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Ifugao Tinawon Rice Export Market Opens

Through the years, the Ifugao rice terraces farmers have been steadily leaving the terraces to seek alternative sources of livelihood like gold-panning, vegetable-growing, and wood-carving in other provinces.

The reason is that their harvest is insufficient to sustain their families until the next harvest season.

Due to gradual abandonment, the world heritage site decayed and deteriorated, and this alarms UNESCO and the Philippine government.

Fortunately, a private agency in Cordillera has made significant breakthrough in the exportation of Ifugao native rice for the past three years.

This private agency is the Revitalize Indigenous Cordilleran Entrepreneurs (RICE), Inc. According to Victoria C. Garcia, executive director of RICE, Inc., the agency was able to export 7 tons of Tinawon native rice from Ifugao and Unoy native rice from Kalinga to the United States last year.

And this year, they will export 20 tons of Tinawon rice and Unoy rice to the United States. She also said that the markets are New York, Washington, Montana, Pennsylvania, Oregon, Vermont, and New Hampshire.

“It’s a big jump from the 7 tons we exported to the U.S. last year,” Garcia said.

The Dona-al and Imbu-ukan, two Tinawon varieties, were selected by RICE, Inc. for its export requirements. Both varieties are planted annually in the rice terraces.

Moreover, RICE, Inc. has already established a buying station in Banaue, a tourist spot, and is organizing farmers groups in Ifugao to concentrate on the purely traditional and organic production of Tinawon.

The organization has now organized 19 Ifugao barangays, mostly in the municipality of Hingyon, whose farmers are now concentrating on Tinawon production.

How did the Tinawon rice break into the U.S. export market? According to Garcia, it all started when the Manila Bulletin published on August 4, 1999 an article by this writer entitled "Banaue Tinawon Rice" which detailed how the Ifugao Terraces Commission and the Manila-based Kaloob Foundation had launched a promotional campaign to sell Tinawon rice at premium price in Manila to support the preservation of the rice terraces.

Posted in the Internet, this writer's article caught the attention of Mary Hensley, a former U.S. Peace Corps volunteer in Lubuagan, Kalinga. Since she was very interested, she conducted feasibility on whether the Tinawon rice and Unoy rice would sell in a highly competitive food market in the United States. The results of Hensley's studies were very promising.

With the encouraging results of her feasibility studies, Hensley prepared a five-year business and marketing plan for the highland rice. The business plan projected the costs of organizing farmers and outlined a marketing strategy to sell the rice at a fair trade price which would adequately compensate the rice terraces farmers.

Together with Garcia, her graduate school classmate, they organized the RICE, Inc. and formed a retailing agency, the Eighth Wonder, Inc. which would market the native rice in the U.S. They began to meet the farmers in Ifugao and Kalinga to generate their interest on project and offered them business partnership to export their native rice.

RICE, Inc. is -now on its third year and its list of accomplishments is far impressive, considering that it only has part-time staff and volunteers.

One of its accomplishments is that it has helped facilitate the organization and legal registration of the Rice Terraces Farmers' Cooperative of Ifugao and Kalinga. It has also trained quality control inspectors, helped organize revolving seed banks and has successfully tapped agricultural offices to assist in the distribution of certified native seeds to interested farmers.

Through workshops, trainings, and extensive networking, RICE, Inc. is now building the bridge between the rice terraces farmers and the export market.

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