



International Rice Research Institute visit

28th February 2014

On a beautifully sunny day last week, 15 BWA ladies escaped the city early and headed south to Los Banos, Laguna. Our guide for the day at the International Rice Research Institute was Charmian Sackville Hamilton, whose boundless expertise and enthusiasm instantly dispelled any sneaky suspicion that rice research might not be all that interesting. IRRI is home to a workforce of over 1000 scientists and support staff in a lovely rural setting just outside Los Banos, where the rice fields stretch out to the surrounding mountains. It is a non-profit global institution which relies on international donors for its funding and aims to help reduce world hunger and poverty by developing new and better rice varieties.

We arrived there at ten and drove out to the fields with Charmian to see some research in action: a multi-coloured patchwork of various species of rice. Shades of yellow, orange, purple, red and black rice; fat grains, thin grains, hairy rice, smooth rice, tall, short, upright, floppy, happy, sad... all at different stages of growth to reduce cross-species interference. Every plot is marked with a code number and the progress and health of the plants is meticulously recorded.

After being out in the open gleaning information and taking lots of pictures we were glad to escape the sun by heading to the Gene Bank where the seeds from the harvested plants are stored. Now, how many different types of rice could we name? Basmati, Arborio, brown, pudding, sticky and Uncle Ben's was about as far as I got. But IRRI has over one hundred thousand different varieties! The harvested grains are dried and sorted by hand to remove any that are damaged or unhealthy. We watched a team of local women deftly examine every single grain, sweeping the rejects aside, and marvelled at the ladies' concentration. The successful seeds are packed into little brown paper bags and kept in a big fridge. We braved the cold to see them. Charmian explained that IRRI also stores, under lock and key, a small sample of every rice gene in the world in walk-in freezers which are flood, earthquake and typhoon-proof. (We gave the freezers a miss.) Farmers will be able to use the seeds in the aftermath of any calamity which might otherwise wipe out a particular strain. There are even backups. One is in the US and another set is kept deep inside a frozen mountain in Svalbard, Norway. In



the event of a world-wide power cut, all those rice seeds will still be safe. We were impressed by this example of international co-operation and forward planning. Even North Korea has sent rice samples!

After our picnic lunches, ranging from the meagre to the magnificent, we toured Rice World. This is IRRI's museum of all things to do with rice, the staple food of half the world's population. From showing where and how it is grown, the machinery used and the pests that threaten the crop, to the harvest festivals and by-products, the museum gives a sense of the fundamental role that rice plays in so many people's lives. We had fun looking at examples of rice coffee, wine, oil, vinegar, crackers, Krispies, flour, noodles, paper.. (and Uncle Ben's!). The list is endless. Those of us who were able to stay on were invited back to a delicious tea at Charmian's house where we enjoyed seeing her garden with its wonderful mix of tropical and temperate flowers and vegetables.

Many thanks are due to Helen Sturdy, who organised our trip so efficiently, and to Charmian, our fantastic hostess.

Julie Ibbott

