

# The Premium in Tradition

## Dela Cruz House of Piña

*Traditional culture and its products live on as both are passed on from generation to generation, capturing a global niche market that puts premium in tradition.*

**PROACTIVE EXPANSION**  
After taking over the piña business, Rhodora Dela Cruz-Sulangi expanded Dela Cruz House of Piña by working on another material and transforming the humble *nito* into a global product.



**S**ome of Aklan's traditional arts continue to find their place in the world of fashion and today's lifestyle.

Right there in the august halls of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. once stood a Philippine loom. Meanwhile, far away in Kyoto, the Japanese are using to this day the *obi* or wide sash of *piña* fibers woven through that loom to secure their kimonos. At another time, handicrafts made from dried indigenous fern called *nito* filled the entire floor of Williams Sonoma's luxury showroom in San Francisco.

The loom, the *obi*, and the *nito* baskets can be traced all the way to Aklan's capital town of Kalibo, where the family-run Dela Cruz House of Piña makes them like no other.

On that day at the Philippine Centennial in 1998, family matriarch Susima dela Cruz took her seat in front of the loom at the Smithsonian hall to demonstrate weaving, and the

foreign audience saw the *piña* fibers turn into premium fabric under her spell. Susima would also see her *piña* sash around the waist of kimonos in Kyoto shops.

Six years earlier, Susima's daughter Rhodora began steering the company into transforming the humble *nito* into a global product, alongside premium items in Williams Sonoma stores across the United States.

### FROM LOCAL TO GLOBAL

Susima is rightfully revered as the "Mother of Piña" for keeping Aklan's traditional weaving alive. In the mid-1980s, she organized the town's weavers and made her house also the office, production plant, and warehouse for the fabric behind the famous Lumber *barang* and *seya*.

Back then, Susima's daughter Rhodora was teaching English in a Vietnamese refugee camp in Batzen. When Rhodora returned to Kalibo to raise a family with her husband, she felt



### TALK OF THE TOWN

The Dela Cruz House of Piña is one of the traditional and renowned *piña* cloth makers in Aklan. *Piña* weaving is the oldest industry in the province and has enjoyed profitable success and an economic hit in producing varieties of *piña* blends—colored, with *jusi*, cotton, or silk embroidery. Pure *piña* is the most expensive among the indigenous fabrics, given the intricacy of the woven craft and the rarity of the raw material.



Dela Cruz House of Piña exports world-class products ranging from handwoven bags and wallets, baskets, napkin rings, placemats, coasters, and other tabletop accessories.



**DID YOU KNOW?** During the 19th century, *piña* cloth was in demand worldwide, before cotton fabric took over. Through continuous effort, *piña* trade was slowly re-established.

the business needed a system, its own showroom, or get exhibited in the trade fairs organized by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI).

Eventually, Rhodora's persistence paid off. A small showroom was built out of their old rice stockroom at home and the company started hooking up with foreign buying offices through DTI. Business picked up and top designers started carrying the Dela Cruz brand.

In 1992, Susima handed over the business to Rhodora, but on one condition: production should be kept traditional—from fiber extraction to knitting, splitting, and weaving the finished product. Rhodora complied.

Later, DTI invited Rhodora to sell *nito* handicrafts, then a cottage industry. The agency provided product development trainings and market linkages, while the company adopted the community-based supply model that it had perfected for the *piña*. "We grew the *nito* business from 10 weavers to over a thousand [community-based weavers]," Rhodora says.

The company makes handwoven tabletop items, such as napkin rings, placemats, trays, and chargers, all exported to the United States, and retailed locally through SM's Kultura Filipino and Balikbayan Handicrafts.



It takes a certain skill and patience to weave and work on a *nito* handicraft. The *nito* vine grows on trees and rocks and has a natural beauty and color that does not require treatment processes like soaking, scraping, and hacking.

**TRADITION FACES GLOBAL TRADE**

It was not all roses, though, for *nito*. "Traditional weaving is slow and tedious," Rhodora says. A foreign buyer once thought of backing out after having learned about the company's lack of centralized production. "Where's your factory?" Rhodora remembers the buyer asking and she replying: "We don't have one."

The buyer doubted the company's capability to deliver with such an informal community-based production setup. "But we challenged them to give us a deadline." The company met it, proving traditional weaving can work with globalization.

This was more than a simple success story. A centuries-old weaving culture and its traditional art of *suksok* have been passed on from mothers to daughters, just as Susima has passed on the business to Rhodora, proving that there is premium in tradition.

The business defies the modern operating efficiencies that yield price competitiveness, but its products serve a global niche market that is more than willing to pay extra for tradition.

**? How piña fabric is made**

- 1 Mature leaves of Spanish red pineapple plant are harvested.
- 2 The fleshy part is scraped leaving only the fiber.
- 3 The fibers are washed in running water streams, then dried under the sun, or preferably air dried.
- 4 The fibers are split into strands thinner than hair.
- 5 The fibers are knotted end to end to make one long continuous strand. The knot is cut close to the end that no bump can be felt.
- 6 The long strand goes through spinning, then delivered to weavers.
- 7 Warping or setting up of the loom with the warped fiber.
- 8 Using a loom, the weaver turns the fiber into fabric. Option: a traditional design technique called "*suksok*" inserts colored threads, usually cotton or silk, to give the fabric texture and hue.
- 9 The fabric can be embroidered or embellished with accents.

**HOW DTI HELPED**

Dela Cruz House of Piña joined DTI-sponsored trade fairs that helped them get market linkages locally and globally and product development trainings for the weavers.