

RICE STORIES

“For years my best memory of the Philippines was the rice I ate. It smelled so good while it was cooking that we couldn’t wait to eat it.

I knew then that there was an incredible rice variety here. Everywhere I went in Kalinga that was the rice people were eating. I remember walking in the fields of ripening rice – it smelled like you were cooking popcorn.”

MARY CLAIRE HENSLEY



GUARDIANS OF CORDILLERA HEIRLOOM RICE

IN 1976, MARY CLAIRE HENSLEY was a Peace Corps volunteer in Kalinga province. Years after her tour of duty in the Philippines, she was still thinking of the rice in the terraces and how she wanted to help preserve it and bring it to the global table. Almost forty years later, together with former classmate and fellow advocate, Ma. Victoria "Vicky" Garcia, she is at the forefront of conservation efforts to make the traditional rice of the famous terraces of the Cordilleras a unique world-class product.

Mary and Vicky come from similar backgrounds in the field of social work and community development. They met in graduate school in the U.S. When Vicky learned of Mary's plans to start a rice project in Kalinga, she said, "I will go with you. You can't go alone." They have been working together on the project since then. That was ten years ago.

Mary put together a model project on rice. It was an economic initiative that involved partnering with farmers to help improve the livelihood of the upland communities. She did market research on the viability of selling native grains as a high-end retail product. They met with farmers and shared their vision, asking them to take part in it. The communities

were willing to give it a try. They saw it as an opportunity to hope again, after many setbacks – like the physical destruction of the terraces, poverty, migration of their youth to the cities, and the looming loss of their traditional way of living.

For Mary and Vicky, it was all about making a difference in people's lives, starting at a very basic level. Mary says, "People just want a certain level of comfort." With their project, they hope to improve the life of the people of the Cordilleras by giving an economic value to their most treasured product – traditional rice.

TURNING AN IDEA INTO REALITY

Mary says it's easy to have an idea – turning it into reality takes hard work. But as both women are no strangers to hard work, they quickly buckled down to the task. Vicky's people skills were put to good use as she trekked through the Cordilleras visiting four provinces, 18 municipalities, and 101 villages gathering information and collecting rice grains.

The Rice Terraces of the Cordilleras has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1995. Intricately carved by early settlers more than 2,000 years ago, this agricultural and engineering

wonder boasts of a comprehensive irrigation system that relies on water from mountain forests.

Indigenous tribes in the region have been growing traditional grains in their ancestral lands for decades. The lives of these agricultural societies continue to revolve around rice – from their creation beliefs, tribal rites and festivities, to everyday life. The grains are their connection to their ancestors and to their gods. Preserving their traditional grains thus sustains their culture and traditions.

THE CORDILLERA HEIRLOOM RICE PROJECT

As envisioned by Mary and Vicky, the project was going to be a "global model for empowering indigenous people to use their traditional knowledge and expertise in the development of sustainable and culturally appropriate eco-enterprises." It hopes to have indigenous cultures flourishing both culturally and economically, in harmony with the natural environment of the majestic terraces – and to build a bridge between the centuries-old tradition of growing rice and the economic opportunities of the modern age.

In 2004, when they first proposed the project, the

government said it could not be done – that native rice cannot be sold commercially and that the different tribes will not agree to work with each other. They persisted and put up the Eighth Wonder, Inc., the company that would take care of marketing and distribution of the grains. Mary brought samples of the rice grains to the U.S. and asked chefs to try them. She got very favorable feedback. By 2006 they had established the Rice Terraces Farmers Cooperative, so farmers can work as a group instead of as individuals.

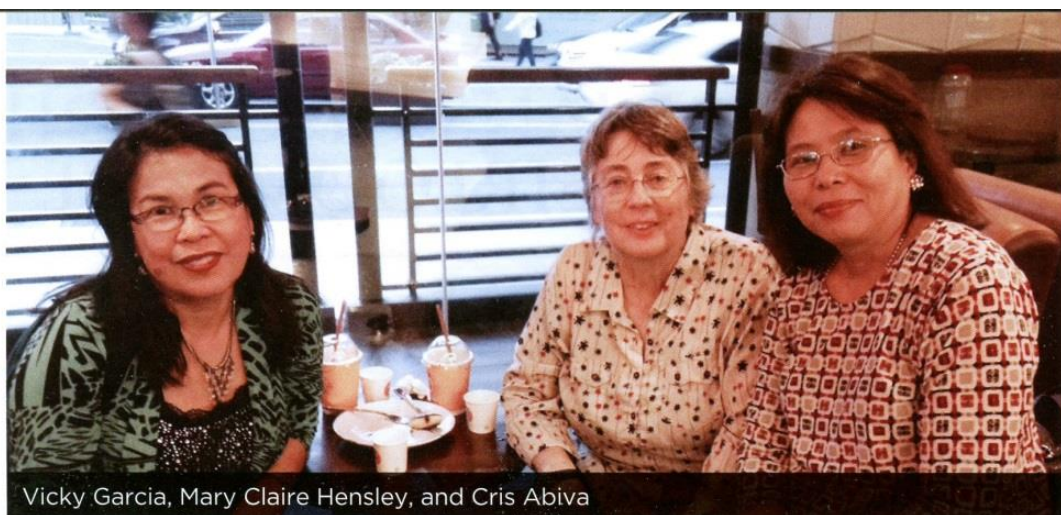
In 2008, the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project won the **Panibagong Paraan** grant competition, a biennial grant funded by a consortium of Filipino and international agencies that include, among others, the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Asia Foundation, and USAID. Aside from the cash prize of USD 25,000 (Php 1 million), the project was also honored with the highest recommendation by the panel of judges.

They decided to invest the money in post-harvest equipment that they had designed by a local engineer. It was a specially designed machine suitable for their grains, that could work with the limitations of electricity in the area. This

PhilRice or the Philippines Rice Research Institute

is an agency under the Department of Agriculture (DA) tasked to lead the strategic efforts in national rice science in order to improve rice production to attain self-sufficiency and food security; increase farm productivity and profitability; reduce hunger and poverty; and provide new knowledge and technology to farmers. The end goal is to transform the lives of people in agricultural communities and achieve inclusive growth.

RICE, Inc. is a non-stock, non-profit corporation with a mission to preserve heirloom rice and the culture of the rice producing community. RICE stands for Revitalizing Indigenous Cordilleran Entrepreneurs. It aims to revitalize the community by building farmer cooperatives and re-energize support for the rice terraces, and to support and conserve the traditional knowledge and agricultural techniques of the farming communities in the Cordilleras while promoting awareness of the region's natural and cultural resources. RICE also works to assist in increasing production of heirloom rice and to bring it to both domestic and international markets. The group conducts training and workshops for farmers so they can participate in the economic development of their area, and works to ensure greater participation of women in the economic endeavor.



Vicky Garcia, Mary Claire Hensley, and Cris Abiva

made grain processing more efficient.

About 80% of the grains are exported to the U.S. and Canada. The domestic market is fairly small at present but it is growing. Buyers include bulk buyers or grains-distributors, and food service institutions. Mary also does direct selling and online selling. It is, admittedly, a niche product at its price of about Php 120 per half-kilo, but its quality is unmatched.

The farmers have benefited from this project and have put their earnings to good use – for their children's education, medicine, for rehabilitation of their lands, and for repaying loans. The latter in particular is touching as it referred to those who had to 'pawn their terraces' in order to support their families. As their lands are now income-generating, migration of the youth has slowed, or at the very least, they come back to the terraces to help during harvest season.

Planting season is from November to December, while harvesting is from May

to July. Grain processing is in August, and by September the sacks of rice are shipped to the U.S. All the grains are pre-sold and the farmers are paid upon harvest.

THE WORK IS NEVER DONE

The work is not limited to production and selling of heirloom rice, as the pair continues to work on bringing awareness of their products. Being members of the Slow Food Movement, they applied the grains to the Ark of Taste. (See story on *Slow Food* on page 30.) An Italian coordinator came to check on the source of the grains in the Cordilleras and it took three years to get accepted. In 2010, three variants of heirloom grains from our famous terraces were "boarded on the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity's Ark of Taste": *Imbuucan* from Ifugao, *Omioni* from the Mt. Province, and *Chong-ak* from Kalinga. The Ark of Taste is an online catalogue of foods that are part of cultures and traditions, but are at risk of disappearing though they have real economic viability and commercial potential.

The pair is thankful for opportunities that have come their way. Once, while attending the Slow Food convention in Italy they met Romeo Ong, the CEO of Sunnywood Superfoods Corp., a big distributor of branded and whole grains. He was very supportive of Mary and Vicky's project and offered to buy Cordillera heirloom grains to sell thru his company. They are very grateful for his help, not just in purchasing grains, but also in helping them market to a wider audience; Cordillera heirloom rice variants are listed in Sunnywood's online store.

Mary and Vicky are also in contact with local chefs whom they encourage to try out heirloom rice. They cite Amy Besa and Romy Dorotan of Purple Yam for their consistent use of heirloom rice in their menu offerings and are thankful for the support and endorsement from chefs like Gaita Fores, Chele Gonzales, and Rolando Laudico. They are happy to say that more and more Filipinos are becoming interested in their products – and not just chefs.

What makes heirloom rice different? It is highly aromatic, versatile, very filling and nutritious, and the plant itself is naturally resistant to diseases. Mary says she just loves looking at the grains and remembering where they came from. She knows they have a very good product but she knows that is not enough. They have to be able to sell more so the farmers can earn more. There is only money to be made if there is a commercial volume and that is what they are aiming for. She says, "People will buy it for the story, but they won't buy it again if it is not good. It has to be exceptional."

What is the endgame?

It is for the farmers to take charge of the whole

process, from production to marketing. That when Mary and Vicky are ready to step down, they can take over. They are gradually weaning their lot – giving them wider roles and a bigger share in decision-making. The goal is to bring them up the value chain. The measure of success, they say, is if the farmers will be able to continue on by themselves. But this is not the case yet, as they cannot manage the exporting aspect of the business. Vicky says there are still a lot of hurdles for them to overcome.

PRESERVING AN AGRICULTURAL LEGACY

Through the work of Mary Claire Hensley and Vicky Garcia, the Heirloom Rice Project is now one of

the initiatives under the Food Staples Sufficiency Program (FSSP) of the DA, with support from IRRI and PhilRice. It aims to "enhance the productivity and enrich the legacy of heirloom or traditional rice through empowered communities in unfavorable rice-based ecosystems." The conservation of heirloom or traditional grains is important, not just in terms of preserving the culture of indigenous people and highlighting the legacy of their ancestors, but also in maintaining the ecological balance or unique biodiversity of an area.

There is an existing market for this premium rice, and that market is steadily growing both here and abroad. In 2012, the

Philippines' total shipment of heirloom rice to the U.S. was valued at Php 1.3 million. In 2013, the DA sent off to the U.S. 15 metric tons of organic heirloom rice that included *Mina-angan* from Banaue, *Hungduan* from Ifugao, and *Ulikan* from Kalinga – this was put together by the Rice Terraces Farmers Cooperative and Eighth Wonder, Inc. DA Secretary Proceso Alcala was quoted as saying this was a milestone in the government's efforts to expand markets for premium rice varieties. Creating more demand will empower the Cordillera farmer to continue his legacy while also securing a strong future for his family and his people.

• Cris C. Abiva

THE ANTIQUE RICE TERRACES

Deep within the lush landscape of San Remigio in Antique lies the hidden treasure of the Iraynon-Bukidnon, the 200-year old well-preserved **Taramnan Kang Antique** – what has now been christened the "Antique Rice Terraces."

Emmanuel Lerona, a U.P. Visayas instructor, was browsing thru Google Earth when he spotted what seemed like rice paddies in a mountainous area. He thought they resembled rice terraces. It was in fact

a 600-hectare rice field carved from the mountains, very much like the famous Banaue Rice Terraces. To reach the area, one has to cross five mountains and walk 18 kilometers from the town of San Remigio. Barangay General Fullon is home to these terraces nestled between two waterfalls that are the sources of irrigation.

With a population of less than 800, the indigenous community here harvests three times a year and can produce 36,000 sacks of rice.

It is a typical agricultural community that stores its rice seeds for cultivation. This rice is mostly grown for consumption; selling has not been a viable option as it is difficult to bring the rice to the lowlands. After the harvest, from December to February, they shift to planting tobacco. More accessible rice terraces can be found two towns away in Laua-an.

The Rice Terraces of the Philippine Cordilleras was established as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995,

the first ever property to be included in the cultural landscape category. It includes five terraces, namely Batad, Bangaan, Hungduan, Mayoyao Central, and Nagacadan, all in Ifugao. They are believed to be over 2,000 years old. •

