

## MY HEIRLOOM RICE EXPERIENCE

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Many of us have food allergies with wheat, which prompt us to choose gluten free food. A gluten free food that is a staple especially in Asian countries, obviously or not, is rice. I've become more aware of the vast varieties of grain from my travels to Bhutan, Laos, and Central America, and would like to introduce our guest writer for this month, Amy Dorotan of [Purple Yam](#). I was in a panel discussion at the [Asia Society](#) several years ago with a few Asian food experts, where we discussed and learned more about the heritage rice that Amy Dorotan and her husband Romy serve in their Brooklyn, NY restaurants, and she will share with us her insight and story here:



Classic Filipino dish, stuffed squid with heritage rice.  
Photo by [Amy Besa](#)

The Cordilleras are a group of provinces in Northern Luzon situated along the Cordillera mountain range: Benguet, Ifugao, Mountain Province, Kalinga, Apayao and Abra. All of these grow rice on rice terraces built on mountain terrain. The history of these rice terraces is in question and nobody really knows how old they are. They were built without machinery, animals or slaves and instead by mutual cooperation. Irrigation was designed by early Filipinos that reflect an engineering feat of harnessing mountain water that flowed from the top that would slowly find its way down to the terraces.

We have been using Cordillera heirloom rice in our New York City restaurants since 2006 when Eighth Wonder (owned and run by Mary Hensley) started importing these rice grain varieties in to the United States. We still order 4 varieties regularly: Tinawon (meaning the rice is only harvested "once a year"), Ulikan Red, Unoy and the glutinous Purple Diket. Getting to know each rice variety is not unlike getting to know a person because each variety has its own size, shape, cooking times and methods, aromas, textures and flavors.



If you are used to eating polished white rice, shifting to the much healthier organic heirloom variety can be a challenge. Commercial white rice can be sweet like candy like the Thai Jasmine and Vietnamese varieties or semi glutinous Japanese rice that is reminiscent of sushi rice. All are delicious because our palates have learned to savor all these sumptuous flavorful rice that go well with our Asian dishes that can be salty, sour, bitter, soupy, full of flavor packed sauces often accompanied by a varied array of dips and condiments.

At first, we were purists. Let us not interfere with each rice variety's flavor profile and let the customer appreciate each one. And we also decided to put them separately on the menu for people to order. We ended up throwing out a lot of rice at the end of the day because in the hurried pace of a full service restaurant with dozens of people coming and going, the waitstaff did not have time to explain and promote the rice. And since people assume that rice will be a part of our dishes anyway, nobody bothered to order the heirloom rice. So we began integrating the rice into the dishes like adobo and that was more effective. Actress like Rachel Weisz would call up for delivery to their SoHo apartment ordering chicken adobo emphasizing that she wanted heirloom rice with it.

When we closed Cendrillon in SoHo and re-opened as Purple Yam in Brooklyn in 2009, we began to integrate the heirloom rice into more dishes such as the Bibimbap, seafood paella and using the purple diket for our bibingka (rice cake) instead of the Japanese Nishiki rice which we normally use. During special occasions, Chef Romy Dorotan would use heirloom rice for our champorado, the Filipino rice version of the Mexican chocolate atole porridge. The uses for heirloom rice are endless, but one must carefully study how each grain cooks with the proper amount of water (pre soaking times if needed) and which dishes to pair them with.



Photo by Mary Hensley, a former US Peace Corps volunteer, who for thirty years remembered the wonderful aroma of this rice while it was cooking. She runs the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project.

In 2014, we opened up Purple Yam Malate in my childhood home in a very old district in Manila. Naturally, this was a great opportunity to introduce both Filipino and non-Filipino diners in the Philippines to our native nice varieties grown and harvested not too far from where they live. It is ironic that more people in New York and the tri-state area have tasted and eaten these native rice varieties than Filipinos in the Philippines.

At present, our vegetable fried heirloom rice dishes are the highlight of our degustation. People finish it up or bring home leftovers. It was a very easy and delicious solution to a complex problem. Now people ask more questions about the rice, where to get the rice and how to cook each variety at home. At this point, it is so much easier to bring home the point that eating organic heirloom rice is so much healthier. We explain that the bran is still intact thereby retaining all the vitamins and nutrients of the rice. What heirloom really means: that these rice varieties are owned by a family or a community and that these have been passed down from one generation to the next. What we are eating today are basically the same set of DNA that our forefathers ate. These rice varieties are what we call in Tagalog, "ang sariling atin" or food that was always ours.