

# Increase heirloom rice consumption, Filipinos urged

Traditional rice varieties finding more lucrative markets abroad

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BAGUIO CITY—The government should help convince more Filipinos to eat indigenous heirloom rice to popularize the commodity, according to advocates of traditional rice varieties.

Local folk are the best promoters of indigenous rice, which is being promoted as a high-value export product, said Chit Juan, treasurer of the Peace and [Equity](#) Foundation (PEF).

The PEF has embarked on projects aimed at sustaining farming practices that can withstand [extreme weather](#) conditions. Juan said teaching the average household to eat traditional rice [improves](#) the domestic market for organic heirloom grains. This, she said, makes Filipinos the best promoters of the variety when foreign tourists come and enjoy local cuisine.

“They can’t push the product if they have not even tasted it,” she said last week at the Good News Kapihan, a roundtable conference which tours the country to promote entrepreneurial programs like traditional organic products. But Juan and several industry [experts](#) acknowledged that heirloom rice was still more expensive than rice products available in local markets.

The [industry’s](#) job today is to convince people to pay for it, they said.

Since 2005, indigenous rice produced using traditional methods has been considered the most unique and competitive grain commodity of the country, said Hazel Alfon, who heads the Social and Agro-Industrial Ventures unit of the Nueva Ecija-based Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice).

Last month, the Department of Agriculture declared that the country’s rice producers have tripled their target for traditional rice exports, after producers sent up to 300 metric tons of indigenous rice varieties to markets like the United States and the Middle East.

The first traditional rice [stocks](#) produced by Cordillera farmers were bought in 2005 by United States-based Eighth Wonder, a grains importer created by former Peace Corps volunteer Mary Hensley. The transactions were facilitated by Rice Inc. (Revitalize Indigenous Cordillera Entrepreneurs), which organized the farmers and introduced quality control mechanisms.

But some of the upland rice producers still fail to fulfill demand quotas, said Grace Baluyan, Kalinga provincial director of the Department of Trade and Industry. Citing a 2005 study she conducted in Ifugao, Alfon, said there were families who expressed reservations about selling their indigenous produce.

Mayette Paragas, chair of the Cordillera Network of Nongovernment Organizations and Peoples Organizations (CordNet), said civil society has been concerned about stories where farming families sell their indigenous rice so they could buy cheaper lowland commercial rice to feed their families. Baluyan said Ifugao farmers and their families consume 70 percent of their rice crops, and reserve the rest for exports or as products they sell in the local markets.

In the provinces of Kalinga and Mt. Province, farming households reserve 10 percent for the markets and consume the rest of the year’s produce, she said. “In some Cordillera villages, there is something wrong if you are caught buying lowland rice,” she said.

She said heirloom rice was among the three primary enterprises that government line agencies have agreed to promote. Coffee and tourism are the other two enterprises. The PEF is venturing into social projects aimed at improving heirloom rice production, said Roberto Calingo, PEF executive director, adding that the foundation would focus on issues that impact on production efficiency.

Danilo Daguio, Cordillera assistant director of the Department of Agriculture, said 26,667 hectares of Cordillera farmland had been devoted to indigenous rice production, but 25 percent of these farms had either been abandoned or damaged and had not been repaired.