

# Montana Senior News

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## Preserving A World Heritage Food: Mary Hensley And The Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project

By Gail Jokerst

In Nevil Shute's beloved fictional story, *A Town Like Alice*, a British woman returns to the Malaysian village where she spent the last days of WWII so she could build a well for the village women. She wanted to ease the women's workload and thank the people for allowing her to live and work alongside them during a dangerous time.

Fast-forward 60 years and you'll find another story - this one true - about a Montana woman returning to help a remote third-world village where she once volunteered with the Peace Corps. Like Nevil Shute's heroine, Jean Paget, Mary Hensley also found herself overseas in a rice-growing village when she was caught in the middle of a war. In Mary's case, though, it was not a world war but a civil war over a proposed hydroelectric dam in the Cordillera Mountains of the Philippines. If built, the dam would have flooded the rice terraces belonging to the indigenous people she was assisting.

It did not take this Choteau native long to realize that destroying the hand-hewn terraces would end a centuries-old way of life for the subsistence farmers

whose families had tended this land for generations. The culture, sustenance, and livelihood of the Kalinga and Ifugao tribes depended on cultivating their unique rice, which is grown nowhere else in the world but on these ancient mountain terraces.

As it turns out, the resistance put up by hundreds of persistent people from the affected villages stopped the dam from being built. They were able to continue growing their rice, which Mary ate at every meal supplemented with beans, greens, or slivers of pork and chicken. While some foreigners may have tired of a steady rice diet, Mary thrived on it. She found the unusual red, pink, and purple hues along with the sturdy texture and nutty

flavor of the large grains appealing and could not wait to eat it.

After returning stateside, Mary embarked on several different careers including social work, travel agency work, and organic farming. During those decades, she often reminisced with her fellow Peace Corps volunteers about the Philippines and the taste of the heirloom rice they had come to love.

"Remember the rice?" they would ask each other. "That was the best thing we had to eat."

Mary had always expected to return to the Philippines - someday. But it took a life-altering incident to convince her to go back sooner rather than later.

"In 1996, I was involved in a head-on collision. The front end of my car was lost but I was fine. It was a wakeup call for me," says Mary. "I realized I wanted to return to the Philippines and do some-



[Photo by B. James Jokerst]

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thing significant for the villagers. I just wasn't sure what." Five years later after learning about the abandonment of the rice terraces, this soft-spoken woman had figured out what she wanted to do.

"The farmers could no longer make a living and were leaving for economic opportunities elsewhere. They were giving up on growing their rice, which was the center of who these people are. I didn't have any business background to be of help," says Mary. "But I knew I wanted to start a small-business initiative with the farmers."

To acquire the needed skills, she enrolled at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont to study social entrepreneurship. Initially in her course work, Mary contemplated a business model based on local handicrafts. She eventually discounted that idea as it did not seem viable considering the international competition. As Mary weighed other options, her memories kept flashing back to the wonderful varieties of rice she had eaten and an intriguing concept began taking shape.

"After doing a feasibility study and business plan I realized that growing rice for export had the most possibility of being a sustainable and profitable project for everyone," notes Mary. "I recognized there was an opportunity to bring their rice to the world because, by then, rice had become a gourmet item. Rice awareness was coming into our culture and I felt there could be a convergence if I could work out the logistics to import the rice. I thought I could make it a high-value product for the farmers so they could earn a living."

Her aim was to create a business in the Philippines that would make money without relying on outside funds for support. Although the follow-through seemed daunting, Mary persisted in designing a business that would eventually be owned and operated by the farmers.

"You try to find any resource that will help and do things out of your own scope," says Mary. "You put aside your own limitations and go for the goal. Nothing happens without going out on a limb."

In 2002, Mary at last returned to her village of Uma to gauge how its 100 inhabitants felt about a business project featuring their heirloom rice.

"Although skeptical, the villagers were overwhelmingly interested. They had never sold their rice before but were willing to try. It was a leap of faith for them," recalls Mary. "I think they were open to the idea because I was known to them."

The plan Mary evolved consisted of a three-pronged effort. In the Philippines, she helped form a legal non-profit organization to conduct workshops for the region's rice farmers to learn the skills for producing a quality product.

The non-profit also helps farmers obtain more technical assistance from the government as well as acquire processing machines. In addition, it aids the farmers in organizing themselves into farmer cooperatives and village associations, which consolidate their harvests thereby amassing enough volume for commercial sale. The third part of the plan, marketing and selling the rice, is Mary's bailiwick. She established a Fair Trade company in America, Eighth Wonder, to accomplish this nationally and internationally. The business is located in Ulm, where she shares processing and warehouse space at Timeless Seeds.

Together with the farmers, Mary chose seven types of rice to import under the Eighth Wonder label. Based on taste and eye appeal, the list includes four staple varieties for savory dishes and three sticky varieties typically used in dessert recipes. All are flavorful and aromatic and will not break down or become starchy. They cook in 20-25 minutes, which is about half the time it takes

to cook brown rice.

Mary imports the rice annually in 25-kilogram bags (about 50 lbs.), which are placed in a shipping container, ocean-freighted from Manila to Seattle, then trucked to Ulm arriving in late fall. Over the past five years, each shipment has ranged from eight to 17 metric tons (2,200 lbs.).

Today, you will find Eighth Wonder rice carried by an increasing number of stores in the West, New England, and Canada. In Montana, it is available through the Jeanette Rankin Peace Center (Missoula), 2J's Fresh Market (Great Falls), the Real Food Store (Helena), and Global Village (Billings). It also can be purchased through Eighth Wonder's web site, [www.heirloomrice.com](http://www.heirloomrice.com) where you can learn more about the Cordillera Rice Project and its accomplishments.

Although still in its early stages, the project has already shown signs of success. The farmers have earned money to help their children stay in high school and attend college, which the older generation hopes will eventually break the cycle of poverty in which they have lived. And in continuing to farm their ancestral terraces, the villagers are preserving their centuries-old traditions along with some of the world's best-tasting rice.

For more information call 406-866-3340 or email [heirloomrice@hotmail.com](mailto:heirloomrice@hotmail.com).

#### Suman with Heirloom Tinawon Rice

This traditional Filipino dessert has a delicate subtle flavor without being overly sweet. It is reminiscent of rice pudding but not as rich.

- 1-cup Eighth Wonder Sticky Rice
- ½-cup Eighth Wonder Tinawon Rice
- 2¼-cups water
- pinch of salt
- 2/3-cup canned coconut milk
- ½-cup brown sugar
- ½-teaspoon vanilla

Combine sticky rice and regular rice. Vigorously rinse 2-3 times in cold water then drain. In a rice cooker or saucepan, put the rinsed rice, water, and salt. Cook according to rice cooker directions or on low heat for 20-25 minutes in a saucepan that is partially covered.

Meanwhile pour coconut milk into another saucepan or wok and bring to a boil. Add brown sugar and stir constantly until the mixture reduces by half volume. Add vanilla. When the rice finishes cooking, stir it well then blend it into the coconut milk mixture. Spread the rice evenly in a wok or return it to the rice cooker and cook it until the rice absorbs more liquid and starts to dry out. You can also do this last step in a large saucepan. Serve warm. MSN

