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TRI FIELD NOTES: KEEPING THE SPIRIT OF THE RICE

August 10, 2015 · by [Erin Beasley](#) · in [Tropical Resources Institute \(TRI\)](#)

By Adrien Salazar, 2015 TRI Fellow in Philippines

Glorieta Mall, Makati City, Metro Manila. I find myself on the ground floor of the Glorieta 5 mall in Makati City, Philippines, standing at a booth hawking samples of three kinds of heirloom rice to strangers—*Ifugao Diket*, a brownish-red sticky rice from Ifugao Province, *Tinawon*, an aromatic fluffy white rice also from Ifugao, and *Ominio*, a hearty black rice from Mountain Province. Most of the people who come to the booth have never tried this rice before. “These are heirloom rices from the world heritage rice terraces of the Cordilleras,” my companions—all from the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI)—say to the bloggers, chefs, and foodies who come to taste these special grains.



We are at the *Bellysima* food festival this Philippine Independence Day weekend. We are promoting a product that most Filipinos are unfamiliar with and have never tried, but which has been eaten as a staple food by indigenous peoples in the Cordillera mountains for hundreds of years. Our participation in this event is part of a multi-component research program to scientifically characterize these rice varieties, build the capacity of the farmers who grow them, and develop market linkages that may enhance livelihood opportunities of growing heirloom rice.

I find myself a salesman, talking about the texture, aroma, and flavor of rice that comes from generations of seed selection and the micro-climates in the northern Cordillera Mountains of the Philippines. A young chef comes to the table and tastes *Ominio* and tells us that the rice has its own unique flavor, and would be paired best with something acidic like dried cranberries, to complement but not drown out its hearty flavor. By the second day of the festival, nearly all the bags of packaged rice have been sold.



Hungduan, Ifugao. My biggest ethnographic faux pas so far is that I don't bring any alcohol to drink with the *mumbaki* when my assistant, Eve, and I come to visit him. We arrive at the house of the traditional priest in a small clearing on the side of the mountain to find the man sharpening some blacksmith tools. During our interview he tells us about the traditional rituals of the rice production cycle. He is one of the few remaining *mumbaki* who hold the knowledge of the old ways.

During a *baki*, or ritual, the family who called the *mumbaki* will offer chickens or pigs to be slaughtered. During the offering, the *mumbaki* will speak the prayers relevant to the specific ritual, then the offerings are cooked and for all to eat. Eve prompts the man to explain to me in English what a prayer might involve—many of the older people in this area are familiar enough with English because they were taught as children by American colonists in the early 20th century. He tells me a prayer was translated by an American into "Higgillidy-piggillidy my red hen, said God, a big one for you and a big one for Me. Higgillidy-piggillidy my red hen, said God to His people on earth." He laughs, and Eve says, "That's just a joke. That's not what he will pray."



When we finish the interview, another man who has come to ask for the *mumbaki* to conduct a ritual at his house scolds us for not bringing any rice wine, beer, or any alcohol to drink. It is what must be done when the *mumbaki* talks about these things, "Otherwise he will not say all." We apologize. "Even I didn't know you have to do that," Eve tells me.

Purple Yam, Malate, Metro Manila. I sit in the ancestral home of Amy Besa, restaurateur who owns Purple Yam in Brooklyn, New York. I am eating some *nipa*- and *pandan*- flavored ice cream she made, with a topping of cacao nibs. Here in Malate, she has converted her family

dining room into a high-end eatery also called Purple Yam, where she serves prix fixe meals of Filipino dishes at up to \$55 (US) per person. She has served heirloom rice in her New York restaurants for many years.



"I want to convince people that Filipino food tastes good, to show them that we can accomplish excellence without compromising. That our food can be locally-sourced, and that healthy food is delicious."

I ask her what the value of heirloom rice is and she says emphatically, "I think we will be impoverished as a nation without our heirloom rice. In the U.S., when I am asked to show people what Filipino food is, I show the rice. Because our ancestors selected these rice varieties in domestication based on their preference. Heirloom grains are a reflection of that. We have these grains because they liked them. That is our palate. That is the palate of our forefathers."

We talk about the cottage industry of artisanal products that needs to be developed in the Philippines for high quality, locally sourced ingredients to become popularized globally. I scoop myself another serving of ice cream made of syrup from grasses and topped with cacao from Davao. It is absolutely delicious.

Hungduan, Ifugao. Manang Ester Himiwat, pictured here during our interview, is a farmer-scientist. Her fields are mixed with Mina-angan heirloom red rice and other varieties. She is constantly moving, feeding her chickens and pigs, testing her rice mill, ordering some young men to carry sacks of rice. In her home, she tells me that she has been testing methods like "*synchronized rice intensification*" and producing fertilizer with *indigenous micro-organisms* using on-site organic matter. She says she is conducting some studies on her land to test how these methods affect her rice crop.



She has been exporting her heirloom rice for about five years. "I wasn't a member before, but I wanted to teach farmers not to degrade the soil, to apply organic fertilizer. You cannot add to what our forefathers have built." Manang Ester's work represents the challenges of improving heirloom rice farming while conserving the traditions inherent in these centuries-old rice terraces.

Here, heirloom rice is produced organically. This means that people continue to use similar methods for generations. The biggest challenge of growing rice in these cooler highland climates is low yields. The only way to grow more is to have more land in rice production.

Some technology, however, like organic fertilizers and improved seed selection can increase yields. These are the kinds of technology that IRRI is interested in sharing with farmers, but farmers don't adopt so easily. A staff member in the Department of Agriculture told me, "For farmers here to adopt something you have to tell it to them three times: the first time they don't believe you, the second time they think maybe your right so they try it, and the third time you remind them to keep doing it because it's very easy for farmers to stop a new practice for any reason."

In this respect, Manang Ester is an innovator and early adopter. She shows me her lot of chickens, ducks and pigs. She tells me that she bought Chinese ducks because the native ducks were insufficient at eating the *kohol* or golden apple snail, a common pest in the rice fields. Now the ducks eat all the snails and there is not enough for them to eat. She uses manure from her chickens and pigs to build compost that she will use on her fields when it comes time to plant.

She says, "We produce this rice organically. We are helping save the environment. Because we are doing these activities, people should understand the higher price."

Barlig, Mountain Province. I am walking in the rice terraces that scale the river valley walls and my guides Izzy and Steph tell me that there is a traditional teaching that if you are carrying a basket of rice home from the harvest, you must not drop it, or else the spirit of the rice will go away, and next season you will have a bad harvest.



In my short time in the Cordillera, I have seen the spirit of the rice at work. It is harvest season, and everyone is in motion. Neighbors and family are called to help harvest. Young men carry sacks of rice bundles along the rice terrace walls. Farmers lay out grains to dry in the sun.

Here farmers grow their traditional rice mostly to eat at home, for their families. To them it is ordinary rice. This rice, however, has shaped the landscape into vast earth works. Agro-ecological systems have evolved with local customs and traditions that continue to change and transform today.

These rice varieties are part of the heritage of humanity. Their flavors are unique, the nutritional quality high, and their socio-cultural history deep. It is by this rice that these terraces were built and, as farmers continuing heirloom rice production hope, that the terraces may be preserved for generations to come.



“TRI Field Notes” share the stories of TRI Fellows as they conduct independent summer research throughout the tropics. The Tropical Resources Institute (TRI) is a center at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. For more information on research and fellowships visit <http://environment.yale.edu/tri/>