



**Co-op Food Stores**  
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About Us

Classes

Co-op News

Jobs

Links

Nutrition

Recipes

[http://www.coopfoodstore.com/news/current/food\\_for\\_hope.html](http://www.coopfoodstore.com/news/current/food_for_hope.html)

## Co-op News



### Food for Hope: Eighth Wonder Heirloom Rice

by Elizabeth Ferry

Kalinga Unoy, Ulikan Red, Tinawon Fancy, Tinawon White—these are the names of rice grown in the mountains of the Cordillera region of the Philippines, where the villages are so remote that travelers hike to reach them. It is a land of awesome beauty, historic rice terraces, and indigenous people engaged in a new model of economic development.

And it brings us a story about food, hospitality, culture, and hope.

The story begins with Mary Hensley, a former Upper Valley resident and Hanover Co-op member. Hensley was a Peace Corps volunteer in the Cordillera in the late 1970s. After working for Janet Flanders Travel in Norwich for many years and briefly at the Upper Valley Land Trust, she enrolled in the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont, where her coursework in social entrepreneurship inspired a return visit to the Cordillera region almost 30 years after her Peace Corps service.

Many people in the villages remembered Hensley. In 1976, she was the first white woman they had encountered. On her return visit, Hensley was reassured to see the positive effects of her Peace Corps project, a public health initiative to reduce goiter.

But the community's health was in tragic condition. The 2,000-year-old culture, formerly grounded in vibrant communal rice farming, had disintegrated in recent decades. The rice terraces—centuries-old masterpieces of engineering and the former center of life activity—were crumbling in disuse. A large number of young villagers in their 20s and 30s had left the mountains in search of work in cities such as Manila, Hong Kong, and Singapore. The traditional way of life, with its intimate knowledge of raising unique varieties of upland rice irrigated with water from the mountain-top rainforests, seemed useless and irrelevant in the 21st century.

“People often place value, even on themselves, in terms of what they can buy,” Hensley observes. She saw despair among the villagers because they had little money and could barely participate in the modern economy. “The upland rice of the Cordillera had never been sold—only raised for personal use or for trade within the community,” she explains. “As such, it was perceived as having little value, despite its life-sustaining properties and cultural importance.”

Talking with local people, she began to formulate a vision for the future which relied on the human, cultural, and natural resources of the region. It all centered around the rice.

“Even after 30 years, I could vividly remember the aroma of the unoy rice as it was cooking,” she says. “It was so wonderful, so intense, that I could hardly wait to eat it. That memory led me to dream of the day when the native rice from the famous rice terraces of northern Luzon would be served in the best restaurants in North America and be sought by gourmets from around the world; the day when tinawon and unoy would summon visions of the Philippines, just as jasmine and basmati evoke Thailand and India.”

Hensley has worked tirelessly since 2002 to make that dream come true. She has sought the advice of many people—rice farmers, governmental workers, chefs, and students at the Tuck School of Business among them—to assess, test, and refine her plan.

Essential to the process is Vicky Garcia, a native of Manila and fellow alumna of the School for International Training. Garcia has formed Revitalize Indigenous Cordilleran Entrepreneurs (RICE), a non-profit organization in the Philippines. RICE facilitates skills training for the farmers and helps them export their crop to Hensley in the United States. Hensley's company, Eighth Wonder, Inc., packages, markets, and distributes the rice to wholesale and retail markets in North America.

By putting a value on the rice, Hensley and Garcia have created an economic option for rice farmers in the Cordillera. “You can't stop people from wanting cell phones,” says Hensley, reflecting on the implications of her work. “What you can do is help them achieve what they want with some measure of dignity and accompanied by meaningful pieces of their culture.”

She describes terrace farming as “back-breaking, hard, and endless. There is on-going repair and maintenance to the terraces. Tending the rice is done by hand; the terraces are too steep for machinery or draft animals.”

So why would anyone want to do it?

“I see the same thing in the Philippines that I saw in the Upper Valley and my home state of Montana,” she says. “There are people who want to farm—who have farming in their bones—and will choose to farm if it is an economically viable option.” For these people, wherever they are in the world, the deep satisfaction of working the land is, in itself, a large measure of their success.

Hensley is developing the appropriate legal structure for the farmers to own one-third of Eighth Wonder. “They will have both the benefits and responsibilities of marketing their own rice.” When this is accomplished, Eighth Wonder will be one of the first American companies to operate with this shared-equity model.

The project is bringing positive change to the rice farmers of the Cordillera. “This initiative is different from the other projects and business proposals,” says the Vice Mayor of Hingyon, a municipality in Ifugao. “They have included us—the farmers—in the planning. They are not just interested in our rice but also interested in helping us as a people.”

Jun Taguinay, a rice farmer, speaks poignantly about his life before and after his involvement in Eighth Wonder. “Sometimes we think that these mountains have covered us and separated us from the world,” he says. “But now, with this project of selling our rice, we will link to the outside world ... they will know us and see the beauty beyond the rice we produce.”

From more than 400 available varieties, Hensley selected four for the Eighth Wonder label. Each of the four is unique, but all share certain characteristics: physical beauty, distinctive aroma, exceptional flavor, and a satisfying heartiness. The rice is easy to prepare and cooks in about 20 minutes.

As of this writing, Garcia and the farmers of RICE anticipate shipping 18 metric tons of native rice to the United States in the fall of 2007, an extraordinary accomplishment.

“The people of Lubuagan opened their homes and community to me when I was a young woman,” Hensley says simply. “That experience changed my life, and profoundly affected the adult person I became.”

The gift of life-changing experience and cultural exchange lives on in RICE, Eighth Wonder, and the rice of the Cordillera.