



Domoguen: A bowl of heirloom rice

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The rice grown in the rice terraces of the Cordillera were once generally and collectively known as traditional rice. It did not ring a distinct name. Any rice, anywhere, once introduced to a place and used by the local folks becomes part of those ultimately called traditional. And most often, traditional commodities become passé. The need for new and “better varieties” in due time leaves these to the dustbin of “has been(s).”

That has been the way in many places where rice is grown. The list of rice varieties developed in the Philippines is long. The list and their descriptions could come in volumes of books. Only the recent and new varieties (high yielding varieties) are in current use. Thanks to the accompanying person-to-person and multi-media promotions, the search for new varieties to replace the traditional has been(s) goes on. That is the business for modern rice that even engages in changing the true nature and character of this staple crop.

Traditional Cordillera did not entirely follow this course in the growing of rice varieties in the terraced paddies. Our highland farmers adopted new varieties over the years but unlike the lowlands, the adopted rice soon became part of the resident home crops. Some retained their old varietal names like Intan, Taiwan, California and others. Some may have been given new names according to how well these were adopted and performed to the farmer’s expectations.

In recent times, some learned folks called our traditionally grown rice varieties, native rice. The name readily clicked but what does native rice mean besides being native. Like traditional rice, it lacks identity as a collective name associated to the place. All rices can become native this way and native rice is to be found all over the planet where rice is planted as a staple food. How about Cordillera heritage rice? The idea is still circulated around. It directly speaks to me about something that is inherited from the past, like industries and in relation to food, yes we have a lot that we can call as heritage food. Still my traditional understanding of the term refers more to biological inheritance and common natural resources and culture. Heritage rice? Maybe yes. But it can open a lot of questions and debatable answers. We can readily say that camote or sweet potato is an original and heritage food of our ancestors. The crop is not native to the Philippines.

Finally, we got heirloom rice, courtesy of Eighth Wonder, Inc., a U.S. based Non-Government Organization (NGO) engaged in the development and promotion of the rice terraces of the Cordillera, its heirloom rice varieties and the people’s culture and traditions of producing it. The NGO does not deal with traditional and heritage rice that are grown outside of the terraces. On top of that, its production must also be related to the protection and preservation of watersheds.

Partly, that is how Eighth Wonder, Inc. processed the characteristic of our heirloom rice. I synthesize this part to focus one part of this enterprise. I hope it will give a glimpse of what the name “heirloom rice” means to this pioneering global enterprise for the Philippines and the Cordillera specifically at this stage. I go back in time, when Eighth Wonder, Inc. and Rice, Inc. its local NGO counterpart were still starting their operation to export Cordillera heirloom rice to the USA. Wow, the export initiative was exciting news and that impression got across to Mary Hensley, President of Eighth Wonder, Inc. when I interviewed her about this “business.” She let my impressions pass even as she tried to impress me that what she wanted to do was “share a bowl of Cordillera heirloom rice to the USA and the west.”

Export, was how it came to me and to many of us. We failed somehow to understand what the business was about besides making Eighth Wonder Inc. and Rice, Inc. rich at the expense of our farmers. Well, I met Mary Hensley and Vicky Garcia, Executive Director of Rice, Inc in Tabuk City last week. “Eight years gone and next year will be my ninth,” exclaimed Vicky. Are they rich already? Obviously not, but still very much engaged in the business of “sharing a bowl of Cordillera heirloom rice to the west.” They accomplished much and we can count these more as our blessings, not theirs. They put the Cordillera, its rice terraces and heirloom rice prominently in the centers of civilization around the globe. They displayed the rice in the White House, had its occupants taste the recipes from heirloom rice, discussed where it came from and informed White House and visitors alike about the farmers who grow it.

Yes, about the recipes, there are several aside from its being cooked as plain rice. I have seen more than 10 developed by Mary and top leading chefs in the USA. It promoted Filipino and other recipes using heirloom rice. The published views on heirloom rice and the recipes speak well about us, the rice terraces and how well we are preserving our forest. That is part of the character of the rice as passed on through the generations. Nobody can exactly lay claim to a rice variety as a genetic property except the scientist and their institutions whose work was to tinker and invest money in this kind of business. They change the nature of the rice and still call it quality rice. As heirloom rice, Mary and Vicky insist on natural rice that was passed on from generation to generation. It was not a simple job for them to have Unoy, Tinawon and Ominio rice varieties from the Cordillera listed in the World’s Arc of Taste and associate its identity and ownership to the people who grow it and the place that these varieties come from. That also partly branded Cordillera heirloom rice and took some rigorous documentation and research work to do that.

The branding and characterization of heirloom rice even if it was listed in the World Arc of Taste matches international standards as good natural food in its production and processing. In this area, the farmers, Eighth Wonder, Inc and Rice Inc., follow a very strict discipline of maintaining acceptable international standards. It was quite difficult, if not impossible for many farmer-participants to follow through the standard. But many stayed with their part of the bargain and are leaving a legacy of good practices in this kind of venture to their children. In Kalinga, the children who grew up with the business are about to take over where their parents were willing to teach and turn over the work to them, In due time, the whole business is theirs to run. There are farmers in Mountain Province and Ifugao, doing the same thing, reported Vicky.

In its early years, many assumed that this was just a matter of collecting the produce and shipping it abroad. Aside from giving heirloom rice its due reward, the first to do it, the whole lot of production and packaging standards will crumble without Rice, Inc. following through land transportation, fumigation and shipping

protocols for this kind of food to its intended consumers. Local business, as we have known, abused the price and sell Cordillera rice equal to its export price, as if they also do what is necessary with having the rice come to the consumers in their proper production, shipping and storage standards. For Rice Inc. and Eighth Wonder Inc., they invested much with their farmers in organizing and training them locally and abroad. A number of them joined free trade activities in Italy. On production, some of them were sent to India for a month to train on sustainable and organic rice production.

This year, the Eighth Wonder Inc. will export 28 tons of heirloom rice, targeting to share some to Canada. The Department of Agriculture (DA), acknowledging the established expertise and experience of this pioneering enterprise is tapping both NGOs to export an additional 26 tons to its market abroad under its name and in behalf of the local farmers. Even with that additional tonnage, it is still “a bowl of rice,” unless we can manage to export some 200 tons to realize significant benefits for all stakeholders. That is how I was oriented about this business as a profitable venture some two years back. Definitely, we are not yet ready to talk business with Mary Hensley and Vicky. But time is running out. I hope that with the DA’s entry at this stage, things will look brighter for all stakeholders in the coming years. -30-

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