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# Ilocos S & T Trends



ENTERED AS SECOND-CLASS MAIL MATTER AT THE SAN FERNANDO CITY, LA UNION POSTAL OFFICE

Volume 6, Issue No. 1

ISSN No. 0118-0924

JANUARY 2013

## Preserving a family legacy: *Sukang Iloko*



Catherine Pascual Abadilla, 66, exactly knows what she wants and she does it perfectly to preserve her family legacy of producing a stimulating aroma and a very strong taste of a dark liquid Ilocanos are known for ages—Sukang Iloko.

Cornel Foods, derived from the combined names of Abadilla's father Cornelio and grandfather Melchor, has evolved as a home-based leading producer and distributor of a chemical-free organic vinegar popularly known as the Ilocandia's original sukan g Iloko. It is now also a multi-awarded family-owned company, commercializing tropical fruit wines and distilled spirits here and abroad.

As a food technologist, Abadilla was concerned about the safety of consumers. Adulterated vinegar is not accepted by the Department of Health standards.

Through continued research and technology development, she perfected the traditional vinegar-making formula she inherited from her elders who used to own a small holdings of vinegar-making in a sugar cane -producing rural village in the city.

She said the process of fermentation was one of her favorite subjects at the University of the Philippines where she took BS in Food Technology. This inspired her to pursue her study when she took a master's degree in Food Science in the same university. Her graduate level dissertation entitled "Physicochemical and microbiological characteristics of *Basi* (sugarcane wine) during fermentation" was all worth it when she tried her developed technology to their homegrown vinegar-making venture.

"At first, my aim is to improve vinegar and *basi* which are being sold at the public market using recycled plastic containers without any label," Abadilla said.



But things changed in 1996 or about 16 years ago when Dr. Saturnino Ocampo, then the regional director of the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) in Region 1, motivated her to commercialize her developed technology instead. That time, the DOST started its aggressive promotion of ripe technologies beneficial to local communities and she was then teaching at the Mariano Marcos State University-Home Technology Department in Batac, Ilocos Norte until she retired.

Together with her husband Camilo, 67, and their two children, the Abadilla family decided to put up a 100-sqm. processing building beside their ancestral home located at the heart of the city to start up the project.



From an additional 50 earthen jars the DOST provided them to increase their production, they were able to create a product following by word of mouth.



Raw materials (sugarcane and tropical fruits) were initially sourced out from their small farm but with increased demand, they trained several farmers to deliver them the needed supply.

She takes pride in keeping the original Sukang Iloko, a chemical-free organic vinegar derived from naturally fermented sugarcane juice and plant extracts locally known as *samak* that turns the liquid color into black.

The popular Sukang Iloko comes with a unique product label consisting of a heritage house like those preserved in Vigan, Ilocos Sur, a kalesa (horse-drawn carrier), earthen jars and *samak* leaves to indicate that the product was processed in the century-old tradition of fermenting sugarcane juice and *samak* in earthenware jars. It also maintains a standard 4.5 acidity level, obtaining a quality seal approved by the Bureau of Foods and Drugs (BFAD).

From their original product Sukang Iloko, Cormel Foods has develop additional product lines such as *basi* and other tropical wines from duhat (java plum), mango and bugnay (wild berries). Their latest baby product is the duhat juice now being tested in the local market during trade fairs and exhibits organized by government agencies.

Since its conception, the DOST has assisted Cormel Foods to develop and improve its products. The DOST gave them an interest-free financial assistance worth P500,000 refundable in three years to cater their customers' growing demand for Sukang Iloko.

After graduating from the first Small Enterprise Technology Upgrading Program (SET-UP I), the DOST gave them another P800,000 financial assistance (SET-UP II) refundable in three years without interest. This time, said amount was used in their tropical fruit wine-making business that evolved through time.

Sukang Iloko remains their prime commodity. To date, Cormel Foods is producing at least 500 gallons every month to meet their product demand.

A number of hotels, supermarkets and distributors from Metro Manila and the neighboring provinces of Cagayan, Ilocos Sur and Abra directly buy from them.

"This is why Ilocandia's Sukang Iloko is not readily available in groceries unlike other commercial vinegars," their son Anthony, who supervises the marketing and distribution of their products, said. (Leilani Adriano)



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