

**HUMBLE BEGINNINGS**

Lydia Perez-Lomibao ventured into the business of *pili*-tart making with a meager Php 500 as a start-up capital. Now with a capital of Php 30 million, her company, J. Emmanuel Pastries, produces 30 varieties of *pili* nut confectioneries that are being sold to both local and international markets.



## Pili: The Choice Nuts Whose Time Has Come

J. Emmanuel Pastries

*Seeing the business potential of pili nuts, a mother from Naga quit her job in Makati to put up her own enterprise with all of her Php 500 as capital. Two decades hence, her business is now a Php 30-million enterprise exporting 90 percent of its products to Japan, the United States, Canada, South Korea, and China.*

**WHAT MAKES THE PILI TART**

J. Emmanuel Pastries' workers make and bake the *pili* tarts and sesame balls, assembling them into rows before finally packing batches into vacuum-sealed packets, using state-of-the-art equipment.



**G**rown only in the Philippines and a few islands in the South Pacific, *pili* remains among the rarest nuts in the world.

It is produced commercially only in the Philippines, where it is grown mostly in the Bicol provinces of Sorsogon, Albay, and Camarines Sur.

Thus, finding *pili* in Bicol is easier than digging for truffles in Europe and picking the stamens of saffron in Eurasia—both widely regarded as worth their weight in gold.

But while far from that noble status steeped in patrician tradition, *pili* nuts are graduating from its lowly image of being packed in cheap plastic pouches and rubber stamped with the surnames of the families who process and peddle them.

Part of that change can be attributed to Lydia Perez-Lomibao, owner of J. Emmanuel Pastries in Naga, Camarines Sur. J. Emmanuel's products are selling in Japan, the United States, Canada, South Korea, and China, and account for 10 percent of the domestic market. Its headquarters is now a landmark for visitors seeking an authentic Bicol snack food.

Back in the 90s, however, exporting *pili* was far from Lydia's mind.



## AWARDS



### PHP 500 STARTUP CAPITAL

Lydia only saw the business potential of pili when she realized how much her office colleagues in Makati liked it.

With only Php 500, she "bought a kilo of flour, six cans of condensed milk, and a kilo of pili nuts, plus 50 molds," then baked them in an old family oven and sold them to friends and, eventually, to vendors in Naga.

### A CHANCE ENCOUNTER

In 1997, Lydia named her home-based business after her son Joseph Emmanuel and registered it with the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), which happened to be looking for local products to showcase at the Palarong Bikol. Her company was among those invited by DTI, which helped her improve the product, acquire training and certification in international food safety protocol, develop a world-class packaging design, and participate in local and global trade fairs.

Now, she has about 30 product variants. "That's 200 kilos," Lydia says of her production requirements of three sacks of pili

daily, processed by around 60 employees of what is now a 30-million-peso medium-size company.

DTI pushed J. Emmanuel to the forefront of the pili industry. No longer is pili sold in poorly assembled plastic bags, but in vacuum-sealed packages using state-of-the-art nitrogen-flushing and sealing machine, which extends the shelf life of the product.

### PILIPINAS

With rising demand, pili's farm production lags far behind, jacking up prices and making supply unpredictable.

Lydia embarked on a social enterprise program called PILIPINAS, giving away free pili seedlings to farmers and families for planting in their backyards or bare land. The program now covers 10 hectares.

Pili trees start bearing fruits at the age of five, with yield peaking after 10 years. "We started planting in 2013 and expect to harvest in 2018," Lydia beams, knowing that the best is yet to come.

## HOW DTI HELPED

The DTI helped Lydia Perez-Lomibao promote and showcase her pili nut products to local and international distributors through trade fairs such as the Palarong Bikol, Orgullo Kan Bikol (OKB) trade fair, and the International Food Exhibition (IFEK) in Manila.



### PRODUCT EXPANSION

Aside from the selection of many flavored pili nuts, J. Emmanuel Pastries has developed new product lines such as brittled pili nuts, pili nut reveal bars, banana chips with honey, and Bikol puto seko among others.



**DID YOU KNOW?**  
The pili tree is dubbed as the next "tree of life." Its processed pulps can be used as cooking oil; shells for handicrafts and firewood; leaves for salads; and sap for perfumes.

## Pili Facts

- TREE**  
It is huge, growing to an average height of 66 feet or more than 18 meters. Yet, it can withstand strong winds and rains, with Bikol being in the typhoon alley. Once mature, the tree, even in the wild, bears fruits year-round.
- FRUIT**  
Green when young and deep purple or black when ripe, the fruit is blanched in hot water for three minutes to peel the skin easily. The pulp, dipped in or mixed with calamansi or bagoong alamang (shrimp paste), is eaten as an appetizer or side dish.
- NUT**  
The pili nutshell is among the hardest and most difficult to crack. No machine has been invented yet to beat the bolo-wielding, skillful hands in cracking the shell open without damaging the kernel. The skill is acquired through years of patience, and an experienced hand can open a hundred kilos in a day.
- KERNEL**  
Soft and creamy yet crispy, the kernel is made into confectionery, or eaten raw (peeled or with its brown skin). It can also be salted, fried, coated with sugar, dry-roasted and ground for use in pastries, or even sprinkled to coffee as accent.