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A-maize-ing La Union crunch



Ilocos is home to inimitable products that have remained the region's trademark, not only in wood and metal crafts, but most especially in the food industry. Its abundance in exotic flora, not to mention fauna, inspired the vast potential and ingenuity of the Ilocanos in food engineering.

The plethora of Ilocos region's trademarks goes beyond the usual exploitation of available resources which is practiced in all parts of the country. Ilocos region's edge is in the innovative skills melded in every amazing and exotic product transformed out of indigenous and even junk materials.

With an economy founded in agriculture, Ilocos Region is in fact one of the country's top producer of rice and corn, the country's staple foods. And from the abundance of the latter, the famous *Ilocos chichacorn* or *cornick* has been made.

Corny Couple

Many manufacturers of the *chichacorn* have already mushroomed in the northern part of Ilocos since the product was introduced in the market. Among them was a household in Bantay, Ilocos Sur, who, for two years had the brittle snack for a business. *Chichacorn* production for Edwin P. Mariñas and his family was fairly lucrative if not for the frequent shortage of supply which they personally produced. The demand was high and their manual system of production could not keep up with the market pressure. Resources for capital and technology upgrade were unkindly elusive, confining them to time-consuming and strenuous manual production. For two years since 1992, Edwin and wife Emma Teresa sufficed with such wanting setup.

Until in 1994 when they decided to settle in Agoo, La Union, a neighboring town of the municipality of Aringay which is Emma's hometown. This was the start of a pioneering food industry to set foot in the province.

Corn is the second staple crop in the Philippines, next to *palay*. And though La Union widely cultivates corn, it wasn't a known producer of any corn products. Until the Mariñas couple broke the ice.

Edwin and Emma brought with them whatever technology and practice they adapted from Ilocos Sur when it came to *chichacorn* production. With only P10 thousand for capital and equipment, they resolved to put up a *chichacorn* factory. They made use of the white glutinous variety most available in the region. Soon, *Agoo Chichacorn and Food Products* came to stand. They set out in producing the fried corn kernels. And in effect, have made their first step to becoming officially La Union's first *Chichacorn* producer.

Maize-merized

It has been always the way of things to start small. And so one to two sacks was a fairly good start for the Mariñas couple. These were mainly sold in Agoo at first. Emma's sister-in-law suggested supplying *CSI*, a mall in San Fernando City where she worked as sales manager. They started with 20 packs of garlic-flavored *chichacorn*. Six more flavors attracted already hooked customers. Chili garlic, adobo, barbeque, cheese, sweet, and sweet and spicy flavors further mesmerized patrons.

A few months later, the expected came about. Two sacks of *chichacorn* simply could not keep pace with the all time high market demand. There, in their new place, the same business problems they had to contend during their Ilocos Sur days were beginning to settle in with them. A bigger capital topped their list of need-to-haves. Equipment and technology to facilitate production were tailing not far behind.

Pop 'n Boom

The solution popped out many years after, when in 2003 at a seminar, the couple chance-met Dr. Ismael Gurtiza, the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) La Union provincial director, who welcomed them into their only opportunity for expansion.

"I didn't know DOST was the answer all along," Emma said. She admitted that the agency came to mind quite many times when resources for production became unbearably restraining. But they knew DOST at that time could not accommodate a number of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to help all at the same time.

"This time, DOST came to us," Emma smiled. And in no time, their little *chichacorn* business was looking up at a clearer sky.

Through DOST's Small Enterprise Upgrading Program (SET-UP) which provides upgrading assistance to Small-Micro Enterprises (SME) for increased productivity, Edwin and Emma were able to avail of a P180 thousand loan payable in three years without interest. The amount was used to buy 20 pieces of drying trace for sun-drying corn, additional furnace, combustors, and two sets of ventilators. The business had soon crossed beyond Agoo in market reach and was already supplying other La Union public markets and major groceries.

When the previous loan was fully paid, the couple applied again for another loan, this time P 0.53 million, which they used to buy a fully automatic vertical fill-and-seal packing machine and plastic sachet packaging materials.

Corny Business

The couple's *chichacorn* business was growing fast and orders from different places demanded another branch. The small factory they left in Bantay, Ilocos Sur seemed the best idea for Edwin and Emma to rebuild and develop. Three combustors were set up in the Bantay branch where the greater extent of the production procedure was undertaken.

More poured from DOST La Union to ensure the business is sustained. Technology transfer through continual trainings relevant to *chichacorn* production were made available to them and their workers such as: Good Manufacturing Practices and Food Safety (GMP/FS), Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP), Cleaner Production Technology Assessment, Simple Recording and Book keeping among others. The agency also took charge of the business' label and design. Profits soon soared to around P300 to 350 thousand monthly. This prompted the couple to increase personnel from 15 to 25 and to source out a much wider area for corn cultivation. Edwin eventually has had his property in Cagayan entirely for corn growing.

The amazing hand with which DOST has disbanded *Agoo Chichacorn and Food Products* from near financial shackles is tastily imbued in each laboriously prepared, crunchy, flavored kernel. DOST's part in the sudden shift of Edwin and Emma's business from fettered profits to heady six-digit gains in a month is as wide as the now 500-square meter production area where workers take their space and carry out individual task. The agency's role over the factory's progress sweeps across provision of employment for 25 pairs of hands, ensuring a stable source of income from which a number of families get their bread and butter, helping sustain an enterprise whose products serve the community's craving for diverse delicacies, strengthening a business upon which corn producers rely as their market, and supporting indigenous culture in food production.

DOST, through its catalog of programs for SMEs, has made it possible for *Agoo Chichacorn and Food Products* to stay alive and solid so it can likewise carry out its part in nation building through the families that run it, the consumers it satisfies, and the income it would surely share with the country.

"Nagpapasalamat kami sa DOST dahil binigyan kami ng pagkakataong makibahagi sa programa ng gobyerno para mapaulad ang mga maliliit na negosyong katulad ng sa amin," a grateful Emma voiced.

There is no choice for the Maríñas *chichacorn* enterprise but to savor and enjoy the inevitable rewards of a proud and kicking corny business.

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