

Food for Thought – Origin Stories and More

Some resources for more information:

The Food Empowerment Project: <https://foodispower.org/our-food-choices/colonization-food-and-the-practice-of-eating/>

Food for the Future: <https://youtu.be/BCL1UI1qRXM>

Tomatoes:

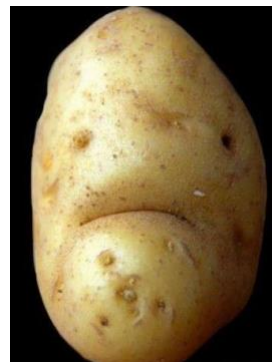
- wild, pea-sized tomatoes originate in Ecuador thousands of years ago; modern ancestor domesticated in the region of Veracruz c. 7000 years ago
- travelled to Eurasia in 16th and 17th centuries, ideally suited to the climate and soils of the Mediterranean region
- like potatoes greeted with suspicion and fear due to association with nightshades, but soon “a common ingredient in the diet of the rich, who ate them because they liked them, and of the poor, who ate them because they had no choice (McCue 1952: 327)
- read more: <https://extension.illinois.edu/blogs/garden-scoop/2020-07-25-history-tomatoes-how-tropical-became-global-crop>

Wheat:

- thought to be one of the earliest crops to be domesticated (with barley) in central Eurasia, c. 9000 years ago
- part of the gradual shift from foraging/gathering food, through selection of preferred strains, to settled agriculture
 - surplus, specialization, defence, and population growth all link to the transition to domestication
- 16th C. introduced to present-day California, Chile, and Argentina; dominant strains pushed out cereals indigenous to these areas
- wheat feeds 35% of all people on earth today
- read more: see Food Empowerment project above for the impact on indigenous crops

Potatoes:

- Andean highlands of modern-day Peru c. 8000 years ago
- reached Spain in 1540s, rapid diffusion across Eurasia for animal fodder
- association with devil worship, leprosy, and poison led to fear and rejection, but in aftermath of wars and lengthy periods of cold weather potatoes became a food of necessity
- promoted as the healthiest single food: <https://theconversation.com/can-you-survive-eating-nothing-but-potatoes-54262>



- early 19th C. seen as the food that had eliminated famine, until mid-century blight wiped out much of European crop and caused ~1 million deaths in Ireland alone
- read more about the famine: <https://www.ighm.org/learn.html>

Soybeans:

- originally domesticated in Southeast China between 9000 and 5000 years ago → Japan and Korea by 1000 BCE at the latest
- quickly became a staple throughout the region
- spread throughout southeast Asia, reaching Indian subcontinent and back to Europe by 1600s
- 19th Century before widespread cultivation in Europe and North America, mainly as a forage crop; from 1960s – present emerged from obscurity to become the second most dominant crop in US agriculture
- read more on the dominance of soy here: <https://www.history.com/news/soybean-china-american-crop-tariffs>

Bananas:

- origin in Southeast Asia and New Guinea c. 10,000 years ago
- within 2000 years reached Indian subcontinent, extending range eventually to Africa
- from India via Alexander spread westward
- by 15th and 16th century travelled with Portuguese to Brazil to feed the sugar plantations newly established in the region
- read more on bananas and neocolonialism in Central America: <https://www.thenation.com/article/economy/united-fruit-guatemala/>

Maize:

- a wild grass, (Balsas) teosinte; two rows of kernels, with hard casings to protect the kernels inside – domesticated 7-9000 years ago in central Mexico
- because casings don't digest, humans and animals would largely avoid teosinte
 - mutant plants lack the *tga1* gene and the kernels are exposed → disadvantage to the plant → advantage to the hungry
- earliest farmers collected mutant plants and encouraged absent *tga1* gene until the glumes receded and the kernels became fully exposed; subsequent genetic manipulation has rendered modern corn unable to propagate itself without human assistance; plant structure is now fundamentally changed
- reached Europe in 1493 – rapid diffusion across Afro-Eurasia contributing to massive population growth
- read more: <https://medium.com/nannie-appleseed/a-maize-ing-maize-the-history-of-corn-dc890d0bafae>

Foods with an Unexpected History

Tikka Masala:

- 1960s and early 1970s immigrants from Bengal, Gujarat, and East Pakistan
- Chef Ali Ahmed Aslam opened Shish Mahal, 1964
- introduced 'tikka masala' as a sauce for curried chicken
- read more: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-64055639>

Doughnuts:

- Nuremburg 15th Century
- adopted by Dutch traders
- introduced to New Amsterdam 17th C. "*olykoeks*"
- 1664 English capture New Amsterdam, eventually confirmed in trade for Surinam & Guyana (sugar-producing regions)
- popularized by "Donut Dollies" during WWI
- 20th C. Russian refugee invents doughnut-making machine
- read more: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-history-of-the-doughnut-150405177/>

Bannock:

- Scotland/Ireland, 8th century – oat or barley-based
- brought to the Americas by Scots settlers and fur traders in 1700s
- as Indigenous peoples forced off traditional hunting lands, severe food shortages and starvation
- bannock emerges as a way to avoid starvation as traditional foodways are fundamentally disrupted
- read more: <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/bannock>

Access the digital version of this handout here:

