

## Geography In The News™



Neal Lineback  
and Mandy Lineback Gritzner

### NEW WORLD FOODS

A book about food titled "Why We Eat What We Eat; How Columbus Changed the Way the World Eats" (Touchstone Press) is in bookstores. In it, author Raymond Sokolov explores how Christopher Columbus and others forever changed food history when they landed in the New World in 1492. This is just one of several interesting sources of research on New World foods.

When Columbus disembarked in the Bahamas, he found the natives cultivating and eating many foods that were unheard of in Europe. He and the other explorers who followed brought those foods back to their home countries. From there, these "New World foods" were distributed across the world, changing the diets of people in many different countries.

A variety of the foods that Columbus and other explorers brought back to Europe found instant popularity (i.e. the sweet potato) because they were easily grown. Others were slow to gain acceptance, according to freelance writer David Hilbert in "New World Explorers Make Food History in 1492, Bring New Cuisine" ([www.suite101.com](http://www.suite101.com)). For example, the British first thought that the tomato was toxic. A member of the nightshade family, the tomato plant's green leaves are toxic. By the 1600s, however, many European cookbooks listed it as an ingredient.

Some of the New World staple foods that traveled to Europe were tomatoes, potatoes, corn (maize), beans, zucchini/squashes, avocados, bell peppers, chilies, peanuts, cassava (manioc) and pineapples. Spices included allspice, vanilla and chocolate.

Eight of the world's 26 top

crops by weight originated in the New World. Furthermore, foods that were first discovered growing in the Americas make up one-third of U. S. crop value today. Some of these are so important to global cuisine that it would be nearly impossible to imagine Italian spaghetti, Indian curries and Thai satays without them.

For example, the tomato, a New World staple common in Pre-Columbian South America and Mexico, eventually became the base for the tomato sauces of Italy. Called marinara and used primarily on spaghetti and pizza, the sauce also includes the bell pepper and chili, two other New World foods.

The potato, which was the staple of the Incas of Peru and Bolivia, was introduced to Ireland. Because the potato stores easily and is high in carbohydrates, it became crucial to the diet of the Irish by 1625. In fact, some Irish citizens with little else to eat might have consumed up to 10 pounds of potatoes in a day by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. When a potato blight hit Europe in the 1840s, however, Ireland lost 20 to 25 percent of its population. About one million people starved and another million emigrated from Ireland during the Irish Potato Famine, as the period is called.

Almost unheard of in Europe until Columbus' voyages, corn (maize) was first domesticated from a wild plant about seven thousand years ago in south Central Mexico. Arriving in Europe with the first explorers departing from the New World,

traders introduced it along trade routes into Turkey. The Moors introduced it to Africa, where it became an instant hit across much of the more humid parts of Africa.

Along with the peanut and cassava root, corn altered the diet of much of Africa. Until that time, Africans' diets had consisted mostly of grains such as sorghum and millet. Today, more than 200 million people worldwide depend on corn as a dietary staple. Of the more than 330 million tons (300 million metric tons) of corn produced globally, Africans eat the largest percentage.

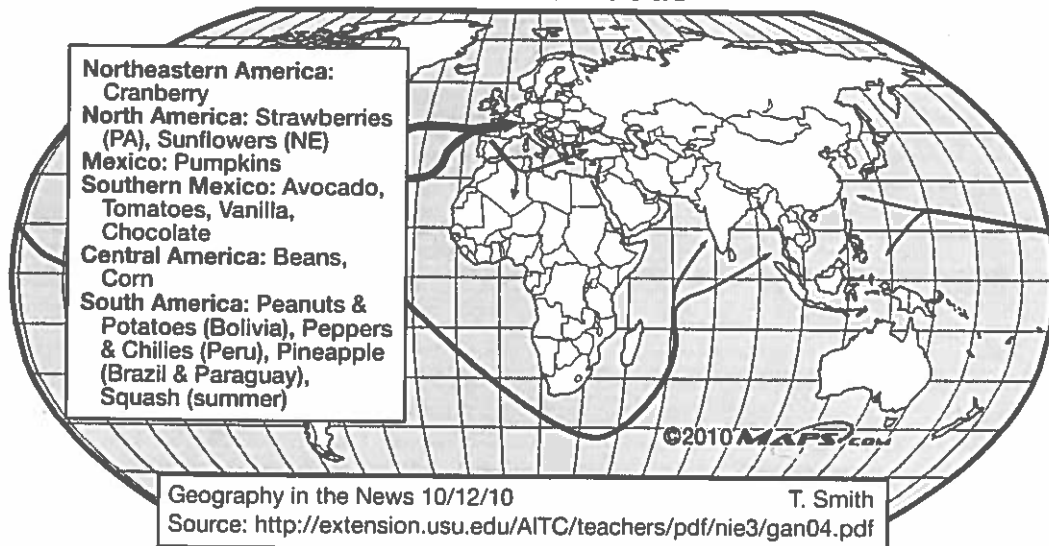
During Columbus' explorations, food from Europe also transformed New World cuisine. Just a few of those foods from the Old World that came to the Americas are onion, garlic, wheat, rice, carrot and lettuce. Today, staples like onion and garlic are used in many Central and South American dishes.

While Columbus did not find the sea route to the spice islands of India (East Indies) that he sought on his voyage, he did find something that changed the world's cuisine—a cornucopia of foods that provide exceptional variety to diets in nearly every corner of the earth.

And that is *Geography in the News™*. November 12, 2010. #1067.

Co-authors are Neal Lineback, Appalachian State University Professor Emeritus of Geography, and Geographer Mandy Lineback Gritzner. University News Director Jane Nicholson serves as technical editor.

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Sources: Sokolov, Raymond. *Why We Eat What We Eat: How Columbus Changed the Way the World Eats* (Touchstone Press, 1991); <http://www.suite101.com/content/new-world-explorers-make-food-history-in1492-bring-new-cuisine-a243162>; <http://www.accessexcellence.org/RC/Ethnobotany/page5.php>; and <http://extension.usu.edu/AITC/teachers/pdf/nie3/gan04.pdf>