

# Up the Stairway from Obscurity

Lao Integrated Farms, Inc.

*Many are surprised to know that Western countries are sourcing their coconut-based food products from a far-away town in Davao del Sur, but they are.*



**THE FARMER SCIENTIST**  
Benjamin acquired awards and recognitions after he shifted to organic farming. Now they have hit it big in the international market with their coconut based products such as coco balls, cocovron, ice creams, and more.

A remote farm in Davao del Sur is surprisingly supplying organic coconut-based health and gourmet products to the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and other European countries.

The farm was inherited and developed by a Bureau of Immigration employee who opted to quit his job and pursue organic farming instead.

Benjamin R. Lao is now President and Chief Executive Officer of his own Lao Integrated Farms Inc.—an advocate of organic farming and healthy living.

**THE START**

With a small capital and 325 undernourished coconut trees planted in a five-hectare land inherited from his father in 1988, Ben tried to make a business out of that distant farm, which produced only 800 nuts quarterly.

Being allergic to chemical fertilizer, Ben had no other alternative but to go organic, composting farm wastes into natural fertilizer.

Even with falling copra prices, Ben held on to his farm and manufactured coconut sugar and other sap-based products to rise from the ordeal.

**THE ROLE OF DTI**

At that time, coconut sugar manufacturing was still in its infant stage, but he had no choice but to diversify. Fortunately, there was the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) to serve as the hub in extending to him all the government assistance he badly needed.

"DTI helped us find our markets in the United States, Germany, France, and other countries. We have also improved our packaging because of DTI," Ben says of the agency's pivotal role in the success of his business, including guidance in the company's application for and receipt of local and international organic and safety certifications.

Now, the company produces teriyaki sauce, ginger brew, turmeric, lemon grass and moringa teas, guyabano syrup, and hot chocolate, among others, all from the sap of the coconut or with coco sugar, whose low glycemic index makes it ideal for weight maintenance and the management of diabetes mellitus, heart disease, and hypertension.

The business has helped increase the income of coconut tappers from a monthly average of only Php 1,000 to Php 20,000. The number of Ben's employees has also increased from five to more than 90, with the coconut tappers numbering to over a hundred.

"All in all in the farm, we have 400 to 500 people," Ben says.

Today, the farmers can send their children to school, buy properties and motorcycles, upgrade their skills and work ethic, and experience marked improvements in their quality of life.



**GIVING BACK TO NATURE**  
After all the success Benjamin and his company have acquired, he never forgets to give back to nature. They have partnered with NGOs and government organizations to promote organic farming.



**DID YOU KNOW?**  
There is a law in the Philippines which promotes organic farming and ensures proper production and handling of organic products.

**HOW DTI HELPED**

DTI's **RIPPLES Plus** helped Benjamin Lao develop his products which are now being exported to the United States, Germany, and France, among others.

**DONNABELLE PRODUCTS**  
With Lao Integrated Farms' expanding export market, its Donabelle brand gains local patronage and recognition. "Donnabelle" was coined from the combined names of his two daughters. All with coconut sugar, its products have become synonymous to healthy alternative sweeteners and organic whole foods. Ben's coconut products are guaranteed 100 percent chemical-free.



**AWARDS**

For his feats in organic farming, Ben was named *Magsasaka Siyentista* (farmer scientist) by the Philippine Council for Agriculture, Aquatic, and Natural Resources Research and Development under the Department of Science and Technology.

Subsequent achievements made him a finalist in the Ernst and Young Entrepreneur of the Year Awards Philippines 2015, and earned him various recognitions from DTI, Department of Agriculture, the Wageboard, and Ernst & Young, among others.

**BACK TO NATURE**

In giving back to the community, the company grows and maintains tree plantations in Bansalan town, feeds public school children in the area, and airs a radio program titled *Don't Panic, Go Organic!* in Mindanao.

**FUTURE PLANS**

Now having diversified further into bakeshop and water refilling ventures, Ben is keen in putting up an organic wellness resort to feature and promote the health benefits of green farming.

Ben's vision does not end there, though. "I see the Philippines emerging as an organic hub in Asia," he confidently stresses, citing passion and perseverance as keys.

"So, whatever happens along the way, you always pick yourselves up and go on to reach your goals," he says of his own trip up the stairway from obscurity.