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Pangasinan's Pop *Puto*

A delicious puff of technology and indigenuity



Many of the most stimulating success stories are contrived in the most common places and told in the only language understood by all: that of the heart. They are extraordinary tales of fortitude, hard work, and faith.

A household in barangay Dinalaoan, Riverside, Calasiao, Pangasinan treasures a true account of sacrifice, of years of struggle from rags to riches, and of preserving the century-old title and crown of Calasiao as the home of the famous *puto*, a kind of steamed rice cake in Philippine cuisine.

Many are called but few are chosen. The timeless biblical verse is alive in the midst of the *puto* industry in Calasiao. For quite a number has ventured in the *puto* trade only to drown in the stream of booming businesses entrenched in the economy of Pangasinan's first class municipality.

Bella's Calasiao Puto Special is among the chosen. Mang Rodolfo Dela Cruz, the owner, has resolutely and untiringly worked for more than two decades tough years for a business to become now one of Calasiao's economic pillars.

The Puto Czar

Mang Rufo, as he is widely known, holds dear entirely poor beginnings. The 68-year old *puto* entrepreneur did not even reach high school, owing to a miserably deprived background where subsistence meant only food.

"Sipag at tiis. Yan lang ang meron ako non," the words were choked with emotions. Mang Rufo recalled that he never afforded spare time. His free hours always found him always on the run – chopping firewood for sale, planting at least two banana suckers every time, and countless errands he took for small amounts. Up to his married life, their humble circumstances cultivated the values of thriftiness, perseverance and diligence in his family.

Puto as a business was conceived in Mang Rufo's mind long before he set out to do. The inspiration welled from the constant encounter with a *puto* vendor in front of the church. Mang Rufo soon found himself buying and selling the steamed rice cake. Then he decided to learn its preparation.

It was almost a miracle how the top *puto* producer of Calasiao puffed its way up to six-digit earnings from a P70 seed investment in the 1970s, an amount which according to Mang Rufo, was borrowed from a neighbor. The capital in no time bought two gantas of rice and four kilos of sugar. There, in his production area which he described as *barong barong*, his first 600 pieces of *puto* were made. He sold at P20 per hundred pieces. This meant everyday finding his place along market sidewalks, movie houses, circuses, barangay fiestas, or from house to house with his *bilao* of *puto*. With only him and his wife running the newly found business, they worked **their fingers to the bone. The long list of equipment and miscellaneous items to buy kept them pinned on their work.**

Mang Rufo's exceptional prudence in the use of his family's resources was a key factor in the expansion of his business. *"Talagang mahigpit kami sa paggastos noon. Kapag hindi kailangan, hindi namin bibilhin. Lalo na't apat na ang aming anak noon."* Mang Rufo said, eyes welling.

Bilao to Kiosk

For years, Mang Rufo's family remained unwavering in their *puto* business. It turned out to be lucrative, so long as they remained faithful to a positive future. Customers did the same as his products had a distinct taste unique to him. Mang Rufo was able to capture the perfect Filipino taste that draws patrons to his food. New customers always found their way to his doors by word of mouth passed on by one satisfied customer to another.

The 80s marked the onset of Mang Rufo's *Puto* industry. Upon its registration as a legitimate business, the family could do nothing but to welcome the long awaited return of their investments. The originally two gantas of rice were no longer enough to accommodate the high demand for the *puto*. His shabby *bilao* gave way to a kiosk that stood proud with his special *puto* in the Calasiao market and eventually in major stores.



One good point about *Bella's Special Puto* is that it invites suggestions, comments and criticisms from its patrons. These feedbacks are factors in his family's efforts to serve the best *puto* in Calasiao. In fact, the original flavor developed into eight more. Cheesy, Salted egg, Cheese, Buko-Pandan, Ube, Banana, Mango, and Strawberry now make up the assortment of colors in Mang Rufo's *puto* display.

To make his kiosk more alive, he began to introduce other products with rice as the main ingredient. The native *bitso bitso*, what many call the Pinoy doughnut, was an instant hit. *Bitso bitso* is made of ground glutinous rice which is deep-fried and sweetened. Soon Mang Rufo came up with a crispy variety of the originally soft and chewy *bitso bitso*. *Tikoy* or the Chinese New Year Pudding was another addition to Mang Rufo's list of products. *Kutsinta* and *Atsarang Papaya* (Papaya Pickles) also had their own space in the kiosk.

But through the almost two decades of his family's *puto* production, an invisible force has been at the helm of the business' success.

Whose Hands



Bella's Special Puto was named after Mang Rufo's eldest child, Bellaflor. She and her five siblings were raised with *puto* as bread and butter. It was also the native muffin that sent them all to school.

As its market expanded and demand for higher production tagged at Mang Rufo's sleeves, inadequacies in the business came to light. Though the family had mastered *puto* preparation, there was no progress in their knowledge especially in instituting a systematic management and operation of the enterprise: good manufacturing

practices, food safety, health and sanitation, recording and bookkeeping, and others which the family didn't know at the time. the principal inadequacy was in equipment and tools, building, technology, and packaging.

It was in 2003 that Mang Rufo came across the answer to his business needs. He met Engr. Felipe D. Andrada, Pangasinan Provincial Science and Technology Director, the one to introduce him to programs of the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) designed to aid, support, and promote small and medium enterprise. DOST assistance can be through grants, technology transfer, and other interventions for enhanced productivity and product quality.

DOST set to work on *Bella's Special Puto*. It started with a **product shelf life study and packaging grant** awarded to Mang Rufo. The agency worked on providing a new look for the bestseller *puto* producer in Calasiao. *Puto* of such taste and quality deserve more than plastic and banana leaves for a wrapper. The shelf life study established that Calasiao puto can last up to 6 days if refrigerated and 7 months if frozen in microwaveable polypropylene trays (PP) or low density polyethylene bags (LDPE).

Invitations for **trainings** from DOST Pangasinan streamed in. Mang Rufo seized each opportunity to avail of the technological skills his business so needed for a long time. As a result, he became aware of important areas in his business that did not meet specified standards in food manufacturing.

Bella's Special Puto went through a major shift in its management and operation. Bookkeeping became organized for a more systematic recording of profits. The production area was redesigned to conform with good manufacturing practices (GMP). Food safety and sanitation became the rules inside the production area. Workers on duty started to wear gloves, hairnets, and aprons. Mang Rufo knew that his business name he had been protecting for so long could be ruined at once when food safety and sanitation were challenged. And so he made sure that proper handling, preparation and storage of his product are practiced at all times. Adequate supply of clean and safe water is a major consideration. Water used in the area is now developed and managed for optimum use.

Bella's Special Puto was able to develop its own system of waste disposal. DOST provided Mang Rufo adequate information on how to treat wastes of his *puto* business, even recommending the most appropriate for food manufacturing especially that the production area is in a residential location.

Since *Bella's Special Puto* came across DOST, the latter became the anchor which ensured that the former was stable and secure. It made sure Mang Rufo's *puto* business undertook only the right moves.

And so the latest streak of DOST's hand arrived at *Bella's Special Puto's* doors in the form of the **Small Enterprise Technology Upgrading Program (SETUP)**. It was in response to Mang Rufo's lack of equipment. These include a rice grinder with 2.5 horse power, 25 sets of *lanson*, four *lanson* covers, and three stainless tables where the cooked *puto* are removed from the molders.

The P116,784 worth of equipment for the number one *puto* producer in Calasiao refunded monthly in three years without fail. *Bella's Special Puto* had recently (February 2012) refunded the entire amount to the DOST which will be reused to assist other SMEs.

Puto Power

"Maraming salamat sa DOST," said the teary-eyed Mang Rufo. *"Sila ang instrumentong ginamit ng Diyos para sagutin ang mga panalangin namin ng aking pamilya. Salamat... Salamat."*

The growth in *Bella's Special Puto* is evident in the number of products that has been added to its menu. Two more cram *Bella's Special Puto's* stall: *Cheese Bibingka* and *Ube Halaya*. One can see the business' progress in the now 120 square meter production area which used to be a *barong barong*. It is in the extent of the malls and stalls and markets it supplies with its famed products. Mang Rufo's product food label is now displayed for sale in the grand racks of SM Clark, Market-Market Taguig, Robinsons Calasiao, malls in Lingayen, Bayambang, and stores in its host municipality: Calasiao.

Bella's Special Puto as authority in the *puto* industry has even reached television screens. Broadcast towers like Korina Sanchez and Jessica Soho went their way to interview the *puto* magnate himself. *Travel Asia* and *Usapang Business*, two of the most credible magazines in the country also sought Mang Rufo's story.

"Naiiyak talaga ako kapag naiisip ko kung gaano kahirap ang pinagdaanan namin," said Mang Rufo.

Now, with 40 workers on his payroll, grinding as much as five to seven cavans of rice and producing thousands of delicious pieces of the rice cake each day, a steaming six-digit income each month keep these men inspired and assured of a stable and sustainable livelihood for their families.

Bella's Special Puto is also an academic venue for students from different universities in the province and beyond. It accommodates requests for on-the-job trainings and Mang Rufo is only too eager to share his experiences, knowledge and skills in entrepreneurship.

A faithful and generous benefactor of community projects, he is most liberal to advancing the interests of the senior citizens.

Well-off that his family is, his and all his family's feet remain on the ground. Mang Rufo laughed as he revealed the truly one great secret he keeps for the success of his *puto* business: *faith in God*.

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