

A gourmet experience direct from nature

Originally published in Philippine Star (Business section) p. B-7
Sunday, August 26 2007 (www.philstar.com)
<http://www.philstar.com/Article.aspx?articleId=15519>

The native rice varieties, Tinawon, Unoy and Ulikan, from the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras, clusters of which are in the Ifugao province, were introduced to the US gourmet food market early this January. This Eighth Wonder heirloom rice product line was launched at the prestigious NASFT Fancy Food Show in San Francisco, California. The rice is now selling in 15 states and in Canada.

Former Peace Corps volunteer Mary Hensley, now the president of Eighth Wonder, Inc. and founder of the Cordillera Heirloom rice project, stressed that the project must maintain a balance between marketing and production: "The market demand is there and we need to support these indigenous farmers to take advantage of this tremendous opportunity."

Vicky Garcia, executive director of RICE, Inc., the capacity building NGO that is assisting the farmers to organize themselves and upgrade their quality control standards, reports that "the Rice Terraces Farmers' Cooperative has member villages in seven Ifugao municipalities and six in Kalinga. Over a thousand farmers, with 61 trained quality-control inspectors, in 63 villages are involved in the effort to bring their heirloom rice to the export market. All the five clusters of the UNESCO World Heritage designated terraces areas have farmers participating in the project.

Although the next export shipment of 20 MT from this years' harvest is hand-pounded, plans are underway to identify and design the appropriate milling equipment that would meet the increasing demand for the heirloom rice of the Ifugao rice terraces. The fund-raising effort to procure the equipment was given a huge boost by the donation from the Operation Brotherhood Montessori Professional High School students, a UNESCO ASPNet (Associated Schools Project Network) member school. This effort could become a key element in the revitalization of these magnificent terrace areas.

The initial success of this sustainable and culturally appropriate development project was also recognized by the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA-CAR), when it was cited as a model project for poverty alleviation.

RICE continues to do advocacy awareness on the farmers' behalf and Garcia was recently invited to share the project's vision and programs with DA-ATI (Agriculture Training Institute, Benguet State University.) This was the time high

elevation terrace farmers were given technical support by the Department of Agriculture to grow their native varieties.

According to Hensley, the potential for this unique, colorful and flavorful rice in the international gourmet rice market is enormous. This is an opportunity for farmers to use their traditional knowledge and expertise in terrace farming to develop a globally competitive specialty food product, which will directly benefit the farmers and their communities.

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