

The History of the Potato



Archaeological evidence credits the natives of Peru with cultivating the earliest forms of potatoes approximately 4500 years ago. Wild tubers have been found in the Peruvian plateau and mountainous regions, where it was too cold for wheat or corn. They provided an ideal source of nutrition as early as 10,000 years ago. The tubers were easily stored and transported, and were resilient to the harsh climate. The Mochia, Chimu, and Inca cultures developed frost-resistant varieties from wild tubers, called papa, which they cultivated as a key part of their primarily vegetarian diet.

Cultivation

The peoples of the Andean region of Peru developed several techniques to improve the production and storage of potatoes. To preserve potatoes for long-term storage, they developed a technique to freeze-dry the tubers. Potatoes were left on the ground to freeze during the cold nights and, in the morning, trampled to remove the trapped moisture. This process was repeated over a period of 4-5 days until all of the moisture was removed from the crushed potatoes. The remaining white potato flour, called chuño, was lightweight and storable for up to four years. Archaeological evidence suggests highland natives traded chuño with lowlanders. Chuño is still made today in Bolivia, Chile, and Peru, where it is mixed with water for food or used as flour for baking bread.

To cultivate potatoes, these early Peruvian farmers developed a foot plow called the tacla as a tool to turn the tough sod and prepare the soil for planting. The tacla was basically a 5-6 foot wooden stick with two handles, and a tip that was hardened by fire or tipped with copper. These tools used human weight as leverage to turn the heavy sod and were instrumental in the success of potato cultivation. Similar tools, with steel tips, are still used by farmers today in South America.

The Incas also developed a system of regular crop rotation to keep their potato fields fertile and brewed a beer-like drink called chicha from potatoes.

Importance

The potato played an important part in the lives of the South American natives both as an everyday food and as a cultural influence. The Quechua language records more than one thousand words to describe potatoes and potato varieties. Particularly in highly elevated regions where maize and wheat would not grow, the potato became the primary food.

Ancient artifacts show that the people of the Andean highlands used potatoes as a theme in their art. Pottery pieces were made to resemble potatoes and sometimes showed potatoes with human characteristics. The potato was also believed to have medicinal qualities and was rubbed on the skin of sick patients as a remedy.

The importance of the potato in the lives of Andean natives is evident in the religious ceremonies created surrounding the tuber. The Inca people worshiped potato gods and celebrated to ensure the success of their potato crops. Rituals and sacrifices were offered to appease the gods especially in times of need.

The Spanish explorers of the 1500's were the first Europeans to come in contact with potatoes. They had ventured to South America, nearly 500 years ago, in search of gold, treasure, and new land. Along with the gold loot taken from South American natives, the Spanish conquistadors carried potatoes back to their homeland aboard their ships. The Spaniards also saw the potato as a valuable source of food for the Inca slaves, forced to work in Spanish silver mines in Bolivia. Potatoes became a common food for Spanish sailors during their arduous crossings of the Atlantic.

Written Accounts

In 1537, Castellanos, a Spanish conquistador wrote about the first European encounter with potatoes. After raiding a village in South America, Castellanos and his party found the area deserted and entered the houses in search of loot. Instead of gold and silver, they found maize, beans, and truffles. From reading Castellanos' account we now know these truffles were in fact potatoes.

Originally it was believed that the potato was native to Virginia. John Gerard, an herbalist and gardener, published one of the first written accounts of potatoes in his book *Herbal* in 1597. In his book, Gerard claimed that the potato was native to Virginia, a fact that would remain unchallenged for 300 years.

Gerard's mistake stemmed from Sir Francis Drake's remarkable circumnavigation of the globe from 1577-1580. On his voyage, Drake encountered potatoes while collecting supplies on an island off the coast of Chile. Later he took on board a group of starving Virginians and later it was assumed that the potatoes were associated with these Virginian passengers.

The Potato Enters Europe

After its original introduction into Spain by returning conquistadors, the potato spread slowly across Europe. At first the plant was treated with distrust and fear, or grown only as a novelty. Fear of the potato lasted for centuries, as some people believed that it was unholy or unchristian, dirty, primitive, or unhealthy. However, others began to recognize the potato as a medicinal plant and its popularity soared when it was heralded as a powerful aphrodisiac. Herbalists claimed that the potato could cure ills ranging from diarrhea to tuberculosis. The Spanish were the first Europeans to appreciate the potato as a delicacy.

France

The French were originally suspicious of potatoes. Potatoes gained acceptance in the 18th century through the work of Antoine August Parmentier. Parmentier, a pharmacist, was imprisoned during the Seven Years War (1756–1763) in a German jail. Parmentier gave credit to the potatoes fed to him in jail for his survival. When he was released, Parmentier worked to promote the vegetable in his homeland. He managed to convince King Louis XVI of France to support the potato and thereby began the popular spread of potatoes in France. He also invited esteemed gentlemen, such as Benjamin Franklin, to his home to sample potato dishes in an attempt to quell the fears of his fellow Frenchmen. Parmentier was one of the most effective promoters of the potato in Europe.

The Potato Comes to Ireland

During the 1500's Ireland was torn apart by constant warfare between the country's English rulers and Irish inhabitants, and between local nobles who were always fighting one another. As a result of this continual conflict, Ireland's peasant farmers had a hard time growing enough food to feed themselves, let alone anyone else. It was into this starving, war-torn Ireland that the potato was introduced around the 1600's.

It was not until 1663 that the potato was established as a field crop. In Ireland, the potato found a perfect growing climate and the Irish people quickly embraced the crop as the common daily food. The potato so popular that it was soon established as a national food and the name "Irish Potatoes" was given to them to distinguish them from sweet potatoes.

The potato caught on very quickly in Ireland. The potato's popularity was based on the potato producing more food per acre than any other crops Irish farmers had grown before. In peaceful times the potato spread throughout Ireland as a healthy and reliable source of food. In times of war it was popular as well. When soldiers destroyed farmers' crops and livestock – as soldiers often did –, the potato would survive because it was hidden, buried below ground. When the soldiers left, people could still dig up potatoes and eat them.

Ireland was the first country in Europe where the potato became a major food source. By the 1800's, the potato was so important in Ireland that some of the poorer parts of the country relied entirely on the potato for food. Because the potato was so abundant and could feed so many people, it allowed the population of Ireland to grow very quickly.

The Famine Strikes

The blight appeared in Ireland in 1845. The blight was the fungus *Phytophthora infestans* that destroyed potato plants and was the principal cause of what came to be known as the Irish Potato Famine. The blight wiped out the potato crop in 1845, 1846 and again in 1848. People were left with nothing to eat and no way to make money. Many wandered the countryside, begging for food or work. Others ate grass and weeds to survive. Those who could afford to left the country in search of a better life.

Over the course of the famine almost one million people died from starvation or disease. Another million left Ireland, mostly for Canada and America. Of those who left, many died on board the boats they were traveling in because the conditions were so crowded and dirty. For this reason,

the ships that carried Irish immigrants to the New World became known as "coffin ships". Unfortunately immigrants to the New World soon found out that the blight was ravaging potato crops there as well.

The New World

After being introduced to Europe from South America, the potato continued its journey, carried by European settlers to North American colonies.

With a huge influx of Scots-Irish settlers to Londonderry, New Hampshire, in 1719, the popularity of the potato soared in the colonies. The Irish had already established the potato as a staple crop in their homeland and found that it grew well in their new settlements. The success of these early potato crops prompted other colonists to cultivate potatoes. The spread of potatoes through the American colonies was swift.

By 1720, the tide of potatoes had reached Connecticut. Fifteen years later potatoes were introduced to Rhode Island and by 1745 had become so popular in the colony that they were able to export potatoes for profit.

Even with its quick spread, Americans didn't appreciate potatoes as a delicacy as the Spanish had done. However, with Thomas Jefferson's support in 1789, the potato was better accepted. As the American Minister to France, Jefferson had gained an appreciation for French cooking and, in particular, their potato dishes. Jefferson can be given credit for introducing pomme-frites (the French word for French-fries) to American cuisine. Later, as President, he had potatoes served in various forms at White House dinners. Through this support, the potato gained popularity in North America as a fine food and a popular crop.

World War I and World War II

The potato became important once again in Britain during both World Wars, when Axis submarines were sinking allied ships bringing food to Britain. The potato can feed five times as many people as the same acreage of wheat, and so the potato made sense as a food source for the hard-pressed British in both wars.

During the Second World War, Russian scientists considered potatoes vital to the war effort. Scientists at Pavlovsk experimental station protected a bag full of seed potatoes when their station came under attack. The tubers were brought to a basement in Leningrad where the scientists guarded them against frostbite and rats day and night. The scientists were defending South American potatoes they considered vital to the genetic improvement of their own potato crop. Without these potatoes, they believed Russia could be defeated. Potatoes were so important to Russia that these seeds were considered more precious than gold. In Russia today, potatoes are called the "Second Bread."

When potatoes were first harvested by South American natives thousands of years ago, they were handpicked from wild plants growing in the mountains. These wild potatoes were typically small,

hard, and bitter. Over time the natives devised techniques to grow better tasting and hardier hybrid varieties.

Today there are many varieties of potatoes available such as: Russet Burbank, brown skin good for baking and great for frying; Yukon Gold, gold skin excellent for baking, good for boiling and frying; Bison, red skin good for baking and boiling not well suited for frying.

Potatoes can be boiled, roasted, baked, mashed, steamed and fried. The cooking time will vary depending on the method cooked anywhere from 20 to 60 minutes.

Nutritional Value

One of the main reasons for the popularity of the potato is its excellent nutritional value. It has a good ratio of proteins to calories and the quality of those proteins is high. There is also a high level of vitamins and minerals. It has almost no fat or salt and offers more potassium than a banana. In reality, a fair-sized baked potato contains about the same number of calories as an average apple or a glass of orange juice.

