

The Great Food Migration

Written by W.J.Pais

“The Great Food Migration”

by John Schwartz

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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 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 Coe 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.)

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“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 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

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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.

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 jade 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,

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"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, marvelling 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.

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