Rice Science FOR DECISION-MAKERS

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ENSURING THE CONTINUITY OF RICE-BASED FOOD INDUSTRY ACROSS GENERATIONS

KEY POINTS

- The rice-based food industry sustains local and national economics by supporting livelihoods, particularly among women and small-scale rural producers.
- Production of traditional rice-based foods is declining due to aging producers, lack of successors, and limited market and processing support.
- Revitalizing the industry requires enterprise incentives, modern technologies, and stronger institutional and market support.
- Integrating rice-based food processing into education and training programs ensures knowledge transfer and cultural continuity.
- Local governments and national agencies should institutionalize support programs that secure the long-term sustainability of the rice-based food industry.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional rice-based food products form an important part of the Philippines' culinary heritage and rural economy, contributing to livelihoods and reflecting deep cultural values across regions such as the Ilocos Region, Central Luzon, Bicol Region, Eastern Visayas, Western Visayas, and Davao Region, among others.

In many provinces, these traditional delicacies remain central to local identity and community life. The traditional rice-based food industry plays a crucial role in the economy, contributing millions of pesos annually. Beyond its economic value, these rice-based products hold deep cultural significance, representing a heritage passed down through generations. De Villa (2022) emphasized the deep-rooted significance of *kakanin* across various aspects of Filipino life that shape culture and identity. Senate Bill No. 244, known as the *Philippine Culinary Heritage Act of 2022*, is currently pending in the Senate Committee on Culture and the Arts. It aims to preserve and promote Filipino culinary traditions, including *kakanin*, by establishing a committee and integrating culinary heritage into school curricula. Encouragingly, scholarly investigations on culinary heritage continue to rise in recent years (Sahin & Yilmaz, 2021). However, the industry is currently at risk due to the aging population of manufacturers. Without intervention, these traditional rice-based products could disappear, weakening the local economy and leading to cultural amnesia.

METHODOLOGY

To better understand the state of the rice-based food industry, a study was conducted to map the landscape of rice-based food products in Biliran Province. It was chosen as a case study since it is a top rice-producing area in Eastern Visayas that has high availability of raw materials for production of rice-based food products. Researchers engaged directly with local producers in Biliran, tracing their networks and documenting the 22 diverse rice-based products found across different communities in Biliran, Cabugcayan, Caibiran, Naval, Almeria, Culaba, Cawayan, and Maripipi. Through interviews and field visits, valuable insights were gathered about processing techniques, challenges faced by artisans, and opportunities for innovation. The study also incorporated location-based data collection to visualize the distribution of producers.

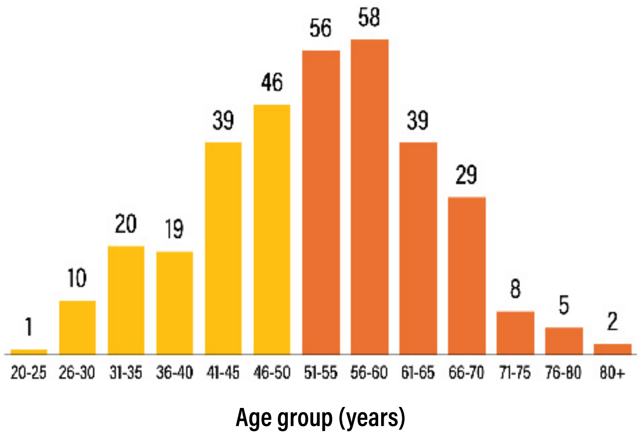
FINDINGS

The following key findings highlight most pressing issues affecting the continuity of Biliran's rice-based food industry.

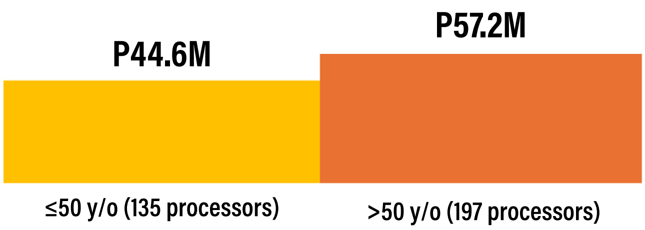
The aging population of rice-based food processors poses a significant threat to Biliran's local economy, with an estimated P57 million in annual circulating revenues at risk over the next 10 years.

Of the 332 active rice-based food processors in Biliran Province, 197—or nearly 60%—are above 50 years old. This aging demographic signals a looming decline in production activity as older processors begin to exit the sector.

Age distribution of active rice-based food processors in Biliran province (n=332)
Of the total, 135 processors are aged 50 years old and below, while 197 are over 50 years old.



Estimated annual revenue by age group
Total annual circulating revenue in the province generated by active rice-based food processor is estimated at



This concern is strongly supported by interviews with former processors who have already discontinued operations. The top reason cited for leaving the industry was the inability to manage their business due to old age and health issues related to aging. Given that the sector currently contributes an estimated P101.8 million in annual circulating revenue, the potential loss of over half of this amount—approximately P57 million—is a real and urgent concern.

REASONS FOR DISCONTINUATION

1. Aging population
   - Inability to manage due to old age
   - Health issues related to aging

2. Scarcity of main ingredients

Another critical factor affecting industry sustainability is the scarcity of specific rice varieties once used in production.

Former processors shared that these varieties are no longer available in the market, indicating they may no longer be cultivated. This supply-side issue disrupts production even for those willing and able to continue the craft.

Several culturally significant rice-based delicacies in Biliran Province are now classified as high risk, raising alarm not just economically, but also in terms of cultural preservation. For instance, Balintawak and Suman Mangga, both delicacies widely associated with the identity and local pride of Naval, are predominantly produced by individuals aged above 50 years old. If younger processors do not step in to learn and continue these traditional recipes, these products could quietly disappear within the next decade. Even more concerning is Manban, a unique rice-based product that the LGU of Cabucgayan envisions as a flagship delicacy which can boost local tourism and economic branding. However, it currently has only one known active producer, who is also above 50 years old, placing it on the brink of cultural extinction. This situation reflects a broader challenge: even flagship products are not immune to vanishing if they are not intentionally passed on.

Table 1. Distribution of rice-based food processors by age group and product.

Rice-based products	Age group ≤50 (135 processors)	>50 (197 processors)	Total (332 processors)
Ampaw	1	6	7
Balintawak	7	26	33
Bibingka	37	72	109
Biko	20	29	49
Binignit	2	1	3
Butchi	2	1	3
Espasol	-	1	1
Kutsinta	2	4	6
Lupak	4	15	19
Manban	-	1	1
Suman Mangga	2	7	9
Moron	72	112	184
Palitaw	5	3	8
Puto	97	147	244
Puto maya	1	1	2
Sampilot	1	1	2
Sapin-sapin	15	7	22
Suman	50	103	153
Suman latik	5	3	8
Tikoy	2	1	3
Tupig	1	-	1
Ube calamay	1	-	1

LEGEND

- **High-Risk**: These are heavily reliant on older producers, with little to no participation from younger processors. Without succession or targeted interventions, these products are at the greatest risk of disappearing in the next 10 years.
- **Moderate Risk**: While older producers dominate, there is a notable number of younger processors involved. With support and continuity efforts, these products can still be sustained.
- **Low Risk**: Despite their relatively small numbers, these products have a stronger representation of younger producers, offering better prospects for long-term continuity.

CALL FOR ACTION

To ensure the continuity and development of the traditional rice-based food industry, the following measures are proposed:

- **Institutionalize rice-based food processing in education**
  The continued decline of traditional rice-based food processing is largely due to the lack of young successors willing and able to take on the craft. This problem stems from the absence of formal education programs that introduce students to the practice, causing disinterest and skill loss. To address this, rice-based food processing should be integrated into both basic and technical-vocational education. At the secondary level, traditional food-making techniques may be incorporated into Technology and Livelihood Education (TLE) subjects. At the tertiary or vocational level, relevant components may be embedded within Bachelor of Technology and Livelihood Education (BTLED) or Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) training programs. By developing specialized modules that combine traditional food-making techniques with modern food technology, students can gain both appreciation and practical skills. Furthermore, establishing partnerships with local producers will ensure knowledge transfer and encourage students to take an active role in preserving the craft.

- **Support agripreneurship**
  The lack of interest among younger generations in traditional rice-based food processing is not only cultural but also economic. Many see the craft as outdated or unprofitable due to limited market access, startup capital, and business knowledge. To reverse this trend, rice-based food processing must be repositioned as a viable and attractive livelihood option. Establishing targeted agripreneurship programs—including startup grants, processing equipment kits, and intensive business mentoring—will empower aspiring processors to transform inherited traditions into modern food enterprises. These initiatives should be community-based and supported by provincial livelihood offices and local cooperatives to create sustainable food-based enterprises anchored in heritage.

- **Strengthen seed security and ingredient access**
  A critical but often overlooked issue threatening traditional food production is the disappearance of key rice varieties once used in these delicacies. Some processors have discontinued operations not due to lack of skill or interest, but simply because the specific rice varieties they require are no longer grown or commercially available. To address this, a program under the DA or concerned LGU should be established to trace, conserve, and promote the cultivation of culturally-significant rice varieties. This ensures a stable and sustainable supply of ingredients essential to *kakanin* production, while also supporting local farmers, who grow these heritage crops.

- **Launch a provincial heritage food registry and promotion campaign**
  Traditional rice-based delicacies are more than just food—they are cultural assets that embody the identity and pride of Biliran communities. Yet many of these products remain undocumented and unsupported, making them vulnerable to disappearance. A formal provincial registry of heritage rice-based foods should be created to identify, recognize, and monitor the status of each delicacy. Active producers can be designated as "Heritage Bearers" and supported through recognition programs, local incentives, and participation in food tourism events. A strategic promotional campaign, coordinated with the Provincial Tourism Office, can further elevate the visibility and market demand of these delicacies, ensuring that they remain relevant and appreciated by the next generation of consumers.

- **Enable local governments to act**
  Local government units (LGUs) are uniquely positioned to safeguard and revitalize traditional rice-based food production, but their support remains fragmented or minimal. Without policy anchors or enabling mechanisms, many producers continue to operate informally with limited access to markets, training, or modern facilities. To address this gap, LGUs must be empowered and encouraged to pass local ordinances that institutionalize support for traditional food processors. This includes providing incentives for heritage producers, establishing shared-use processing centers, allocating funds for training programs, and integrating rice-based food into local tourism and development plans. LGU-led action ensures that interventions are responsive to community needs and embedded in long-term local governance frameworks.

CONCLUSION

Preserving and revitalizing Biliran's traditional rice-based food industry requires a holistic approach that combines education, agripreneurship, ingredient security, and cultural promotion. With nearly 60% of active processors aged 50 and above and millions of pesos in economic activity at risk, urgent action is needed to close the generational gap and restore continuity. Integrating rice-based food processing into formal and vocational education can ensure that knowledge and skills are passed on to future practitioners, while targeted agripreneurship programs can inspire both young and aspiring producers to view this heritage not only as a cultural legacy but also as a viable enterprise. Addressing ingredient scarcity, particularly the loss of specific rice varieties, is equally vital to maintain authenticity and supply chain resilience. While this study focused on Biliran, similar challenges are observed in other provinces where traditional rice-based food industries thrive, such as Ilocos Sur, Pangasinan, Masbate, and Davao de Oro. These shared circumstances highlight the need for national collective action to preserve culinary heritage while fostering sustainable livelihoods. With strengthened institutional support, local government engagement, and heritage-driven campaigns, rice-based food enterprises can continue to flourish, sustaining local economies and celebrating Filipino identity across generations.

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ABOUT THE MATERIAL

Rice Science for Decision-Makers is published by the Department of Agriculture-Philippine Rice Research Institute (DA-PhilRice). It synthesizes findings in rice science to help craft decisions relating to rice production and technology adoption and adaptation. It also provides recommendations that may offer policy triggers to relevant rice stakeholders in search of opportunities to share their knowledge on rice-related products.

The articles featured here aim to improve the competitiveness of the Filipino rice farmers and the Philippine rice industry through policy research and advocacy.

This policy brief emphasizes the importance of sustaining traditional rice-based food enterprises as a source of livelihood and cultural identity. It tackles the urgent problem of declining production and loss of traditional knowledge, and presents policy directions to revitalize the sector through education, agripreneurship, ingredient preservation, and heritage promotion.

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