

Heirloom Rice, (It's) Nice to Eat You!

In Los Baños, we learn about Filipino farmers and IRRI scientists working together to bring traditional rice varieties to our dining tables

Heirloom rice is unpolished colored rice with only the husk removed. Generally kept intact, the bran or outermost layer of the grain gives rice its different pigments such as black, red, brown or purple. During our Los Baños tour, we visited the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) to learn more about these naturally pigmented rice varieties that are the focus of the Heirloom Rice Project, launched in March 2014 as an initiative under the Food Staples Sufficiency Program of the Philippine Department of Agriculture (DA), and supported by various agencies of DA and IRRI.

According to IRRI social scientist Dr. Digna Manzanilla, this wide-ranging undertaking concentrates on "heirloom" or rice varieties handed down several generations through family members and grown by small landholders on their ancestral farms. Though the rice varieties also include some from Mindanao (i.e. Arakan Valley Complex and Lake Sebu in Cotabato), the project's focus on the Cordillera Administrative Region (specifically, Kalinga, Ifugao, Mountain Province and Benguet) also aims to preserve the high elevation terraces surrounding Banaue,

A HEALTHIER RICE
High in fiber, packed with vitamins, nutrients and antioxidants, and low in glycemic index

Ifugao, a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site. At present, our scientists are working on 41 varieties (with over 70 variants identified under these varieties) in collaboration with the Rice Terraces Farmers Cooperative of over 900 members, of which 80% are women. According to IRRI plant pathologist Dr. Casiana Vera Cruz, the goal is to help farmers to produce higher seed quality and purity in greater quantity.

Thankfully, these rice varieties aren't just found in upland farms or in the IRRI lab. You can buy select varieties—

sold as "heirloom" or colored rice (i.e., red, black, brown, violet/purple)—in leading supermarkets and through various suppliers at an average P110 for 500 grams.

So let's add color to our dining tables by buying heirloom rice and savoring every precious grain. Because with every spoonful, we help farmers to produce more, preserve indigenous cultural heritage and sustain fragile agricultural eco-systems, while enjoying the health benefits of this deliciously world-class breed of Pinoy rice! ■





The **chor-chor-os** whole-grain variety has a more neutral taste than the other darker colored heirloom rice, which makes the transition from white rice to colored rice easier. Not too sticky in between the brown-ish grains, it goes well with our standard homecooked ulam (viand), from saucy adobo, ginisang gulay (sautéed vegetables) to soupy chicken tinola. Because of its good absorption property, chor-chor-os can be used with risotto, too!



Ominio, a medium-grain variety that is deep violet or black in color smells somewhat like *suman*, is a little firm and slippery when cooked, and kind of pops when chewed. We recommend it with curry or dishes with coconut milk. The glutinous violet rice could be your new alternative for sticky desserts or native kakanin. But if you're making paella, Ifugao tinawon might work for you!



Ingudpul, the whole grain red rice variety, is slightly sweet and earthy with a hint of corn and could be sticky when cooked. Try it with grilled fish or steak. According to Dalcielo chef Marissa de Jesus, it should go well with shiitake and a little ginger.



LEARN ABOUT RICE
The International Rice Genebank, a calamity-proof facility, holds the biggest collection of rice "accessions" from all over the globe, which currently includes 124,000 modern and traditional varieties and wild relatives of rice.

The Heirloom Rice Project is about market and product development, alongside maintaining biodiversity in the region to encourage farmers to continue growing these rice varieties, adding value to every step, from varietal development to market linkages which will benefit farmers in the long term. To learn more, visit irri.org or email info@irri.org

HOW TO COOK HEIRLOOM RICE

Heirloom rice has exceptional cooking quality, flavor, aroma, texture and color. According to Dr. Rosa Paula Cuevas, the Grain Quality Evaluation Specialist at IRRI, cooking it is a matter of taste and preference. Rice-to-water ratio depends on if the rice is newly harvested or milled, or aged (*loon*). For example, *chor-chor-os* cooked at one cup of rice to two cups water ratio produces a firm and *buhoghog* (loose) texture. Adding another cup of water makes the rice puff up bigger and much softer.

I have achieved the fluffy texture I like with my rice cooker at 1:3 ratio on "congee" setting. Place your finger on top of the steamed rice and when the grains do not stick to your skin anymore, keep the pot covered, unplug the cooker (or turn off the stove) and let the residual heat complete the cooking process. This way the rice does not harden on the bottom of the pot. When thoroughly cooked, the rice does not spoil quickly even when left unrefrigerated in this weather.

Here's a tip: cook heirloom rice mixed with your favorite white rice to enjoy the best of both worlds!

Heirloom rice varieties are available at leading supermarkets like Ruston's, Robinsons and Save More. Or visit www.sunnywoodrice.com for home delivery or wholesale orders.