

Corn rice: Healthier, safer, not 'fake rice'

A University of the Philippines professor and scientist urges the public not to eat the controversial 'fake rice'

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Published 12:47 PM, Jul 11, 2015

Updated 12:47 PM, Jul 11, 2015



CORN RICE IS SAFE. Corn rice (center and right) is made from corn grits (left) and are very safe to consume. Photo from UP Professor Alonzo Gabriel

MANILA, Philippines – The public is strongly advised against consuming “fake” rice that has been the subject of recent controversy, a University of the Philippines professor and scientist said on Friday, July 10.

Professor Alonzo Gabriel of the Department of Food Science and Nutrition in UP Diliman’s College of Home Economics (CHE) clarified that his colleague, Professor Emeritus Ma. Concepcion Lizada, was “misquoted” in previous reports that said “fake” rice is not bad.

Lizada, in a statement, explained that she was referring to the possibility of processing different starches into grains – extrusion process – and not asking people to eat the controversial “fake rice.”

“The extrusion process provides the opportunity to produce rice with nutrients that are otherwise absent or found in low levels in rice,” she wrote in a statement. “This allows us to address the issue of nutrient deficiency.”

The extrusion process, she added, has been around for some time already and produces breakfast cereals and snacks, among others.

Meanwhile, Gabriel said there is a possibility the “fake rice” may have been produced through the same process. However, it is very different from the ones made from corn.

“They’re both rice mimetic or similar to rice,” he told Rappler. “But they’re very different in terms of composition as ‘fake’ rice is dangerous since we don’t know exactly what’s in it yet.”

The grains that came from corn – usually called corn rice, he said, are not marketed as rice grains but clearly labelled and properly declared only as mimetic.

“Consumers are informed of their ingredients,” the 2014 Ten Outstanding Young Persons of the World Awardee said. “Plasticizer-contaminated rice is a different thing.”

Corn vs ‘plastic’?

While “fake” rice is harmful, corn rice is beneficial to consumers.

The corn rice Lizada mentioned during the 37th Annual Scientific Meeting (ASM) of the National Academy of Science and Technology on Wednesday, July 8, is definitely the healthier alternative, Gabriel said.

It is not, however, anything like the ones allegedly circulating in Davao and earlier in Indonesia.

Corn rice, is made from corn grits. These corn grits go through gelatinization – boiling or cooking – and are then shaped (extruded) to liken rice grains.

Meanwhile, the **alleged fake rice** found in Davao City was tested to have dibutyl phthalate (DBP), a plasticizer contaminant often used in cosmetics. (READ: **‘Contaminant’ found in alleged fake rice in Davao**)



INSPECTION. NFA Administrator Renan Dalisay checks a rice store in Metro Manila on June 30, 2015. Photo by NFA

Despite clarifications that DBP will only be harmful if ingested repeatedly, Gabriel, a food microbiology expert, pointed out that it can escalate quickly as it is made out to look like rice – a staple food of Filipinos.

“The thing is, *ito ang nakalagay sa rice at ito ay laging kinakain ng tao,*” he said. “*Mas mataas ang exposure at mas mataas ang risk of harmful effects.*”

(The thing is, this has been put in rice and it is often eaten by people. It increases exposure and risks of harmful effects.)

When uncooked, a person might have a hard time differentiating between the two. However, plastic film-like bits will form in the “fake” rice while cooking, and are less sticky than regular ones.

Wider choices

The Food Technology Laboratory of UP CHE has been working on developing food products from these extruded grains and not from the fake ones, Gabriel said, to widen the choices for those who want alternatives. They also seek to help Filipino corn farmers.

“*Limited kasi ang gamit talaga kasi kadalasan bibilhin mo at isasaing mo lang,*” he explained. “*Kami magde-develop kami ng produkto at ibang market forms ng corn rice.*”

(The uses are very limited since you’ll only buy and then cook. We are trying to develop other products and other market forms of corn rice.)

They are also looking into producing ready-to-eat food products from corn rice to address the need during disasters – especially in areas where corn is more staple than rice. (READ: [Proper nutrition during disasters: Is it possible?](#))

His student and a Yolanda survivor, Bea Jusayan, is currently researching on how corn can be developed for these needs. She found out that her co-survivors preferred corn than rice while evacuated.

Be vigilant

Gabriel said that stopping the distribution of “fake rice” is a shared responsibility among the government, vendors, and consumers.

These most likely passed through the backdoor and did not go through the proper screening of the Food and Drug Authority (FDA).

“*Vigilance na lang dapat, kasi ang consumers ang end-user nito at sila ang maaapektuhan,*” he explained. (Let’s have vigilance since consumers will be the end-users so they’ll be the ones most affected.)

“If you are a vendor, you should be careful not to sell these harmful products.” – **Rappler.com**

Ref.: <http://www.rappler.com/move-ph/issues/hunger/98985-corn-rice-safer-healthier-fake-rice>

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