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Domoguen: Imagine Tinawon rice and what it represents to the world!

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By [Robert L. Domoguen](#)

Mountain Light

Tuesday, February 8, 2011

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YOUR Mountain Light column series on heirloom rice just popped out on my computer today. Thank you for making the corrections in your previous article. More important, I want you to imagine what Tinawon or Unoy rice represents about the Cordillera, the rice terraces farmers and about you as a Filipino, to the world. —Mary Hensley, Ulm Montana, February 2, 2011.

Imagine? The word becoming a query in my mind brought memories of my meetings with Mary and Vicky Garcia, RICE, Inc executive director in years past. In one of those meetings, they narrated a story about Mr. Delfin Otagalon's outlook on heirloom rice. Mr. Otagalon, more 70 years old now, has been growing "Tinawon" rice in the rice terraces all of his life. "Tinawon" is a heritage rice grown in the rice terraces of Ifugao. It is not known how old the variety is but its cultivation has always been part of the terraces and the culture of the Ifugao people.

Greet your loved ones this Valentine season.

A year into their venture of promoting heirloom rice and uplifting the living conditions of the rice terraces farmers, Mary and Vicky thought of developing an appropriate rice mill that would process heirloom rice. The initiative was inspired by the remarks of the villagers about their need for a right machine that can mill their rice without destroying its desired quality.

In expressing that desire, Mary and Vicky understood that what they farmers sought. They need a machine that can process rice the way it was pounded with the use of morfal and thistle. In the eyes of the farmers, pounding rice is not just about removing the grains' outer covering or over pounding them. It must be pounded right to retain the grains flavours and taste. The farmers explained that their rice when pounded right can be eaten as a meal by itself even without a viand. Heirloom rice pounded this way is enough to sustain their energy and strength until the next meal.

Today's generation sustained by commercial white rice, instant food and supplementary vitamins and minerals cannot appreciate that reasoning. The farmers speak the truth though with generational oral testimonies and years of personal experience. Mary loved that. It is one among many that appealed to her desire to continue her civic work for the Philippines after completing her tour as a U.S Peace Corp volunteer years ago.

Mary and Vicky approached the Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice) and the Bureau of Postharvest Research and Extension, now PhilMech, to research and develop the design for this sought-for prototype machine. In the way, both ladies do their work, the research and design process was done in consultation with the farmers. That process highlighted how they always put premium to the ideas of their farmer partners and how they value their rice produce. When the prototype milling machine was ready, the rice terraces farmers from Ifugao and Kalinga were advised to bring their produce to PhilRice for milling and processing.

Among those, who brought his produce to PhilRice is Lakay Otagalon. During milling, he wailed and complained that the machine is not doing the work right. While the machine can be adjusted by the miller to estimate the desired pounded rice product, Lakay Otagalon was offended seeing milled rice and un-milled grains falling and being mixed together on the cement floor. Instead of a few days to complete the milling of the truckloads of rice, the milling was stretched into weeks until Lakay Otagalon and Vicky beside him were satisfied.

Lakay Otagalon's pigheaded stand in how a milling machine must process heirloom rice spoke well about the value of his produce. It contributed in the production of several prototype milling machines that respects food as food—not just a machine for mass food processing. The good machines were later procured by Eighth Wonder Inc. and distributed by RICE, Inc. to the Heirloom Rice Terraces Producers Associations in Ifugao, Kalinga and Mountain Province, and paid out of the proceeds from the sales of heirloom rice.

There is something in that word, "imagine" as Mary suggested. As I write, I imagine my grandfather opposite me as we pounded rice together, ate or worked the fields several years ago. I hear his husky voice telling me, "not a grain son" falls and get wasted on the ground. During meal times, the explicit attitude from anyone partaking of the meal is not to get more than what you can consume. That goes to say too that rice is cooked just enough for everyone.

I had the opportunity to talk with Mr. Otagalon, myself. Like my grandfather, they speak about heirloom rice being prayed for throughout the rice growing season. They speak about the rice being irrigated with fresh flowing water from the watershed. In their culture, the integrity and interrelationship of nature is very critical to survival. That also explains why the rice terraces were once biodiversity structures, living mountain relics, thriving with all kinds of food from shells, fishes, crabs, water ferns and vegetables—gathered and collected as organic food in all the Cordillera provinces.

Much of the rice terraces were abandoned now or converted to other uses. We are about to lose this precious heritage because of continued neglect. We strayed away too far from the ways of our old folks. I imagine, as Mary advised me to do and I agree with a marketing strategy that tells a story and a legacy that sustains life. I imagine Mary in the U.S.A. calling on a friend, a chef and as many interested American citizen telling them this story about a people, about the rice terraces and their efforts to protect the environment and a way of life.

I listen to the story and how Mary makes it still relevant to a post-modern world. I imagine what a Tinawon or Unoy means to an American who listens and buys the product. I imagine this person as he/she sets about to cook and serves these unique rice products on the family table. Back to where I am, I imagine what heirloom rice means to you and me and the world as a quality food, a continuing legacy, a cultural item and symbol of a continuing struggle to preserve our integrity, ways of life and nature's gifts, beauty and bounty in our highlands. As I imagine, I think about reverence, respect, gratitude, care and the friendship that goes with these things. To the Ancient of Days, ancient folks and their good legacies, to all the Mary's of the world, long live!

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