and deepening the relationship and solidarity between fellows and partners.** While it's difficult to strike a perfect balance, the immersions were spacious enough to restore fellows overall and exciting enough to spark deep bonds of solidarity, powered by the excitement of new ideas and revelations. Feedback from each immersion was gathered, which we used to gauge how well we met our goals and what the impact was on fellows and their leadership.



# The Retreat

The Highlights Foundation  
Retreat Center, Pennsylvania  
May 8-12, 2023




The opening in-person gathering for each cohort is a retreat. That means there is much less focus on land-based learning and instead an emphasis on laying the groundwork for building the cohort culture and planting the seeds for deep interpersonal solidarity and relationship.

Our opening retreat had more structured learning and workshop time and more facilitated conversations, while still ensuring some spaciousness for fellows' connections and restoration. In addition to stellar workshops on disability justice and embodied storytelling, fellows were able to volunteer to lead their cohort in joyful activities like creating self-portraits and dance. Learning and seeding relationships were the order of the day at the retreat.



## Stories from the retreat



“It was really nourishing to be in a room full of people who understood so many of the same struggles I’ve been dealing with as a leader of color. I really needed this boost, lift, fill-up of the soul – especially as someone doing a lot of work on the ground and in the frontlines, it’s often a dance of getting close to burnout and barely avoiding it. There are so many takeaways from this cohort, everyone is brilliant and has so much to share and offer to all of us. I’m excited about learning more and deepening my care practice for myself and for my teams. Being part of Castanea has really helped me battle my imposter syndrome a lot. This experience has helped me ground so much and truly embrace the power of my work. That alone is priceless.”

“I haven’t laughed as hard as I laughed during charades in probably years. Those belly laughs seriously brought so much goodness into me that I’m still basking in.”

“As much as I prepared for the experience and retreat, I wasn’t prepared to receive a loss in my family beforehand. Everyone, who were mostly strangers before that week, helped me carry things with greater ease without just passing me a tissue or moving on. I am very grateful and renewed in awe in the amount of love, mindfulness, and strength our movement carries”

“[I have] renewed inspiration, energy, love for the world (really!); respect and awe for people doing and living all the facets of this work; wonder; hope; hopefully collaborations and deepening connection [with fellows]; and redirected attention to disability justice and the power of a storytelling practice”



# Durham, NC

The Avila Center, Durham, NC

September 11-16, 2023




We came together for our first place-based immersion for Cohort 3 in Durham, North Carolina. Our trip started with a powerful grounding in place and context setting at Stagville Plantation, led by Indigenous leaders and descendants from Stagville. We visited with partners EarthSeed and Sankofa Farms, who are doing food and land justice and sovereignty work. We made time for activities such as a Whistle Stop Tour about activist icon Pauli Murray, and an excursion to enjoy the Saxapahaw River via kayak and hiking. We laughed, ate delicious food, and bubbled over with new ideas about growing movements and what it means to take care of ourselves and our communities.

After laying groundwork for collective relationship building and culture setting at the retreat earlier in the year, the North Carolina immersion program opened the opportunity for fellows to deepen their relationship to each other and begin building relationships with partners in Durham.



## Stories from Durham, NC



“I continue to feel a desire and need to have a support network around me that I can lean on and call on when I need to. The immersion time together offers windows into what that can look like because of the conversations that come up or that I feel like I can share with someone else. It’s very supportive to feel like I can open up to another person who I feel can understand what I’m talking about in a way that most people don’t, so the peer mentorship is huge for me.”

“I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to the Castanea team for bringing together a group of leaders who are both dynamic and down-to-earth. What has truly impressed me is the humility that characterizes the leadership within this cohort. Each individual is a powerhouse, yet there is a remarkable absence of ego, which I find incredibly invigorating. This humility paves the way for thoughtful communication and collaborative problem-solving, enabling us to tackle challenges with a sense of unity and purpose.”

“This is having a huge impact on me as a person, it’s hard to exactly pinpoint all the ways, but I sit with a lot during and after these retreats and reflect hard on how I show up in spaces, how I hold space for others, how we navigate differences of opinion in our movement work, how we continue doing this work knowing that seeing the end to it isn’t the ultimate goal, how we find joy and celebration in the middle of it all.”

“I have thought about [the North Carolina immersion] every day since we returned. It was incredibly powerful and I am so thankful for the experience. Being part of the cohort has helped me grow as a leader and storyteller.”



# Kaua'i, HI

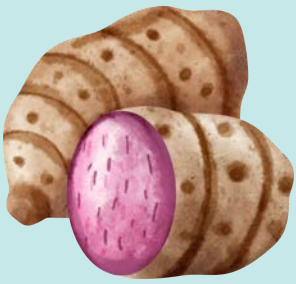
Waimea, Kaua'i  
March 9-15, 2024



Kaua'i was the first location that Castanea returned to – we held our first visit to Kaua'i with Cohorts 1 and 2 in spring of 2022. This foundation created quite a different experience, both for staff and fellows. Having a solid grounding in the place and with partners, logistics, planning, and programming flowed more smoothly with stellar results.

The deep relationships that staff have cultivated with the land and partners in Kaua'i translated to a deep, moving, and fulfilling experience for fellows. Fellows reported feeling restored and rejuvenated and inspired to think more deeply about their leadership and building solidarity with Native Hawaiian food-sovereignty work.





## Stories from Kaua'i

“I appreciated the spacious time to be able to connect with folks one-on-one, in small groups, and with the full group. One revelation is a renewed sense of motivation to deepen my sense of home and place and learn the origin stories and language of where my ancestors are from. I’ve always known knowing our history is important to our cultural organizing and fights for liberation, and having the deep honor to learn how native Kaua’i people are fighting for their lands and have language to describe all of their culture and cultural survival made me feel deeply inspired to delve into my own. I also found a lot of similarities connecting with other fellows and the communities they work with and that we continue to be more in common than different.”

“I did indeed have revelations – or more like bodily and spiritual experiences that gave a whole new life to the things I have been thinking about and the work we are doing. The unapologetic defense of the land/water and people in relationship to one another that came from everyone we met and spoke with was like a drink of water and also a mandate. I also loved connecting with other fellows and felt like I much more deeply got to know people and build connections that might result in partnerships or at least visits in the future!”



“This immersion has helped me reflect on my leadership in deep ways – how integral culture, community, and shared struggle and joy is to our organizing. It’s also helped me think about the long-term – the importance of creating spaces for elders and younger generations in our work to continue the food and lifeways of our people to sustain and nourish the next generations. I used to think that leadership was having particular skills. In some ways, it is. Though it’s more than that – I was inspired in this immersion thinking about leadership in how we hold our stories, our language, and how to respectfully carry ourselves in relationships to ourselves, each other, and the Earth.”



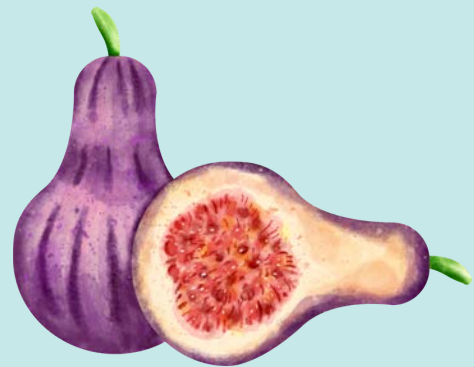
# Ghana

September 20, 2024 - October 5, 2024

The Ghana immersion, Castanea's first international in-person gathering, proved to be the most challenging of all Castanea programming to date. Feedback was gathered through facilitated conversations rather than surveys to investigate and dig into multilayered and complex components that go into hosting an international immersion.

While there were plenty of lessons to learn, there were also many moments of connection with partners and joyful experiences. Fellows were graciously hosted by friends at Ghana Food Movement with a mixer at their new kitchen in Accra with delicious food and drinks, visits with partners and farmers growing in the regions outside of the city, cooking lessons with local chefs using local foods, and tours of the Nima spice market.





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## Lessons learned: International immersions

### Size of cohort

We knew after our first in-person retreat that a cohort of 24 fellows was simply too large to create the kind of connection we wanted to foster in the group. The international immersion threw this into relief - fellows weren't as tight as a group and the hiccups often inherent in international travel caused more of an issue than they otherwise might have.

### Ground truthing locations

This was another lesson that we learned earlier in the cohort but that quickly became magnified with an international location. Staff had not been to Ghana previously, and the logistics proved to be quite challenging. We soon implemented scouting trips for all immersion locations with which staff was not already familiar and will hold off on international immersions until we are certain we can hold them with the same integrity as the others.

### Necessity of deep partner relationships on-the ground

Without a scouting trip or existing relationships in a location, partner relationships are also challenging. Though we connected with our wonderful Ghana partners remotely many times, starting over a year in advance of our trip, we learned that Zoom meetings cannot replace the connections forged in person, visiting sites, and over a meal and conversation. Nurturing these deep and meaningful relationships before showing up as a visitor is a critical piece of building an intentional experience.





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## Lessons learned: International immersions

**More clearly communicating what Castanea is equipped to provide and hold**

It is perhaps a mark of society that people doing food, land, and justice work - and likely just about everyone else - are desperately needing spaces to be fully held, such as political homes, or cultural or spiritual homes. Castanea strives to provide a container for restoration and solidarity to be built, but we have learned we should communicate more clearly what we cannot reasonably hold. Fellows may have strong, stirring, or even spiritual experiences at different points throughout the fellowship. As a small staff, we cannot hold and lead fellows through those experiences. This was never a promise of the fellowship but in noticing that it can emerge as an experience inside of the very special container we hold, we want to encourage spiritually-inclined fellows to prepare by building the support structures they need, including calling on each other. We know that deep work is happening on multiple levels as we encourage fellows to show up as their whole selves with all of their truths. As we refine programming and deepen our understanding of our capacity, we can more clearly communicate how we're collectively moving through all experiences, allowing every person to both hold space and to find space.



# What has the Castanea experience meant for you?



At the conclusion of the two-year cohort, we asked fellows: What has been made possible for you because of your participation in this fellowship?

We knew the program was bringing joy and camaraderie to fellows throughout the program as we kept a pulse check on folks – but the stories we heard as the fellows were transitioning from their active programming time into alumni still blew us away. Here are just a few of those stories from Cohort 3.



“So much has been made possible by participation in the Castanea Fellowship, both personally and professionally. The fellowship and the stipend were a huge catalyst for my work. The funds helped open up the grant dollars we were receiving. It allowed me to focus on community engagement, development, and community projects – Castanea freed up the resources that otherwise would have been used to pay my position and gave me more flexibility. It allowed me to build partnerships and work with different communities that didn’t have resources to pay me. This helped us develop partnerships and project ideas, and we were able to develop a more regional and comprehensive plan for larger grants and funding. This really laid the groundwork for scaling up our work. The ripple effect of reinvesting what otherwise would have been used to pay for my positions opened up the possibility for regional projects and new funding to come to fruition. Beyond funding, the increased capacity from Castanea was helpful for me to gain trust of the community – we’re not just talking about bringing in resources, we actually did it and actually helped to implement ideas and help build partnerships to bring in more resources. Tolani Lake Enterprises was able to get a USDA grant, which is a big deal on the reservation since traditional farmers and farms are not eligible for subsidized support because of how our land stewardship and ownership is set up.”



## Roberto Nutlouis





“Castanea has allowed me space to reset and to connect deeply with new people. And importantly, the fellowship has allowed me to massage my dreams. I was already moving forward and acting on a vision to create the QTViet earth school and land-based practice, including a seed library and practicum. We had been doing that but wanted to put more oomph, substance, resources, and money there. The Castanea monetary support was extremely helpful to make that happen. We got to see movement happen because we were able to stipend people in the community, and it allowed me to open up time and move money to people. Before, I was working other jobs, and it was hard making time to focus energy.

The burnout was real. Castanea allowed me to bring more people together to do more of the earth school work. Castanea became an opening – more energy and more resources to come in. We were able to quadruple our budget!!”

**Hai Vo**



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“Castanea personally allowed me to center in on a personal path and allowed me to feel like I’m moving forward in my heart work. I was able to leave a part-time job, opening up time and energy. This, plus other grant opportunities, allowed me to focus on my family’s land with my mother, to explore how we move forward with Black-land stewardship, and working with others doing the same. I’ve had time to work explicitly supporting other Black folks with heirs’ property and all that entails. Otherwise, I don’t know if I would have had have the time or space for that without the fellowship.”



## Celina Ngozi Esekawu

“Castanea made so much possible, on multiple levels. I actually have an oyster farm now! I’m going to harvest the last bunch of this crop next week and do a community oyster roast. We sold 50,000 oysters this year. It’s phenomenal. When I started, it was just an idea, a goal, a vision. It was not realized and it could have gone a lot of ways. The financial support from Castanea let me take the risks without being afraid or having to take on other work. Castanea was like a vote of confidence and an invitation into community with others – it was like, ‘Y’all believed in me, so I should believe in me.’ Connection with other fellows gave me a different sense of what the universe is like in the food-justice movement world. I was coming from a space where I was stressed about getting back into collective processes inside of movement and had pulled away from a lot of things given fallings apart, shifts, changes. Castanea was an invitation back into community, and I was able to step into that.”



## Xochitl Bervera



# Castanea's special sauce: Joy, solidarity, and resilience



As an organization rooted in supporting the leaders and communities that are doing the deep justice and liberation work we need for our food, land, and climate health, **Castanea is doubling down on building and supporting critical-movement infrastructure.**

We wouldn't be able to move into the juicy space of joy and justice without our funder partners – your support is a key ingredient to hold fellows in a powerful collective of people who, quite simply, have their back. We are holding the space of care, rest, joy, and camaraderie that is so desperately needed, now more than ever. Regardless of the systems in place and regardless of who is in power, the work toward justice is a long arc, and we know the importance of creating the networks of community care for food, land, and climate leaders. **It is imperative for our communities and leaders to have strong reservoirs of resilience to draw from.**

