

Follow the Potato: How One Plant Forever Altered the World

Nikka Rosenstein

The United Nations estimates that, in 2007, the combined production of potatoes worldwide reached 325.3 million metric tons (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations). That's over 100 pounds of potatoes for every person on Earth. These tubers all eventually made their way into the stomachs of Earth's inhabitants, becoming food for humans, fodder for livestock, or alcohol or food starch. However, the widespread cultivation and use of the potato only occurred over the last 500 years. The arrival of Europeans to the Americas at the turn of the sixteenth century inarguably altered the history of the Western Hemisphere, but those Europeans also brought the potato back with them to their home countries, and that single plant forever altered the history of the entire world.

The Native Americans who inhabited modern-day Bolivia likely cultivated the potato from a wild root in the area (Simmons et. al.). It quickly spread to a large area, including modern-day Peru, as an alternative staple for areas that had difficulty growing the more iconic maize. Properly dried, potatoes could keep for years without refrigeration. Though the version eaten today is often freeze-dried for speed and convenience, *chuño* may be one of the first potato preparations in the world.

The introduction of the potato to Europe was not as greatly marked as it might have been, since many Europeans did not initially feel keen about the tuber. Laws regulating the use of open fields often limited large-scale agriculture to grains, meaning that farmers grew potatoes in small garden plots (McNeill). Some Europeans thought the potato contained poison, because it grew underground, which resulted in the nickname "the Devil's Apples." The proper French term for potato is still "pomme de terre," which literally translates to "apple of the earth."

By the eighteenth century, however, Europe began to change its mind. Potatoes were cheap, nutritious, and, unlike wheat or rye, did not need grinding before consumption. King Frederick the Great of Prussia thought highly of the potato and insisted his subjects cultivate it. French royalty promoted the potato as food for the peasants. Peter the Great introduced potatoes to Russia, though it took until the end of the nineteenth century for Russians to accept the potato and integrate it fully into their agriculture (Ekshtut).

But the potato did not stop there. European colonists and traders brought the plant to Africa, India, and China. India received the potato in the seventeenth century and quickly adopted it into cuisine (Gopal et. al.). The samosa, a traditional food since the days of the Persian Empire, now almost always contains potatoes. Another Persian originating dish, Massaman curry, is standard potato-bearing fare in Thailand. Cooks in Japan have long incorporated potatoes into stews and ground them into flour for pancakes.

Meanwhile, the potato became first a savior and then a destroyer in Ireland. This root vegetable had become extremely popular in the poorer parts of the country. As one historian explained, “Close to half the population ate little except potatoes and buttermilk—a diet that, although monotonous, was highly nutritious” (Kinealy). Unfortunately, this monoculture made Ireland susceptible to disease. Between 1845 and 1852, five near-consecutive crop failures due to a mold that grew on the potato killed one in eight people. Ironically, this famine drove millions of Irish immigrants to the United States, back across the Atlantic Ocean that had brought them their traitorous staple.

It is ironic that these Irish immigrants were preceded by their own potato. The potato came to North America by way of Ireland, rather than straight north from its origins in what is now Bolivia. Potato cultivation arrived in New England from Europe and spread west with the white settlers (invaders, from the perspective of the Native Americans), reaching the West Coast in a little more than a century.

Following this path, the sheer distance covered by the spread of the potato is astounding. It traveled over ten thousand miles from Bolivia, to Ireland, to Idaho; over 14 thousand miles from Brazil, to India, to Japan. These routes do not count the potato’s many branching paths through Europe, Russia, and Africa. Since the Earth’s circumference is just under 25 thousand miles, it’s no exaggeration to say that the potato has literally circled the globe. The potato’s travels changed nutrition, culture, and demographics worldwide.

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Nominating Faculty: Professor Geoff Zylstra, History 1110, Department of Social Science, School of Arts and Sciences, New York City College of Technology, CUNY.

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