

A few years ago, while I was attending the annual UN General Assembly in New York, First Lady Michelle Obama organised a special programme of events for the other First Ladies in attendance. The most exciting event on offer was a trip to a ranch – one run on the principle of being as organic and close to nature as possible – just outside of the city. In Estonian terms, it was a giant farm. American style.

All of us First Ladies were shown onto a coach and, once settled, our journey along the ten-lane highways winding their way through the Big Apple began. But we'd barely been half an hour on the road when the security escort accompanying us turned off, the blue lights on their motorcycles flashing, and led us onto a dirt road that couldn't have been more genuine if it tried. After driving for another ten minutes, our arrival was marked not only by the clouds of dust billowing up into the heavens as we pulled up at our destination, but by the alarmed calls of geese and ducks. It's not often that anyone arrives here to a display of flashing lights that any disco would be proud of, after all. It's not really the done thing, either, considering you're in the bosom of nature.

We ladies emerged onto a lawn of lush green grass – which was actually real! None of the Astroturf you find elsewhere in America. Those who opted for heels, despite the warnings, were forced to spend the next hour or so on tiptoe. The lady who runs the ranch wanted to show us her herb garden, which was impossibly aromatic, and not unlike our own; before we reached it, we were distracted by the flower beds, which were a mixture of the wild and the cultivated. All of them were carefully and properly labelled in both English and Latin. But since this wasn't an excursion to some botanical garden, but rather a working farm, we soon learnt what they 'produced': knowledge. Their days on the ranch are filled with all sorts of excursions, and all sorts of visitors: mostly school children in their nature studies groups; some bigger, some smaller, but always amazed at the fact that oil can be pressed from seeds and nuts, that ketchup's main ingredient is a delightfully scented red flower which doesn't taste anything like the sauce if you nibble on its petals, and that potato chips start out in life as little bulbs buried in the soil. And so on.

As we were shown out of the gardens and into the fields, the lady of the ranch swelled with even greater pride. She showed us how truly environmentally friendly farming works: part of their land is ploughed for grains and vegetables, while the rest is used as hayfields; natural fertiliser is provided for the former by their chickens and for the latter by their cattle. Portable chicken coops resembling the little huts constructed on building sites to give the workers somewhere to warm their cockles are moved about the fields by tractor to wherever fertiliser is required. The chickens themselves potter about in the fields, seemingly quite satisfied with their itinerant lifestyle.

Suddenly, behind me, a group of ladies from Africa exploded with laughter. I stepped towards them, wondering what had tickled their fancy; one, wearing a colourful turban-like headdress, smiled broadly as she told me: "We were brought here to see the most exotic thing America has to offer – free-range chickens poking about in a field! – and we have them all over the place in our villages: they're everywhere!" It's understandable that she found it funny for the First Lady of one of the wealthiest and most developed countries in the world to showcase something which was so mundane to her as something so rare and precious – but she probably hadn't considered that domesticated animals given the freedom to roam about as they choose actually is exotic and something to be valued in certain parts of the world.

Chicken husbandry is all the rage among American urbanites at the moment, since they're fed up of antibiotics, hormones, chemicals and the aggressive sales pitches that are part and parcel of them all. The lady from Africa would undoubtedly have laughed even longer and harder had she heard about the chickens and other poultry roosting on highrise roofs and in apartments in the big city, and of the egg parties that are popular at the moment – at which those who've turned their backs on the cholesterol fear-mongers eat their fill of eggs and come up with new ways of cooking with them. They admire the smooth texture of one another's home-grown eggs and the subtle changes in colour of their yolks as the summer progresses. Mechanical production in artificial light out of synch with the cycle of nature fails to produce such finds, after all.

But what seems new is often simply the old rediscovered. Lucky are those who keep pace with developments in technology whilst acknowledging long-held traditions. Because, where food is concerned at least, healthy city kids never saw anything good come out of a chemistry lab or factory, but from the fields, the forests and the ocean. That's something we shouldn't forget. It's a principle we should live by, respecting and supporting those who provide us with this bounty, rain, hail or shine. Honouring nature and the people we share this planet with.

It was a happy realisation that day when I thought: yes, we're not that different from the Americans – very techno-savvy and forward-thinking; but at the same time we're still running barefoot in the fields, without turning our noses up at the cowpats, and always knowing where the best places are to pick berries and mushrooms. We should recognise that that's something we should be grateful for, and recognise it now. Otherwise it could be too late.