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Helping lives, preserving tradition grain by grain

Sunnywood and Eighth Wonder rally for development in the Cordilleras

The Cordillera terrace region is a paradox. Spanning two millennia, its rich history and ingenuity is a great source of pride for the country. Still, municipalities in the region remain third class and its people shortchanged in terms of opportunities for development.

Growing rice in the terraces is considered a treasured art for its inhabitants. Harvests from Cordillera's lush soils are a cut above the rest with their organic nature and unique taste. Yet despite their notability, lack of support and exposure serve as roadblocks for the preservation of the terraces and advancement of its farmers.

“We saw an opportunity to help,” says Romeo Ong, CEO of Sunnywood Superfoods Corp.

A trailblazer in the distribution of branded and healthy whole grain rice from various parts of the country, Sunnywood saw the challenge and decided to rise to it. In addition to just raising awareness about local and traditional rice, however, the distributor also focused in extending the blessings to the farmers.

When asked about his reason behind this thrust, Mr. Ong adds, “For us, we wanted to go beyond just business. We saw this opportunity 17 years ago when we worked with farmer-producers of organically grown, unpolished rice looking for a market.”

He continues, “We took this challenge and were fortunate enough to increase appreciation for healthy rice products, while providing a steady source of income to the producers and cooperatives.”

After meeting at a conference in Italy, the rice distributor struck a partnership with the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project to further extend its efforts.

Saving a heritage

Project founders Mary Hensley and Vicky Garcia dream of great things. A former Peace Corp volunteer and an experienced program planner and community organizer, the pair has built together a sustainable environment for farmers over the years.

Mary recalls how her story all started back in 1999 when she read about the collapse of the terraces in the country. She narrated: “It just broke my heart to think that in my lifetime, what

was a very strong and vibrant culture was going to disappear. One of my memories of being a Peace Corps volunteer was for three times a day, for two years, I ate the most wonderful rice in the world.“

After 30 years of being away, she returned to the Philippines and founded the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project with Vicky.

The perfect partnership

The Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project had one major hurdle: in order to make the initiative flourish, they needed to market the product on a wider scale. And this is where the partnership with Sunnywood was born.

Vicky shares, “Before we came in, the farmers were simply selling rice to neighboring municipalities. For them it’s enough; but we thought, why not help them gain more than just sustainable livelihood? Because with this quality of rice, they can definitely grow.”

By buying the heirloom rice for higher price margins, farmers in *barangays* in the Cordilleras have been able to build a daycare center, purchase a generator, and a community jeepney. Since the project’s inception, the pan-Cordilleran Rice Terraces Farmers’ Cooperative has consolidated 142 metric tonnes of native rice for commercial sales which totals P8,634,670 in direct payment to farmers.

The art of rice

Rice varieties from the project are cultivated using the traditional way of farming passed down through generations. The rice stalks, which are taller than the lowland varieties, are grown organically and handpicked individually during harvest. Once they are sent to distributors, they are assessed critically before the packaging to ensure their quality.

Romeo finishes, “We want to help in three ways: first, we market the rice to a wider audience; second, we help sustain the tradition and heritage of these communities; and third, we help them flourish as individuals and as a community.”