



When Columbus arrived in the Caribbean in 1492, he entered a world with almost no domesticated animals. No cattle, no horses, no pigs. On his second voyage, however, instead of just the *Nina*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa Maria*, he brought 17 ships, 1,200 men, 10 mares, 24 stallions, several burros and sheep, and a full complement of cattle and pigs. The animals did well on Hispaniola because there was an unlimited amount of food, local diseases did not affect them, and they had few predators. They reproduced at an extraordinary rate, and within ten years had taken up residence on most of the Caribbean islands.

Pigs were the first to take on the New World. Sailors would “seed” a remote island by leaving behind a family of pigs. The pigs would reproduce, and be ready for dinner when the next group of Europeans stopped in.

Both cattle and the plow, which Columbus brought to the western hemisphere, dramatically altered the landscape and the diet of the Americas. Oxen were strong enough to pull an iron plow across the plains. The plow transformed the grasslands into fields of wheat and corn, and cattle converted the unfarmed grasslands into meat and milk. Native Americans had no animals that gave them this kind of protein. By the 1600s, one of the least expensive foods in



the Americas was meat.

But of all the animals imported into the Americas, the horse was the essential element in Spain’s conquest.

“You could go to the coast in your ship, but then you’d have to get to the highlands of Mexico and Peru. Horses provided the mobility. Also, a mounted horseman could sweep down on a foot soldier with great speed, and discombobulate that soldier so it left him vulnerable to being killed. It was very efficient. Thirdly, having a horse gave a psychological advantage, because New World natives had never seen an animal like that. To them, it was a kind of mythic, supernatural being.”

—Daniel W. Gade

Caribbean natives thought a horse’s favorite food was a

Caribbean native. The Indians of Chile were terrified of the Spanish horses—they believed the horse and its rider were one animal. The horse changed the battle odds.

GRAPE EXPECTATIONS

By the time Columbus arrived in the Americas, wine was the beverage of choice for the Spanish. It was what Columbus’ crew drank, and he had dozens of casks on board his ship.

New Spain first attempted to make wine in Mexico, but failed miserably. They had much better success in their South American colonies, where a major wine business developed. English settlers in the Americas were also interested in producing wine. Their new colonies were overrun with native grapevines and it seemed obvious that with a little work, good wine would be as near as the next harvest. Wrong! The wine they tried to make at Jamestown, Virginia was dismal.



But within 200 years, Spanish missions in Mexico were making wines that were pretty good. In the middle of the 1700s, the Franciscans moved north to California.

“In 1769, they brought wine with them. They needed wine, of course, for Mass. By the end of the 1770s, however, Father Serra was able to persuade Mexican officials to send cuttings to the mission at San Juan Capistrano. By the early 1780s, you actually had a vintage of wine. And from then on, it spread all over, mostly in southern California. Within two decades, there were vineyards in the missions all the way up to what is today Sonoma.

“Very few places in the world have this kind of climate. There’s a spot in Australia, one in Chile, one in South Africa, and of course one in the Mediterranean itself. Some people think we produce the greatest wine in the world. It’s debatable. But it’s a debate.”

—Charles L. Sullivan

AFRICA—THE HAND THAT STIRRED THE POT

Europeans used the Canary Islands and Madeira to test the plantation system and the use of slave labor. When Christopher Columbus planted the first sugar cane in the Caribbean, he also planted the idea of an enslaved labor force—a labor force that came almost exclusively from Africa.

Slaves came from many different tribes with many different gastronomic traditions. And when they were brought together on the boats and in the plantations, they began to exchange those traditions.

“They didn’t come from the same place. They didn’t speak the same language. As they were juxtaposed in the New World,



there was a trade-off. You end up with the evolution and creation of one of the world’s original fusion foods—Creole food.”

—Jessica B. Harris

Where slaves were allowed to grow their own food, they planted okra, bananas, watermelon, yams, rice and peanuts. As our nation developed, much of the cooking

was done by Africans, and the hand that stirs the pot usually has a lot to say about what goes into that pot and how it’s cooked.

“When you start to talk about the influence of black cooks on the food of this hemisphere, you almost don’t know where to start. . . . The soupy stews over starches, the gumbos, the leafy greens. All of those things are African. The technique of frying in deep oil or fat, one of my preferred methods, is arguably African.”

—Jessica B. Harris

To a considerable extent, American cooking has been shaped by the contributions of African foods and African American cooks.

COFFEE TAKES THE HIGH GROUNDS

“A French lieutenant named Gabriel Matthew de Clieu became obsessed with the idea of taking a coffee tree to the New World. He got hold of a tree from the Paris Botanical Gardens, and took it aboard ship. He gave it half his water ration because there was a drought. It almost got swept overboard in a storm. An evil Dutchman ripped off one of the branches in an effort to kill it. Eventually, de Clieu brought the tree to Martinique and it flourished. And from that one tree, supposedly, most of the coffee in the Western hemisphere has descended.”

—Mark Pendergrast

British colonists in North America arrived with a taste for coffee. John Smith, who led the settlers at Jamestown, had traveled in Turkey and was a coffee aficionado. Coffeehouses also crossed the Atlantic to New England with the colonists; in

1689 Boston opened its first coffeehouse.

As the United States industrialized, coffee found a new role. In the previous two centuries, coffee and coffeehouses brought thinkers, artists, writers, and politicians together for conversations that initiated social and political change. But coffee soon became the fuel that powered the industrial laborer. For workers who had to be at the factory or office early in the morning, and often for round-the-clock shift work, coffee became a necessity.

During the last 30 years, America has seen an increasing trend toward better and better coffee. It started with Alfred Peet in Berkeley, California and continued with Starbucks. Today, even gas stations have espresso machines.



Coffee is the world’s leading cash crop, the second most actively-traded commodity in the world after oil, and the most widely used psychoactive substance on the planet.

THE MEDITERRANEAN’S SIMPLE PLEASURES

The *Nina*, the *Pinta* and the *Santa Maria* were filled with water, biscuits, salted pork and beef, dry salted cod, sardines and anchovies, dried chickpeas, raisins, olive oil, vinegar and fortified wine—typical provisions for Spanish ships of the period and typical of the diet of people, living on the northern coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

As Spanish and Portuguese colonists settled down in the Americas, the foods they brought from the Mediterranean were blended with the foods available in America and a new hybrid cuisine evolved. Cooks in Mexico began making tortillas with wheat as well as corn. Olive oil, cheese, garlic and onions from the Mediterranean took up residence next to American foods like corn, chili peppers, tomatoes and chocolate. Today’s Mexican cooking owes as much to the Mediterranean diet of 500 years ago as it does to the kitchens of the Maya and Aztecs.

“After 1492, several long-lasting marriages occurred when the foods and cultures of the Old and New Worlds came together. These marriages occurred with the aid of olive oil. We



know of the instant union of olive oil and tomatoes, and the red sauces, primarily from the cooking of southern Italy. The union of olive oil with sweet peppers occurs in Spain’s *sofrito* as well as in many composed and salad dishes. The third marriage is that of the citrus fruits—lemon, lime, sour orange—with the chili peppers of Mexico.

“By the way, when you talk about the marriage of certain ingredients, there is one duo we all know and love: the little green unripe Spanish olive, stuffed with a little bit of red pimento. It is a feature of our festive tables and occurs in every

martini. How palpable a symbol of the union of two worlds can you get?"

—Elizabeth Rozin

HOW SWEET IT IS

Columbus was well aware that sugar cane was a very valuable crop. His mother-in-law owned a sugar plantation on the island of Madeira and Chris picked up a little extra change transporting sugar from there to the Italian port city of Genoa. On his second voyage in 1493, he planted sugar cane on the island that is now known as the Dominican Republic. It was the first sugar cane planted in the Americas.

The Caribbean islands were perfectly suited for sugar cane production. They have lots of flat land, plenty of water, and a climate that is hot enough but not too dry. By 1640, sugar cane was the crop of choice in Haiti, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Cuba.

"Over a million people were in that region when it was first discovered in 1492, but by the end of the 17th century,



that population had diminished to nothing. So it was a pioneer area. The one thing it didn't have was labor. Europeans understood that if they brought in free labor to work on those plantations, that labor would pick up and walk away. There would be no way to make those men work as long as there was land to be had for the asking. The only answer was to tie down your labor force. Slavery was the natural answer. And Africa was the nearest place from which to get large numbers of people. So there's an equilibrium between sugar production and the enslavement of human beings."

—Sidney Mintz

SOME LIKE IT HOT

One of Columbus' objectives was to get King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella into the pepper business. When he arrived in the Caribbean and the natives gave him a taste of a pungent fruit, he decided to call it pepper. He had two good reasons. First, it did something to his mouth that felt like pepper, and second, and much more important, he was getting paid to find pepper. So he found it.

Hot peppers have been used in Mexico and in Central and South America for their medicinal effects for thousands of years. The Aztecs rubbed hot peppers on sore muscles. The Maya made a drink of hot peppers, which they used to cure stomach pains. And they rubbed hot peppers on their gums to stop toothaches.

"Columbus was a magnificent deluded neurotic. I think he also had bronchitis and a strong personal interest in looking for a better cure for it. Finding the right type of peppers would have been an adequate treatment. There's good evidence from earliest

history that peppers were not just used as food flavors but as medicines as well, and one of the major things they were always used for was treating the common cold and bronchitis."

—Dr. Irwin Ziment

One out of every five people on the planet eats hot peppers every day. Most say they do because they like the taste, but an even better reason is that people who eat hot peppers, especially



in hot climates, are generally healthier than people who don't. Something in hot peppers and in garlic helps kill microorganisms that spoil food. Societies that have developed

without refrigeration over the last three or four thousand years have incorporated hot peppers into their diet. And they're healthier for it.

CORN—THE SEED OF LIFE

On November 4, 1492, Columbus came ashore on what is now the island of Cuba. The natives greeted him and gave him two gifts. One was tobacco, and one was corn.

His diary for the next day contained the following entry: "There was a great deal of tilled land sown with a sort of bean and a sort of grain they called *Mahiz*, which tasted good. It was baked or dried and made into flour."

On that one day, the American plants of corn and tobacco were introduced to the rest of the world. The Indians presented corn to Columbus not only because it was a valuable food, but also because it was the basis of their civilization.

"They used it for every possible food and sacred ceremony because corn is at the heart of all the mythology, the calendar, the religions, and the rituals of Mesoamerica. The corn god is represented in the plant. Man was created from dough of corn and blood."

—Betty Fussell

The Mesoamerican Indians showed the Spaniards how to grow and store corn. It was a strong plant that traveled well, grew fast and provided plenty of food. It spread quickly throughout the world.



"Corn instantly changed the way the world eats. It went around the world after Columbus. It developed with great speed everywhere it went. It grows every place but the North and South Poles. It can adapt itself to all kinds of climates and ecologies—damp, dry, high, low. It can also be eaten by both men and animals. That's enormously important."

—Betty Fussell

TIME TO PLAY KETCHUP

Between conquering and trading, the Aztecs came in contact with many different cultures and were exposed to dozens of new foods. The Maya introduced them to the tomato, which they immediately accepted because it reminded them of something they were already eating—the husk tomato. They juiced them, added some chili peppers, ground up a little pumpkin seed, and produced what we'd call salsa.

The Spanish were pretty good at conquering too, and eventually conquered the Aztecs. The first Spaniards to see a tomato were with Hernán Cortés when he invaded Mexico in 1519. They called it a *tomate*. Tomatoes did well throughout



southern Europe. But Spain, southern France and Italy were slow to incorporate them into their diets.

“It took tomatoes a while to be adopted. They're sort of bright and frightening-looking. It's hard

to believe Mediterranean cuisine didn't have tomatoes before 1600—it's the essence of Mediterranean cuisine—but they didn't.

“The green pepper or red pepper that goes with the tomato in the sauce also came from the New World, so except for the olive oil, the basic sauce used in the Mediterranean is new stuff. In many ways, it is like a meat substitute. It adds color and some of the taste and texture of meat to foods. It is widely popular, particularly in cuisines like the Mediterranean, which are not high meat cuisines.”

—Paul Rozin

HOW THE POTATO CHANGED THE WORLD

The potato was first cultivated in the Andes Mountains of South America about 7,000 years ago. The great centers of pre-Inca culture were high up, some as high as 12,500 feet above sea level. Each night the temperature would drop below freezing. Edible crops were in short supply. But the potato was one of the few crops that could be grown at high altitudes. Andean farmers came to rely on the potato.

At first, Spanish settlers looked down on the potato and relied on corn. The potato, however, did catch on with sailors, who recognized that eating them prevented scurvy. The first potatoes to reach Europe traveled on Spanish ships returning from South America.

“In Europe, potatoes were taken up early in Germany and the British Isles. The French, however, were loath to try them. Potatoes didn't look like anything the French were used to eating. In the late 1700s, the French scientist and agronomist Parmentier planted a great field of potatoes and set armed guards around it.

“When the potatoes were ready for harvest, he removed the

guards, and of course, the peasants had all been watching this field, which was obviously so valuable. And they all raced in and stole the potatoes and took them home to eat some and planted the rest.”

—Barbara Ketcham Wheaton

As potatoes spread through Europe, a feedback process was set in motion. More potatoes produced more food, more food produced more people, and more people produced more potatoes.

The population of northern Europe grew as fast as the potato plants. In fact, the rate of population growth in northern Europe far outstripped the rate in other parts of the world.

All across Europe, the potato became

the staple food of the poor, and the new working classes. It contributed to a population increase that was big enough to provide Europe not only with extra farm laborers but with the workforce it needed for its transformation into an industrial society.

The extraordinary health and nutritional value of the potato has made it a staple of American and European diets for hundreds of years.



THE STORY OF CHOCOLATE

In 1502, Columbus set sail on his fourth and final voyage. As usual, he was trying to get to Asia. He believed the islands of the Caribbean were just off shore from China and Japan. Poor guy—he never had a clue.

On this last voyage, his first landfall was the Bay Islands, about 30 miles north of Honduras. As his ship sat at anchor, the crew saw a tremendous dugout canoe. It was a Maya trading canoe, about 150 feet long and carrying a cargo of cacao beans. Columbus was the first European to come in contact with the source of chocolate.



At that time, chocolate was taken as a drink. It played an important part in Maya gatherings and celebrations. It was a form of currency and a sacred ceremonial drink used to cement pacts, like a marriage.

“When the Spaniards first came to Mexico, they saw people drinking chocolate, and they tried it. They thought it was horrible. In fact, one of our sources said it was only fit for pigs. It was

bitter. They didn't like the color of it. It made your mouth black. Or if it was mixed with *achiote*, a red spice, it made your mouth look red and dyed your lips. They thought it was disgusting. It wasn't until later that they realized how good chocolate was."

—Michael D. Coe

"The original problem was that chocolate beans from Mexico are bitter, and don't smell good. Europeans learned to dry it, to ferment it, to roast it, to mix it with various things, including vanilla, and then, of course, to bring out the fat by heating it in a complex way. It was a little bitter, so they added sugar and milk. In doing so, they created a food that was totally

different from its origin and highly appealing to humans. It's designed in its texture, taste, aroma, and caloric load to be an ideal food."

—Paul Rozin

So chocolate, tomatoes, potatoes, corn and chili peppers were what Chris brought back to Europe. And in the end, the exchange of plants and animals between the two hemispheres totally altered the future of the world. Not politics, not religion, not gold and silver—the events that changed our destiny were the changes in what we eat.

TO LEARN MORE

THE TRUE HISTORY OF CHOCOLATE
BY SOPHIE D. COE AND MICHAEL D. COE
PUBLISHED BY THAMES & HUDSON

NATURE AND CULTURE IN THE ANDES
BY DANIEL W. GADE
PUBLISHED BY UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN PRESS

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