Lifestyle

Philippines' 300 heirloom rice varieties and their Hong Kong fans eager to serve them to diners

Biodynamic and organic rice varieties are more expensive than the polished grains most of us eat, but their intense flavours and chewy textures are increasingly drawing chefs and consumers in the Philippines and overseas

The Philippines

Bernice Chan
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Grains from an International Rice Research Institute paddy field in Laguna, south of Manila. Photo: AFP

At Kin's Kitchen in Hong Kong, chef and owner Lau Chun offers several types of rice with his Cantonese dishes, including grains from Taiwan and Japan. He's eager to serve rice from the Philippines – if only he could get it.

"The grains are not polished, so they have a chewy texture and more intense flavour, very nutty," he says of the black, brown and red Philippine rice he's tasted. Fellow chef Margarita Fores had given him samples to try and now Lau is keen to add them to the "rice menu", or to use them as stuffing for some traditional dishes.

Chef Lau Chun at his restaurant Kin's Kitchen, in Wan Chai. Photo: Antony Dickson

"The rice I've tried is biodynamic and while it is more expensive, I think it's part of the diners' education to understand the true cost of food," he says.

Lau's desire to use Philippine rice in Hong Kong is good news for Bernadette Romulo Puyat. She is undersecretary of the Philippine Department of Agriculture and regularly visits farmers to promote best practice in rice growing and cultivation.

She also collects rice seeds to distribute in the aftermath of typhoons, and helps collect samples of heirloom varieties for the International Rice Research Institute, which has its headquarters in the Philippines.

"We have over 300 varieties of heirloom rice that are indigenous to the Philippines," she says during Madrid Fusion Manila, an annual food trade show that was held in April. "The heirloom rice is organic and takes about nine months to grow on rice terraces." While rice is the number one crop grown in the Philippines, Puyat says the output only covers 90% of the country's consumption, with the remainder imported from Thailand and Vietnam.

Cordillera heirloom rice from the Philippines.

Rice is served with every meal, and carbohydrate alternatives, including noodles, aren't considered even a close substitute. Many Philippine dishes are strongly flavoured with ingredients such as soy sauce, fish sauce and vinegar, and these sauces are best soaked up by rice.

Puyat cites 2015 government consumption figures of 112.26kg of rice per capita – more than 2.6 times the amount consumed in Hong Kong, at 43kg in 2015 and 2016.

Heirloom rice makes up less than five per cent of total rice production in the Philippines, primarily because its price deters consumers and also because growing it is labour intensive.

"Only in the past few years has there been an interest in heirloom and organic rice," Puyat says. "But if we don't eat it, heirloom rice will disappear."

Rice terraces at Hapao, Banaue, a Unesco World Heritage site in northern Luzon in the Philippines. The country grows only 90 per cent of the rice it needs, and heirloom varieties make up just 5 per cent of the crop. Photo; Alamy

Madrid Fusion Manila, now in its third year, showcases Philippine ingredients for local and international chefs.

“In the first year, we showed foreign chefs that we have good quality food. At first local chefs weren’t interested in local ingredients, but then they realised that they are good quality and now they want to meet the farmers,” Puyat says. Consumer interest is spurring farmers to continue growing and harvesting this kind of rice.

Varieties of heirloom rice on show at the Department of Agriculture’s booth at Madrid Fusion Manila.

Photo: Bernice Chan

The Agriculture Department stall displays more than 40 small glass jars of different kinds of rice, in various shades of beige, red, brown and black.

There's lantiko, grown in a mountainous area and described as a red short grain, kabal from Benguet that looks like brown whole flaxseed, the black-grained ominio from the mountains, and innawi from Ifugao, a corn-coloured short grain rice.

The young chefs at forefront of a Philippine food revolution, and why you'll be hearing a lot more about country's cuisine

To promote locally grown varieties, Puyat gives samples to chefs to taste and experiment with, hoping they will place big orders.

Award-winning chef Margarita Fores.

Chefs such as Margarita Fores, named Asia's Best Female Chef in 2016 by Asia's 50 Best Restaurants, is grateful to the agriculture official for raising awareness of indigenous rice among local chefs. "It helps create a market for farmers and encourages the younger generation to choose farming," she says.

Fores, chef and owner of such restaurants as Grace Park, Cibo and Café Bola, says she uses black rice in her cooking, and says it is much healthier than polished rice.

"It has an earthy, nutty flavour and it can be used in modern ways to make it crispy, a puff, wafer, crackers, and you can ferment it to make the flavours more complex," she says. She recently cooked for a special dinner for Christie's clients in New York, where she used black rice that she made into a cracker topped with kinilaw, a Philippine indigenous dish similar to ceviche.

Jordy Navarra, chef and owner of Toyo Eatery in Manila.

Another young chef experimenting with rice is Jordy Navarra of Toyo Eatery, who uses local ingredients to cook traditional Philippine dishes in creative ways. One is called lugaw, a traditional congee dish usually served for breakfast that's on a tasting menu at his restaurant. Navarra uses short-grain rice that he flavours with crab roe and burnt kalabaza, or squash, and dresses with coconut vinegar.

"Before, rice production was more about quantity than quality," says the 31-year-old, who did a year-long stint at Alvin Leung's three-Michelin-star Bo Innovation in Hong Kong. "But in the past five years, the quality of the rice has improved a lot."

At trendy restaurant Hey Handsome, chef Nicco Santos also says if it weren't for Puyat, he wouldn't be as interested in local rice.

"It was eye-opening because I never thought there were so many varieties of rice in the Philippines. It's way too many. I try to taste as many as I can," the 32-year-old says. "Heirloom rice can be more expensive, but it's more rewarding because you know how it's grown and where it's from."

http://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/article/2096460/philippines-300-heirloom-rice-varieties-and-their-hong-kong-fans-eager

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Bernice Chan is a senior writer on the Culture desk. She samples more than her share of dishes around Hong Kong and writes about people and issues that make an impact on the city.

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