

THE DREAM LIVES ON TO KEEP CORDILLERA HEIRLOOM RICE IN THE INTERNATIONAL MARKET

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The vision to develop the region's heirloom rice as an internationally competitive industry must go on for as long as:

There are farmers who continue to cultivate heirloom rice varieties in the rice terraces following indigenous sustainable practices that are basically organic; and, The farmers themselves are willing to work together as a cooperative and support each other to improve their enterprise in terms of quality production, processing, packaging and marketing pursuant to established international standards.

This vision, according to Mary Hensley, President of the Eight Wonder, Inc., a development and marketing non-government organization (NGO), who pioneered the marketing of good quality heirloom rice abroad, needs the support of government and development agencies for the benefit of the farmers and their communities including the preservation of the region's rice terraces as a precious human heritage.

Mary is in town to visit the farmers who are participating in this enterprise, a practice she has been undertaking annually since she returned to the USA. Later in 2005, she

launched the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project (CHRP) with Ms. Vicky Garcia of Rice, Inc. DA-RFU-CAR Regional Executive Director Cesar Rodriguez and I met with them in Bontoc, Mountain Province last August 25, in time for the launching and installation of the custom-made prototype postharvest facilities developed and donated by the CHRP for use of the farmers. It included two milling machines, weighing scales, moisture meters and others, all designed and turned-over to the Rice Terraces Farmers Cooperative of Mountain Province headed by its president, Mr. Francis Dangiwan.

During the launching program, Mary Hensley further elaborated on the vision of the CHRP by expressing her gratitude to the farmers' efforts in "preserving the beautiful rice terraces; the indigenous rice varieties and the indigenous cultural practices of preserving and growing them," she said.

In response, Governor Maximo Dalog and Mr. Francis Dangiwan accepted the challenge in behalf of the people of Mtn. Province and the province' rice terraces farmers, respectively. "We must show our gratitude to the help that the project is extending to us by showing our commitment to sustain its

successful operation in our villages and farms," he said.

Director Cesar Rodriguez, for his part, committed the DA-RFU-CAR's support for the procurement of the custom-made prototype postharvest facilities in cooperation with the provincial local government unit (PLGU) for the project.

After the program, Mary told that she was asked by the National Geographic magazine to write about the Cordillera and the article will come out in October, an effort she said will promote the good places of your region, its rice terraces and good heirloom rice varieties.

We also talked about some aspects relative to the impact of the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project. For instance, there is this increasing critique on selling of the region's quality heirloom rice instead of having it consumed within the region or the Philippines.

Mary does not need to respond to the issue. In Mountain Province, Ceferino Oryan, Municipal Agriculturist of Barlig, said that this is hardly an issue in the municipality because only about 10 percent of the produce is committed to the enterprise. Mr. Dangiwan agrees and that their participation and commitment encourages farmers to farm with an eye to producing top international quality rice for export and local consumption. He added that after fulfilling their export pledges, and even with reduced production because of the erratic weather, much still remains to be sold during the Lang-ay Festival of the province.

Since opening the eyes of the farmers and the nation to the export potentials of heirloom rice, CHRP also changed the people's perception on the market value of heirloom rice. From being just a relic of the old indigenous ways of farming to be given away as tokens for visitors, heirloom rice has suddenly become a highly priced market commodity. It has encouraged owners and farmers to return to the old ways and in effect opened the eyes of government to give more support to rice terraces farming in terms of irrigation, post harvest and training support. Because of its export, colored and highly nutritious heirloom rice has finally arrived as the best rice in the eyes of the locals, some of whom once preferred eating commercial rice due to its white color and smooth eating qualities.

Mary admits that there are many ways as there are many voices in government and the private sector that now compete in prescribing how heirloom rice should be developed, utilized and marketed for the farmers' benefit. She sees nothing wrong with that except the commitment and well-meaning intentions that goes with the vision that she started along with her export enterprise for heirloom rice and its great potentials.

Mary has and continues to do what she can to promote heirloom rice in the international niche markets. This generates best value and profit for heirloom rice, her marketing enterprise and the people who benefit from it, mainly – the rice terraces farmers. Mary's Eighth Wonder Corporation in partnership with RICE, Inc., are teaching and training their farmer-partners on best quality control practices from production, processing, packaging to shipping required by the international market. The effort has certainly raised the value of heirloom rice notches above how locals earlier appreciated it. Such appreciation for this partnership, its current pursuits and requirements should sustain the promotion of the enterprise' vision of sustainable rice terraces, preservation and production of quality heirloom rice varieties, and improved and good income for the currently marginalized rice terraces farmers in the region.



Mary Hensley, President of Eighth Wonder, Inc. with Vicky Garcia, DA-CAR Exec. Director Cesar Rodriguez, Gov. Maximo Dalog, Vice Mayor Francis Dangiwan, PA John Likigan, and other officials in MP.

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