

Dreisbach Family Association

September 2011 Newsletter Potato Supplement

DREISBACHS AND THE POTATO

A (very) short history of the tuber

More than you really wanted to know about potatoes.

But first, a selected 'history of the potato' because it's interesting and to give you some background. ☺

Potatoes originated in Peru more than 10,000 years ago but it was not until 1570 that the Spanish conquistadors brought the plant to Spain. Here the plant was introduced to the aristocracy and grown, largely, as a botanical curiosity.

In 1589 Sir Walter Raleigh gave a potato plant to Queen Elizabeth I. Shortly thereafter, potatoes were served at a royal banquet. Unfortunately the cooks threw away the ugly tubers and prepared a dish using the stems and leaves, which are highly poisonous! The entire company became very ill and the potato was banned from court!



The introduction of potatoes elsewhere in Europe was no more successful. In France the potato was accused of causing leprosy, syphilis, sterility and early death. The town of Besancon, France issued an edict:

"In view of the fact that the potato is a pernicious substance whose use can cause leprosy, it is hereby forbidden, under pain of fine, to cultivate it."



During the 1600's, the aristocracy recognized the value of the potato – in particular that it would provide food for the masses. Although 'vitamin C' was unknown, it had been shown that sailors who ate potatoes had less scurvy and it was also noted that people who ate potatoes, combined with dairy products, were particularly healthy.

Many rulers tried to introduce the potato to their subjects. However, for years, peasants stubbornly refused to eat the ugly tubers which sprouted 'ears' and turned green in sunlight. As late as 1774, Frederick the Great of Prussia planted a royal field of potato plants and stationed a heavy guard to protect this field from thieves. Local people assumed that anything worth guarding was worth stealing, snuck into the field and snatched the plants for their home gardens. This, of course, was Frederick's objective¹.

Potatoes were introduced to Simon Dreisbach's homeland, Wittgenstein, Germany in 1709!²

Wittgenstein was one of the first places in Europe to record potatoes planted as a crop. Indeed, the introduction of potato planting was important enough to

merit an entry in the Berleburg Archives. In the records for the year 1726 there is a statement: “Cartofeln zum erstenmahl im Feld angebauet und Zehenden davon erhoben”. (For the first time potatoes were planted in the field and a tithe was levied on them.) The ‘tithe’ was the fee that was collected by the Count on everything that the peasants raised or grew. The amount varied with time and the ruler, but became ever more onerous during Simon Dreisbach’s lifetime – more on this topic in a later issue of the DFA Newsletter.

Another entry in the Wittgenstein Archives from 1730 says that a poor Jew, Joseph Stieglitz, from the town of Laasphe, reported that he, his wife and his children did not starve during the previous bitter winter because they ate boiled potatoes!



Boiled potatoes

This entry indicates that in 1729 – 1730, potatoes were grown in Wittgenstein but that *eating* potatoes was still not a common practice. In fact it happened so seldom that the simple act of potato consumption, by itself, merited inclusion in the archival records!

Growing and eating of potatoes did not occur everywhere at once. In 1730 farmers in the Westerwald ate potatoes as part of their Sunday dinner³. However the 1739 court records from Erndtebrück, Wittgenstein, show that potatoes were not part of that year’s crop⁴. Consuming potatoes was encouraged by an expanding population and the word was spreading that potatoes were *good to eat* and easy to grow. By 1744 there were enough potato fields in Wittgenstein so that the tithe on them was listed along with the tithe on the major crop of flax⁵.

When Simon Dreisbach and his family left Wittgenstein for Pennsylvania in 1743, they almost certainly knew about potatoes! It is even possible that Simon and Katherina Dreisbach carried sacks of potatoes as part of the family provisions for the trans-Atlantic journey. Passengers on ships had to bring food, water and/or drinks such as ale or beer, as well as medicines, to sustain themselves and their families for up a journey that could last 2 to 4 months! Potatoes would have been nutritious, could be stored in barrels and were easily prepared by boiling in sea water.



“The Potato-Eaters” by Van Gogh

It appears, then, that many German immigrants were familiar with potatoes even before they arrived in Pennsylvania. It may be that the *reason* potatoes were accepted in south eastern Pennsylvania long before they were accepted in New England, was because these German immigrants already knew how to make use of the lowly potato. Elsewhere in the new United States, the potato was not widely accepted as food until Pres. Thomas Jefferson served potatoes at Monticello.

A little bit more about potatoes⁶!

Researchers have used potato genetics to determine that there were at least 4000 varieties of potatoes known to the ancient peoples of South America. Even today, there are more than 1400 varieties available there! Wild potatoes traditionally were domesticated and raised by women, with the knowledge transmitted orally. Today some 200 varieties of wild potatoes are still known, most of them so bitter as to be inedible.

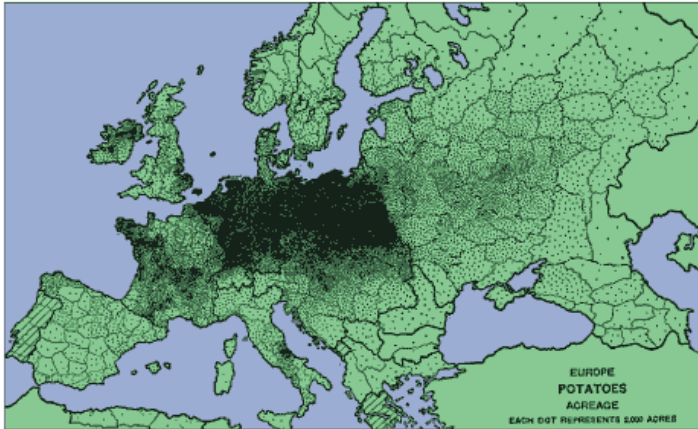


A few of the non-commercial varieties of potatoes still grown in South America.

US Dept. of Agriculture (USDA) researchers examined potatoes for health-giving properties. They found not only high levels of vitamins C and B6 but also significant levels

of anti-oxidants, particularly in the potato skin. The USDA scientists also established the presence of a potato compound that reduces blood pressure – kukoamine – that may be of value for people with high blood pressure.⁷

The major market for potatoes used to be central Europe and North America. In the map below⁸, the darker the area, the more potatoes that are raised (and consumed) in this region!



Map showing the density of potato cultivation in Europe in the early 20th century.

Now the major market for potatoes is China! The Chinese are giving a whole new twist to the taste of potatoes, combining them with soya sauce, sesame oil, ginger, garlic, and more. Here is my version of an oriental potato dish:

Oriental-style Potatoes

4 large boiling potatoes (with thin skins)
2 Tbsp soya sauce
1" fresh ginger, grated
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 tsp sesame oil
1 tsp sugar
2 Tbsp sherry (optional) or water or orange juice
Oil for frying
2 Tbsp dry sesame seed, toasted in skillet
Green onions, parsley, and/or fresh coriander leaves

Sauce: Combine 2 Tbsp ketchup, 1 Tbsp soya sauce, 1 Tbsp honey, 2 Tbsp water, 1 tsp cornstarch, stir.

Mix soya sauce, ginger, garlic, sesame oil, sugar and sherry in a large bowl.

Cut the potatoes into thin wedges.

Marinate in liquid mixture for 15 to 30 minutes.

Generously cover bottom of large fry pan with oil, toss in marinated potatoes. Cook, with stirring, until potatoes are soft when pierced with a fork.

Combine sauce ingredients and pour over potatoes in frying pan. Fry and stir until coated.

To serve - Sprinkle sesame seeds, chopped green onion and/or fresh coriander leaves on top.

Potatoes and the Pennsylvania Dutch:

Given the history of potatoes and German immigrants, little wonder then, that potatoes became one of the mainstays of Penna. Dutch cooking! Potatoes went into almost every dish ... they were made into soups, put into stews, made into salads, used in breads, turned into pie fillings, mashed, fried, baked in the coals, and stuffed into turkeys. They were fed to pigs, cattle and chickens. They were even used to make vodka!

Many potato dishes were made in my family - one of my favorites, a very old recipe, is stuffed pig's stomach: Take 1 pig stomach and wash it well. Stuff it with a mixture of cubed raw potatoes, chopped onion, chopped celery, chopped smoked sausage, salt, pepper, fresh parsley, sage, and thyme. Sew the opening shut and brown on all sides in butter. Put in a roasting pan with about 1" of water in the bottom. Put on a lid and roast at 350F for 3 hours. Make gravy from the drippings. Serve with mashed potatoes!



Mashed potatoes!

Enjoy your potatoes – and Bon Appetite!

¹ Chapman, Jeff, *The Impact of the Potato*, History Magazine, Vol. 2. <http://www.history-magazine.com/potato.html>

² Harnack, Wilhelm, *Einführung der Kartoffeln in Wittgenstein*, Wittgenstein – Blätter des Wittgensteiner Heimatvereins e.V., Vol. 23, 1959, Heft 1, pp 62, 63.

³ Harnack, W., *Ibid.*

⁴ Wied, Werner, *Weitere Nachrichten über den Kartoffelanbau im alten Wittgenstein*, Wittgenstein – Blätter des Wittgensteiner Heimatvereins e.V., Vol. 24, 1960, Heft 1, pp21-24.

⁵ Wied, W., *Ibid.*

⁶ International Year of the Potato 2008,

<http://www.potato2008.org/en/potato/origins.html>

⁷ <http://www.ars.usda.gov/is/AR/archive/sep07/potato0907.htm>

⁸ Chapman, Jeff. *ibid*