

# Rice Article: Philippines

## Ifugao rice-wine makers remain resistant to change

*By Ramon Dacawi*

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BANAUE, Ifugao—More often than not, visitors introduced to bayah—the native rice wine, also known as tapuy, that has kept upland Ifugao villagers warm for centuries—readily declare after the first sip that its taste and quality compares with the best from the famous vineyards in the West.

Ifugaos are understandably proud, if flustered by the compliment to the traditional wine produced from native rice grown in their world-renowned terraces. It appears, however, that they have yet to sober up to what it takes to nudge their bottles into the international racks.

The potential of bayah for commercial production and distribution is not debatable, but efforts toward making it competitive in the world market have been unsuccessful to date, according to Dean Robert Ngidlo, head of the research department of the Ifugao State College of Agriculture and Forestry (ISCAF).

“Our producers of rice wine are resistant to change,” laments Ngidlo. He made the revelation in response to a recurrent suggestion for him to assist tribal wine producers meet international standards, as the Japanese did with their now-popular sake.

While bayah’s taste and other attributes are beyond question, he said these qualities cannot be kept for long unless fermentation is controlled by technological intervention.

He noted the frustration of experts from the Department of Science and Technology in convincing producers to adopt pasteurization in their traditional wine-making process.

“Somebody bought a bottle only to find out that the contents had turned to vinegar,” he said. Ngidlo added that the sugar content of bayah eventually increases because of continuous fermentation that changes the chemical composition and quality of the wine.

This explains why bayah can last only a few months, and be sold only in the local market, usually in bottles with loose caps to prevent the container exploding due to fermentation.

The Philippine Rice Institute (PhilRice) noted that rice wine made in the Cordilleras cannot be kept for a long period for want of a standard procedure of production and packaging. “For this reason, Philrice researchers studied the standardization of the process to make the rice wine a certified value-added product,” the institute said. “With the help of the original makers of the rice wine, this indigenous health beverage can now be kept at least six months longer.”

The PhilRice formula includes pasteurization of the newly harvested wine at 65 to 70 degrees Celsius for 30 minutes and of the bottled wine for 20 minutes.

“We cannot just be contented being a consumer,” Ngidlo stressed before fellow Ifugaos attending a recent United Nations-sponsored forum here on the restoration of the eroding terraces.

Notwithstanding his own disappointment over resistance to technology, Ngidlo said the ISCAF is set to conduct a series of eight studies on improving bayah production and storage in several towns starting next year.

He said the research would start in Kiangan town where villagers are already bottling bayah and distributing it in the local market under the brand name “Heritage”.

The shift to commercial production can be profitable, according to PhilRice, which estimated a return of investment at 88 percent. "With a ROI of 88 percent, the investment can be recouped in seven to eight months," the institute noted.

Some Ifugao leaders are now mulling on holding a rice wine festival to help convince the producers of the profitability of commercial production with the assistance of technology.

While reluctant to yield to the dictates of technology in wine processing, Ifugao villagers readily proclaim the unique taste and superior quality of their bayah, compared to that of other Ifugao towns.

The Ifugaos, like other indigenous people of the Cordillera and Asia, have for centuries been fermenting glutinous red and white upland rice grown in the Hungduan, Mayoyao and Kiangan terraces.

Rice wine is generally called tapuy among the Cordillera natives—collectively known as Igorots—who use it for their time-honored hunting, marriage and death rituals and rites performed to mark various stages of the traditional rice cycle.

The Igorots have their own way of preparing glutinous rice before applying yeast (bubod) to start fermentation. The Kankanais and Ibalois in Benguet, normally apply yeast on half-cooked rice. Ifugaos sometimes half-roast the newly pound rice to add to the wine taste and then cook to well done before the starter culture is applied so as to produce more liquid.

Wine from the concoction begins to drip within three days, ready for drinking and transfer of the rice base to a jar, sometimes an antique piece acquired during the old trading days with visiting Chinese merchants.

For the Ifugaos, wine production is at its height after the harvest season, usually during the typhoon season in July and August, in time for the post-harvest bakle festival when rice cakes are also served by the villagers. It is also used in the various rituals, especially those surrounding the various stages of the rice cycle.

As production is occasional, sometimes in anticipation of a guest's arrival, the menfolk usually turn to readily available intoxicants in the market, especially local gin.

Ref.: <http://www.asiarice.org/sections/whatsnew/Philippines168.html>