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# Dedicated to TRADITION

world heritage farming and heirloom rices

BY RENE FEATHERSTONE  
PHOTOS COURTESY EIGHTH WONDER, INC.

**H**ave you heard of the rice whisperer, the mysterious Lady of Terraces? She arrives in Seattle in her Subaru loaded with seven kinds of rice you've probably not seen before, the grain in hues from ochre to blue-black, tan, even red.

Her name is Mary Hensley. Her Eighth Wonder, Inc is based in Ulm, Montana. You meet her when she's offering in-store samples. You taste her offering of rice, your palate surprised by a flavor profile pleasingly complex, the texture robust. When you compliment her, she smiles. She's so soft-spoken you suspect shyness. She's a quiet woman, middle-aged, no bravura. Which makes it all the more astonishing that she's doing her part in taming a monster—globalization, no less. Not that she puts it that way. She speaks of heirloom grains raised on ancient terraces in the Cordilleras of the Philippines, terraces that UNESCO declared a World Heritage Site in 1995.

Look at her photos. Imagine yourself: knife in hand, in a winding line of 80 farmers cutting panicles, thousands of panicles, ten thousands before the long, hot day is done. The next day you do it again, and again, under the gaze of mountain top spirits veiled in rain forest. Hensley said that about 300 rices are grown in the region, on farms measuring from 1/3 hectare to 1 hectare. A typical terrace village raises as many as 30 rice varieties, but many heirloom rices today hang on only at single farms. As the indigenous culture declines, so too does crop diversity.

Hensley is determined to help. "Being a responsible person in the world means caring about social justice. I have empathy," she explained her passion for the Cordillera tribes of Kalinga and Ifugao. She first got to know them three decades ago.

The delicious Tinawon rice.

## ON THE CORDILLERA TERRACE

Raised in Montana, after high school Hensley went to U.C. Berkeley. She studied social work, and the February before graduating, she applied to join the Peace Corps. The required physical exam was taken at a military base in Oakland.

She had no choice regarding where she'd be sent; on the commercial flight to the Philippines she was one of about 40 new Peace Corps members. "The Peace Corps had their own office compound in Manila, with hundreds of staff. We had nine weeks of intensive language and culture training at a Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement site 50 miles from Manila." When it was time for her assignment, she opted for the mountains. "I love the mountains more than the ocean," she said. "I thought the mountains would be cooler than the low-land areas that were unbelievably hot. And what I had heard about the indigenous culture made the terraces sound like an interesting place."

A Philippine military convoy truck brought her to her destination in Kalinga Province, Culong Village in the Uma village area, Lubuagan the nearest municipality. "I wore jeans and a T-shirt. I had a woven backpack. I was the first white woman in that village." She was 22 years old. The seventeen families in the village were animists. "Their whole culture revolves around agricultural phases. They grow rice mainly, and some dry beans, and they gather greens like watercress."

Hensley lived in the rural health unit building, "a dispensary that had a door but no furniture. It was a nice wood building." Adjacent was the hut of the barrio captain who was in his 40s; he lived with his wife and mother, and five children, Hensley said. "They built a thatch outhouse for me, for that I was so thankful." Taking baths in the village remains a distinct memory for Hensley. "There was a spring, it was a public area. It became a nightly activity for the kids to watch me—I learned a lot of ways to use the sarong."



Rural Health assigned her to a midwife. The Peace Corps policy was to not ask for huge changes: “We were there to help them with the goiter problem, almost everyone there had goiters. We distributed iodized salt. The other program we participated in was to create a baseline for poverty and health, we weighed a lot of babies, as what babies weigh is an important indicator of that baseline.”

But the actual birthings went on without Hensley. “They didn’t let me get too close to births, they didn’t know what effect my white spirit might have on the baby, and they weren’t taking any chances.”

Her two years on the terraces Hensley summed up as “not terribly exciting. You’re there living with the indigenous people, not asking for anything special. You’re very isolated, and that’s a terrifically hard thing. It becomes really necessary to meet with other Peace Corps workers every so often. There were five others in the Province. We communicated by telegraph.”

## ON THE SEATTLE TERRACE

After the Peace Corps, Hensley ended up in Seattle, volunteering for church organizations and the YMCA which hired her as social worker in 1980, right in the middle of a decade-long immigration wave. “Between 1975 and 1985, about 1 million refugees from southeast Asia came to the United States, about 100,000 of them to Washington State. The first wave were mostly Vietnamese, they were the best educated who could afford to leave Vietnam. The second wave were the boat people, and in 1980 Laotian hill people and Cambodians came to Seattle; the Laotians were an ethnic minority, they were Hmong and Mien whom the CIA had trained to be guerilla fighters during the war. They didn’t speak English, their own was not a written language. They had no skills that were immediately transferrable to our way of life.”

Hensley’s work with those refugees is remembered to this day, particularly her initiative in starting the still-active community garden near the intersection of Martin Luther King Jr. Way and McClellan Street. A recent visit turned up a steep series of terraces. An older black gentleman was busy sanding the wood walls of a building immediately below the garden. No, he wasn’t involved in the garden, but usually someone was around “Go up to the top.” The gate’s an arch fashioned from string-tied bamboo. The steps climb by terrace after terrace, with stacked cinder blocks holding up the growing beds. Fall-planted garlic stood tall in neat rows—lots of garlic. It’s obviously the primary crop. Along the garden: a sidewalk overlooking the many terraces. A bench, and a chair, but no one at work here this afternoon.

Still, the beds spoke of long hours of shovel work and stooped-over planting, tedious weeding, careful watering from the evenly spaced faucets, quick-handed harvesting, and then, again, the shovel work of soil prep.

A type of chard over here, some bok choy there, a few rows of onions. On the beds not yet planted were piled sticks about 5 feet long; the plan here seemed to be for beans or some other climbing vegetable.

The black gent noticed us coming back down, and shut off his sander.

“I remember when the Asian people first came here. All of them, even the older ones, had known nothing but war all their lives. The first years they grew opium poppies here, they did the whole thing, they made the slits and collected the opium. After a couple years the city told them not to do that anymore.”

We heard compassion for the refugees in his voice.

Hensley was not surprised when we told her of the conversation. “In those years Americans welcomed immigrants, there was a sense that we owed those people something because they’d supported us in Vietnam. It was a real community effort to help them get used to our way of life.”

She remembers the day she started the garden. “The Mount Baker Apartments were one of the housing projects that had been built for refugee families. I happened to live in the neighborhood. After spending two years in a mountain area with poor people, I knew well that they were farmers. The hillside was a total blackberry bramble, oh, it was dense. I went there with clippers, machete, shovels and hoes...”

Machete? “Yes, I’d brought one back from the Philippines.”

It must have been June, Hensley said. “I remember the day as terrifically hot. The Hmong women watched me, I knew most of them, they were in classes I was giving at the YMCA. I got redder and redder from the heat. At some point they made me stop, they thought I might have a heart attack. They went back to their apartments and came out with hoes and digging instruments—the handle was about 1 1/2-foot long, they were made for mountainside digging...they’d brought them with them when they came over.”

They’d also brought seeds, bok choy, and, yes, poppy. “Ceremonial opium use is part of their culture. In the beginning nobody realized what type of flowers they were growing.”

Looking back after all these years, Hensley remembers the start of the garden as “an amazing transformation.” Certainly it ranks as an example of guerilla gardening, she noted: “Had we asked anyone for permission, they’d have said no.”

The terracing and eventual metamorphosis into a more formal garden under the Seattle Community P-Patch Program came after Hensley left Seattle in 1983.

In the meantime, many Hmong refugees proved themselves enterprising truck farmers after learning American ways, Hensley pointed out. “Half of the vegetable and flower sellers at Pike Place Market today are Hmong.”

## RETURN TO CORDILLERA

Hensley swapped coasts and settled in Vermont where she became a travel agent. Together with a partner she also grew organic hay and





## THE LONG, LONG JOURNEY OF FAIR TRADE RICE

When you purchase a package of Eighth Wonder rice, it's been places.

"Rice is first planted in concentrated seed beds in December; it's transplanted in January and February. Depending on variety and elevation, it's harvested by hand after five to seven months. Old women who're the 'seed keepers' pick out the best panicles first," Mary Hensley says of Cordillera heirloom rice production on terraces.

The bundled panicle sheaves are carried to an open area for drying, and then they're put up in wooden granaries on stilts. The estimated yield per hectare is about three tons.

Hensley's company contracts with about 250 farmers who each pledge a certain number of 25-kilogram sacks. Since much of the terrace terrain is too steep for motorized or draft animal travel, every sack is carried on the shoulder down the mountain to the nearest municipality.

At the "final line station" the grain is inspected and moisture tested, hulled and conditioned. By truck the sacks are taken to the Philippine Rice Research Institute where they're fumigated in carbon dioxide bags. Next they're trucked to Manila where the rice sacks are palletized for container shipping.

They arrive at the Port of Tacoma, where the sacks get trucked to Ulm, Montana. There Hensley runs the grain over a screen mill, the final step of grain cleaning and quality control.

Lastly, it's packed into one-pound consumer bags, by a shelter workshop for developmentally disabled adults also used by Timeless Seeds in Montana.



Above: A farmer and co-op member with her rice. Below: Rice terraces at the World Heritage Site.



## LONG AND SHORT GRAIN VARIETIES

**Tinawon Fancy:** Large, separate grains with a firm inner texture. Fragrant, with a mild, sweet aftertaste.

**Tinawon White:** Looks like Arborio, with a sturdy texture and strong fragrance and mild flavor. Has been called "the mother of all Arborio types."

**Kalinga Unoy:** Reddish color and nutty aroma. The mild but distinct flavor is great with fresh herbs or stongly spiced dishes. This rice is regarded by its farmers as a safeguard against illness.

**Ulikan Red:** Slightly sticky long grain rice with a reddish color and earthy cooking aroma. Holds up well to curries and makes a great rice pudding.

## STICKY RICES

**Mountain Violet:** Intense purple color, with a plump grain and nutty flavor. Makes a fine visual and flavor contrast in desserts with coconut milk.

**Ifugao Diket:** Light purple color, with a fat, sticky grain. Good for puddings or in a whole-grain salad.

**Kalinga Jekot:** Pleasantly chewy texture and light purple color. Lovely when flavored with green cardamom.

## FIND THE RICE

[www.heirloomrice.com](http://www.heirloomrice.com)

### In Seattle:

Ten Thousand Villages, 6417 Roosevelt Wy. NE  
Pacific Food Importers, 2323 Airport Wy. S  
Uwajimaya, 600 Fifth Ave S  
Whole Foods Roosevelt, 1026 NE 64th St.

### Around the Sound:

Bremerton: Fresh Local, 540 Fourth St.  
Everett: Sno-Isle Natural Food Co-op, 2804 Grand Ave.  
Friday Harbor: Gourmet's Galley, 21 Spring St.  
Mill Creek: Central Market, 15605 Main St.  
Moses Lake: Michael's Market and Bistro, 221 W Broadway Ave.  
Olympia: Olympia Food Co-op, 3111 Pacific Ave SE.  
Redmond: Whole Foods, 17991 Redmond Wy.  
Spokane: Main Market, 44 W. Main Ave.

raised a few cattle for organic bulk freezer beef. "At the peak we calved 20. It was a hobby farm."

As the Internet waxed and airlines restructured the way tickets were sold, the profession of travel agent began slipping away. Aside from that, Hensley did not find it all that fulfilling a career: "I needed something to feel passionate about," she related.

She often thought about the villages in the Cordilleras. "I read that the terraces were being abandoned because of environmental and cultural collapse. I thought about what I could do if I went back there with some skills. I remembered the wonderful rice they grew on the terraces, I thought those rices could fit into the gourmet rice market that was developing here in the United States."

In 2001 she enrolled in the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont. Specifically she wanted to learn about "social entrepreneurship."

Next she interned with a Fair Trade NGO in the Philippines. It was during that internship that she visited Culong again. In the 1970s the terrace villages knew only subsistence farming, and some suffered extreme poverty. "Some babies were literally starving to death." But indigenous culture had been whole.

Change began with outsiders' presence. "Just being there, an American in a remote village, has consequences," Hensley remarked. In a few ways life improved for the terrace farmers as they gained access to medical facilities and schools. But now they needed money for medicines and money for kids' pencils, and yet more money to send their children on to higher education. "The men left, they went to the bigger towns and abroad to find work. Women, children, and old people are left in the villages, they're some of the most marginalized people in the world," Hensley said. She said that traditionally women did the farming, whereas the men's job was primarily the continuous repair of the terraces, and the upkeep of irrigation channels from the rain forest.

In 2004 she went back there with a feasibility study and a business plan for Fair Trade rice production and export. But the Cordillera farmers were skeptical. "They had never sold anything," Hensley pointed out.

In 2005 Hensley helped form the non-profit RICE, Inc. "They came up with that, it stands for Revitalize Indigenous Cordilleran Entrepreneurs." It's managed by Vicky Garcia, a Philippina with whom Hensley had become friends in grad school.

To develop the Fair Trade plan, first they had to identify the best rice cultivars. "We looked at over 80 varieties. We had the farmers tell us which varieties tasted the best. I then sent samples to chefs in the United States to get their input."

They settled on 17 cultivars. The farmers had to be educated in how to improve production. "The Philippine agriculture department had never worked with those farmers before," Hensley noted. "For the farmers, broken kernels are food, but I can't sell broken kernels," she



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remarked. All levels of the Philippine government contribute to the RICE project, because rainforest is at stake. Hensley explained that the collapse of terrace farming inevitably opens up the mountaintop forests to exploitation.

The quasi-governmental Philippine Rice Research Institute helped RICE with hulling and conditioning equipment that mimics the traditional mortar-and-pestle method of grain production. "One of the farmers, an elder who's like a shaman, rejected a prototype of the equipment because a little rice was getting lost in the process, and that's taboo for an animist. 'You cannot waste a single kernel,' he told the engineers, and they went back and modified the machine."

The farm gate price for rice from the terraces is around 50 Philippine pesos per kilogram, about \$1.13 U.S., compared to 12 pesos for a kilogram of subsidized Thailand rice. RICE has grown to where now 190 villages in four provinces take part in the project.

How goes Hensley's marketing in the Pacific Northwest?

She said that she's riding the coat tails of a friend's company, Timeless Seeds, which markets heirloom lentils. "I spend a lot of time shipping out samples, and writing letters on the Internet." Before returning to the Philippines, she'd identified over 80 different packaged rice products in an East Coast market survey. But that number may increase considerably, now that commercial American rice has become contaminated with biotech genes, after a GMO rice called Liberty Link "escaped" from the Bayer CropScience facility in Arkansas. The USDA detected the contamination in 2006; Bayer's ongoing court battles with farmers in six states keep the issue alive in consumers' minds.

Her marketing ace, she said, is the rices' story. "It's about a culture that somebody has to try and save." This resonates with gastronomes, ethnic food lovers, and high-end restaurant chefs, and environmentalists: Eighth Wonder has earned the Green America stamp of approval from the Green Business Network, as well as membership in the Fair Trade Federation. And that marketing ace should ultimately help the venture become a long-term sustainable enterprise that offers a genuine livelihood for the high-elevation farmers. Says Hensley, "It is my hope and dream, that as the production and sales expand, the farmers will continue to learn the skills needed to be involved and have ownership of all phases of the business—not only of the production, but the sales and marketing. When that happens, Eighth Wonder will truly be a model for sustainable economic development." *eS*

René Featherstone is a freelance writer specializing in agriculture and environment in the Inland Pacific Northwest, with over 2000 published articles under his byline. René has worked in Eastern Washington agriculture since the mid-1970s.