



the great FOOD MIGRATION

Imagine, if you will, a time when English food was actually worse than it is today. Imagine Italian cuisine without tomatoes, or Mexican food that was literally grub—insect larvae, as well as eggs. Columbus, sailing West in search of Eastern spices and gold, brought about cultural revolutions that reached virtually every nation in the world. The changes in the global menu don't simply mean better eating—the new foods altered the fates of nations and strengthened a growing sense of national identity. "The French, Italian, and Spanish food 'traditions' we now think of as primeval all sprang up relatively recently," writes Raymond Sokolov in his new book "Why We Eat What We Eat," "and would be unrecognizable without the American foods sent across the water, mostly in Spanish boats."

Europe was certainly ready for a change. The lower and merchant classes had put up with a dull menu for years. Peasants commonly ate dark bread made with rye and wheat; cabbage soup and cheeses (or cheese curds) filled out a typical meal. Wealthier families ate much of the same things, but they enjoyed more variety in flavors, thanks to the obsession with Asian spices that first set Columbus on his way. Spices also had a practical purpose for the pre-refrigerator era: they blanketed the smell and flavor of decay.

At the upper end of the social scale, meals approached the orgiastic. A noble meal might include whole roasted peacocks with skin and feathers reattached after cooking—or even four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie. "Presentation was enormously important," says Bridget Henisch, a food historian at State College in Pennsylvania. Feasts, she explains, "went with the whole medieval enjoyment of heraldry and drama, the music and trumpets announcing the arrival of the main dish." The thing they were hungriest for was novelty—and Columbus provided it.

Each new cargo transformed the European menu. The Americas may not have produced traditional spices and condiments such as clove, ginger, cardamom and almonds, but they produced potatoes, corn and other colorful crops that excited the 16th-century palate. Peanuts and vanilla, as well as

Forget gold. The real treasures the e

brought back from the New

and a lowly tuber. Chocolate wasn't b

green beans, pineapple and turkey all broadened the horizons of European chefs. Some of the exotic new crops had humble beginnings; before the tomato made its way into the cuisines of Spain, Italy and other European societies, it was a weed in the Aztec maize fields.

The Aztecs came to cultivate tomatoes in astonishing varieties. Food historian Sophie Coé found a description of markets in the writings of a 16th-century Aztec chronicler. (In reading the following passage, it is best to imagine it being narrated by John Cleese.) "The tomato seller sells large tomatoes, small tomatoes, leaf tomatoes, thin tomatoes, sweet tomatoes, nipple-shaped tomatoes, serpent tomatoes. He also sells coyote tomatoes, sand tomatoes, those which are yellow, very yellow, quite yellow, red, very red, quite ruddy, ruddy, bright red, reddish, rosy dawn colored." Not all the tomatoes were easy on the palate, the Aztec noted: "The bad tomato seller sells spoiled tomatoes, bruised tomatoes, those which cause diarrhea; the sour, the very sour. Also he sells the green, the hard ones, those which scratch one's throat, which disturb—trouble one; which make one's saliva smack, make one's saliva flow; the harsh ones, those which burn the throat."

The first tomatoes to reach Europe were probably yellow, since the Italian word for it is *pomodoro*—"golden apple." While the tomato took root in every European culture, it truly conquered Italy, where the warm climate proved ideal for the source of rich red sauces. Still, Europeans were slow to accept it. Like many exotic foods—including the far less assertive potato (page 60)—it was first thought to be either a poison or an aphrodisiac.

While Europe was coming to grips with the tomato, the Americas were being invaded by



by JOHN SCHWARTZ

It was the start of a beautiful friendship. Juan de Castellanos, a conquistador charting the wilds of Colombia, came upon a deserted Indian village in whose houses he found "maize, beans and truffles." In fact, the "truffles" were potatoes which, the explorer noted, were "good of flavor, a gift very acceptable to Indians and a dainty dish even for Spaniards." This union—potatoes and Europeans—would change the course of world history as much as any gold or silver pilfered from the Incan Empire.

The true daintiness of the potato would not be discovered until a later age. At the outset, Europeans treated it as a food for the masses. Potatoes were loaded aboard Spanish treasure ships as a cheap food for sailors bringing home the booty of the New World. They reached England and Germany courtesy of Sir Francis Drake, who apparently picked up a batch during a stop in Colombia in 1556, where he was seeking to stake out part of the New World for Elizabeth I.

It wasn't so much the potato's taste that appealed to the European elite; they imagined it was an aphrodisiac. "Let the sky rain potatoes!" cried Shakespeare's Falstaff in a moment of passion. Europe's peasants were more cautious: before they came to subsist on the potato, they mistrusted it, even thought it might be poisonous. In 1619 potatoes were banned in Burgundy because "too frequent use of them caused the leprosy." Even starving Prussians refused to touch them when, in 1774, Frederick the Great sent a wagonload of potatoes to Kolberg to relieve famine.

Over time, however, necessity and familiarity dulled the peasantry's bias. "One and a half acres, planted with potatoes, would provide enough food, with the addition of a bit of milk, to keep a

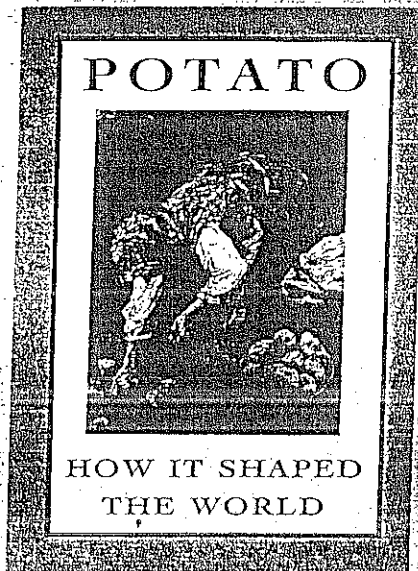
family hearty for a year," wrote Alfred Crosby in "The Columbian Exchange." In Ireland, the potato was not ruined when battle raged over the ground in which it grew, and it could remain safely hidden in the earth throughout the winter, even when a peasant's home and stores were raided or set afire by English soldiers. Because potatoes are ideally suited to northern climates, Catherine the Great launched a pro-potato campaign as an antidote to famine in 18th-century Russia. Vodka soon followed, and the potato

thus became indelibly fixed in the Russian diet. (The instant popularity of vodka should be no surprise; one of the Russian drinks it replaced was fermented grapes with a hunk of meat thrown in for flavor.)

But it was in Ireland that the potato made its greatest mark. "It was not exceptional for an Irishman to consume 10 pounds of potatoes a day and very little else," wrote Crosby. On this diet, the

Irish population nearly tripled between 1754 and 1846. But depending on the potato was precarious; when the potato blight hit Europe in 1845 the consequences were devastating. In Ireland, as food historian Reay Tannahill describes it, "the potato famine meant more than food scarcity. It meant no seed potatoes from which to grow next year's crop. It meant that the pig or cow which would normally have been sold to pay the rent had to be slaughtered, because there was nothing to fatten it on." No cow for the rent could mean eviction, and hunger was soon compounded by scurvy, failing eyesight, even dementia, from vitamin deficiency. Nearly a million Irish men and women died as a result of the blight. Another million immigrated to the United States. They were, in a way, the New World's harvest from those first potato exports 300 years earlier.

—MARY TALBOT



new foods as well. Before Columbus, many native cultures were relatively meatless. In the 16th century, writes food historian Reay Tannahill, Mexicans began their day "with a bowl of maize porridge, sweetened with honey or spiced with red pepper. The main meal of the day was at the hottest time, in the early afternoon. Then there would be tortillas to eat, a dish of beans—which were grown in Mexico in great variety—and a sauce made from tomatoes or peppers." For a change of pace some dishes contained grubs, insect eggs and pond scum.

With Columbus came an explosion of new foods. To provide familiar table fare for Spanish colonists, the crown sent over crops and animals from home. Before Columbus, Peru's meat specialty had been the guinea pig; after the explorer's visits, Mexico and Peru suddenly had beef and pork, as well as milk and cheeses. Chickens, sheep and goats also provided new meats that quickly became staples. Columbus brought vegetable seeds, wheat, chickpeas and sugar cane to the Caribbean in his later voyages.

The novel foods not only broadened menus; some of them transformed whole cultures. The advent of crops like potatoes and corn, which could produce far more nutrition per acre than the grains that came before, allowed for population growth. Some even claim potatoes, through their influence, made the industrial rise of Germany possible—and, by extension, the first world war.

The spicy peppers of the capsicum genus have not had quite the public-relations triumph of the potato, but as their partisans know they have their own way of making an impression. Columbus, having failed to find the Indian spices he sought, brought back the capsicum peppers he found. The peppers flourished in southern climes and took hold in dishes like Italy's *arrabbiata* (angry) sauce. Eventually the capsicum peppers of the New World even made their way into the cuisine of India, where spices were

much favored, and into the Sichuan and Hunan provinces of China, too. Food writer Sokolov cites scholars who suggest that Portuguese traders carried the Columbian Exchange into those two nations. Portuguese traders in the Middle East could have passed peppers along to the Turks, whose Ottoman Empire stretched all the way to the Balkans. Few Northern European peoples were interested in peppers, which were hard to grow in their climate. But the Magyars of present-day Hungary took to them lustily and gave them a name derived from their own word for pepper: paprika. Today, Hungarian paprikas run the gamut from sweet to fiery hot—and form a link in a chain that stretches all the way back to Mexico.

As the foods spread around the world and ingredients became shared, you might have expected to see a common "international cuisine"—a kind of culinary Esperanto—result. Mercifully, things didn't turn out that way. People took the same ingredients and did different things with them: beef, corn and chilies might become a taco in Mexico, a stir-fry in China or a spicy meatball beside a dish of Italian polenta. The food dispersion coincided with a period of evolving nationalism. Says food historian Tannahill: "The cuisines of individual countries began to take on consciously individual characteristics."

And so food came to be one of the pillars of national identity. (If you doubt this, try walking into a French restaurant and asking for pizza.) Once foods caught on, they quickly became traditions, and the fact that they were relatively recent arrivals was forgotten. One of the highest expressions of French culinary pride, for example, lies in artistic desserts often rich with chocolate. Chocolate, of course, came from tropical cacao plants in the New World. It didn't catch on with the French until the mid-17th century. Even then, the French saw chocolate only as a drink until the early 1800s, when it first came into mass production in block form.

Were it not for corn, archeologists say, the Spaniards would have been mightily disappointed when they arrived in the Americas. There would have been no Aztecs with floating cities and carved pyramids to conquer, no vast Indian armies with whom to do battle. The conquistadors likely would have left Peru empty-handed, for there would have been no Incan empire offering temples paneled in gold and stocked with jeweled icons. Corn was what made the great civilizations of Central and South America possible: it supplied the calories that nourished the thriving populations required to build complex societies.

Christopher Columbus first sampled corn in Cuba. He was impressed, declaring it "most tasty boiled, roasted, or ground into flour." When he returned to Spain, he took along a few specimen Indians, some handfuls of gold dust and a packet of corn kernels. Those first seeds may not have

made a big impression on Ferdinand and Isabella, but they quickly proved their value. Within a few years the Spaniards had introduced maize around the Mediterranean. By the mid-16th century corn was so familiar in the Southern European diet that it formed the basis of such national dishes as Italian polenta and the Romanian staple *mamaliga* (a sort of cornmeal mush). Corn also traveled to the Philippines and the rest of Asia; by 1560 it was a fixture in Chinese cooking, in everything from porridge to stir-fry.

Portuguese traders, who used corn as slave-ship stores, carried the grain to Africa. It was an instant success there: corn grew more rapidly than other grains, and it needed very little cultivation. You could plant it and then pretty much ignore it until harvest time. Corn weathered drought and the harsh African sun better than other staple foods. But its advent in

Africa was not an unmixed blessing. It produced something of a population boom, which may in turn have fed the slave trade. In addition, says historian Robert Hall, "Europeans used slave labor in Africa for cultivating New World crops like corn, yams and cassava to provision the slave ships." And it led to a serious imbalance in the African diet. But by the late 18th century, many Africans ate almost nothing but corn, and suffered from vitamin deficiency as a result. Africans today are still afflicted by pellagra or "mealie disease,"

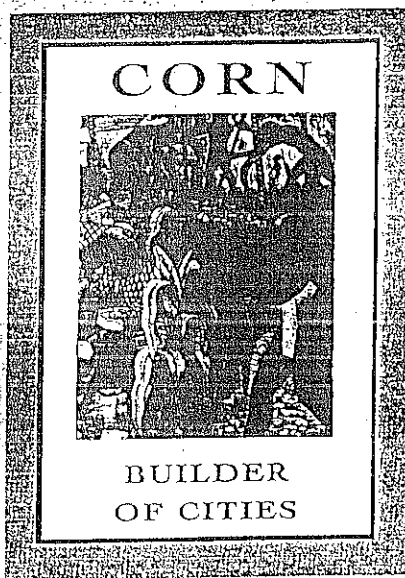
a sickness related to malnutrition from overreliance on corn.

In the Americas, Indians who depended on maize combined it with tomatoes, capicum peppers and sometimes fish—all of which contain the necessary vitamins to make up for the deficit in corn. In fact, corn on its own provided only about a third the calories of Old World staples like sorghum and millet. In Europe, humans never really took

to corn, but it became a major source of fodder for animals and helped improve nutrition by making meat cheaper.

Today, corn continues to relieve the planet's hunger—and slake its thirst. Any portrayal of the Pilgrims' first Thanksgiving would be incomplete without the requisite display of Indian maize, but what probably made the meal so jolly was a native brew of fermented corn. Later, less puritan immigrants took the process a few steps further to make that most American of liquors, bourbon whisky. Corn is the staple food of 200 million people in Africa and Latin America, and Americans consume an average of three pounds of corn a day in the form of meat, poultry and dairy products. And it's not just food: corn is used in products from baby powder to embalming fluid—the cradle to the grave.

—MARY TALBOT



Africa was also a major player in the food exchange. Thanks to Columbus, it got such crops as maize, sweet potatoes, manioc and green beans, which opened up new agricultural possibilities to a continent that had previously been confined to a relatively narrow spectrum of foodstuffs. Then those foods made their way back to the New World in the misery of the slave ships. African culinary habits—from frying to the use of such ingredients as okra—have been nearly as profound an influence on the American table as African music has been on American entertainment. “When you see a hush puppy,” says Sokolov, “it’s not just a dish for good old boys: it’s something they picked up from the African migration to this country.”

The revolution is still going on, one bite at a time. It’s easy to spot in the menus of chic new restaurants, where regional American cooking has turned menus into road maps. New foods are constantly coming into the markets to tempt the jaded palate. The latest pepper to make its faddish way into specialty stores is the scorching *habanero*, a Latin favorite also known in Anglophone countries as Scotch Bonnet for its distinctive shape. Even McDonald’s, the definition of mainstream American food, boasts Mexican and other *picante* items ranging from *fajitas* to spicy chicken wings. (If you care to enjoy the thrill of culinary subversion firsthand, the new McDonald’s Cajun hot sauce tastes awfully good on its Egg McMuffin.)

In some places, the revolution is more obvious than in others. Recently Sokolov took a

stroll through the great savory melting pot that is Jackson Heights in Queens, New York. Having traveled the world to track the results of the Columbian food migration, he seems nearly giddy with the gastronomic kaleidoscope that Queens presents. The neighborhood, he exults, “is the epitome of how this country works: immigrants come to America looking for a better life, but bringing the best of their old culture with them—happily, that always includes the food.”

He stops in at an Indian grocery for a bag of crispy spiced chickpeas, then ducks into an Uruguayan restaurant—there are several in the neighborhood, along with eateries featuring the cuisines of Colombia and Brazil. The Uruguayan meal includes roasted sweetbreads and a black blood sausage pungent with cinnamon, polished off with a Colombian red wine and snackings of the chickpeas between helpings of the meat. “Who would imagine we could get a rather complete Uruguayan meal in New York City?” Sokolov asks, marveling at the forces of immigration that put not one but two such restaurants on one block. Down the street, a Colombian bakery does a brisk business in heavy pastries and cakes. In the front window sits a massively multitiered wedding cake—and Ninja Turtle toys.

Maybe it’s the wine, but such sights and flavors bring on the thought that we really are what we eat. The global table turns out to be a vast potluck, with everyone tasting and sharing everyone else’s dishes. Through the language of our foods, we come to know one another better.

THE COLUMBIAN EXCHANGE WHAT CAME FROM WHERE

new world

old world

- CORN
- POTATO
- TOMATO
- PEPPERS (BELL AND CHILI)
- CHOCOLATE
- VANILLA
- TOBACCO
- BEANS (LIMA, POLE, NAVY, KIDNEY)
- PUMPKIN
- CASSAVA ROOT (MANIOC)
- AVOCADO
- PEANUT, PECAN, CASHEW
- PINEAPPLE
- BLUEBERRY
- SUNFLOWER
- PETUNIA
- BLACK-EYED SUSAN
- DAFFODIL
- MARIGOLD
- QUININE
- WILD RICE



- HORSE
- CATTLE
- PIG
- SHEEP
- CHICKEN
- HONEYBEE
- WHEAT, ASIAN RICE, BARLEY, OATS, S.
- SUGAR CANE
- ONION
- LETTUCE
- OKRA
- PEACH AND PEA
- WATERMELON
- CITRUS FRUIT
- BANANA
- OLIVE
- LILAC
- DAFFODIL
- TULIP
- DAISY
- DANDELION
- CRAB GRASS

old world

new world

PASTA WITHOUT TOMATO SAUCE?

National cuisine would have tasted very different without the Columbian Exchange. The delights of tacos and pepper vodka, pasta marinara and Chinese stir-fry spring from the global migration of food.

