THE HUMBLE SPUD

by erin nicolai

I was four years old, and I was a pistol. At least, that’s what my grandfather called me. Being at the age when most things grown-ups said didn’t make sense, I didn’t bother trying to decipher how I could be similar to a metal death tool. Plus, I distinctly remember being far too preoccupied at the time. The trenches of warfare were slung out before me, with landmines nestled in the furrowed dirt every few inches. Mud caked every bit of me, except for about one clean inch around each of my eyeballs, making me look like a raccoon. As I crawled my way to freedom I heard the anguished bellow from the enemy, “Nooooo! My garden!” It was too late and I was captured, yanked up by my armpits in a most indignified manner. In a last attempt to maintain agency, I struggled to fling a grenade at my predator. And that’s when I vividly remember the look in my grandfather’s eyes—like a feverish squirrel after it realizes its nut hoard is being stolen. He yanked the potato from my grubby fingers and gingerly brushed the remaining dirt off of it. After he carefully laid it aside, he returned his attention to me and began a dreadfully long lecture on the importance of his produce, while he vigorously directed a jet of hose water in my general vicinity. I vaguely recall some of his lecture, mostly the parts that dealt with him threatening to take away my grandma’s peanut butter cookies if I were to decimate his vegetables again, but the odd reverence he held toward the potato also stuck in my memory. My grandfather is a good old-fashioned Irishman, sticking to the general diet of meat and potatoes (in one form or another) at every meal. But on that day, he succeeded in imparting some understanding of those magnificent spuds beyond my previous belief that they should only hover briefly between my plate and my mouth. Yes, that day my utilization of the Russet-Burbank potato (otherwise known as the Idaho potato, or my grandfather’s gardened variety of choice) as a grenade changed my outlook on potatoes forever.

Throughout history, the potato hasn’t been granted a high place of honor. The one exception might be in its indigenous region. Evidence shows that potatoes existed up to thirteen thousand years ago, although they first showed up in human agriculture about eight thousand years ago in the Andes region in South America. In the Moche culture in Peru, potatoes were such an important part of life that they inspired people in their works of art. Potato-like images are found in jugs and sculptures, even one fertility sculpture in which a man has a crown with what looks like an eye of a potato from which women are protruding. Their beliefs were that god-like spirits resided in most of nature. So yes, there was a potato spirit. Conflicting emotions about potatoes were generated when European explorers were introduced to them. One school of thought says that the Aztecs bargained with some early Spanish conquistadors, promising them payment, but when the conquistadors found their prize, it was merely a bag of potatoes. It should come as no surprise that this was upsetting, for the conquistadors were interested in gold, not potatoes. Perhaps this difference in value of vegetable verses precious metal was where the spud met its condemnation, leaving it to struggle to gain acceptance from the rest of the world.

The conquistadors brought the potato back to Europe in the early 1500s, where it was met with much skepticism. The Europeans were used to the sweet potato and could not help but think this vegetable with its wrinkled appearance was the unfortunate cousin of the other food. It also did not help that the Middle Ages had left Europeans a highly suspicious folk. The potato plant resembled others that were...
thought to be used in witchcraft or to induce poisoning. Another popular belief was that a potato looked like the hands and feet of a leper, and must therefore cause leprosy. It’s a good thing they didn’t eat more potatoes in an already turbulent time, because that’s soundproof logic, really.

The Irish were the first to really embrace the potato as a food source, making it a field crop in the 17th century and transforming it into a staple in the 18th century. Potatoes did well in Ireland because they thrive in rain, which Ireland appears to get a lot of. Also, potatoes require relatively little land and work, which allowed the Irish to capitalize on the freedom and ease to grow and cook this “lazy root” so they could pursue other activities. The Irish loved potatoes so dearly that by 1800 an average family would eat 5.5 pounds of potatoes daily. However, they began running into problems with the vulnerability of the crop. In 1728, they faced an oat crop failure, and the poor potatoes could not produce enough to sustain hungry Irish stomachs. Then, in 1740, great freezing temperatures caused many crops to be lost, resulting in round two of the potato famines. However, the worst trouble the Irish faced was in 1845. At the time of the Great Famine, 40 percent of the Irish diet was comprised solely of potatoes...
The world has extended its imagination, rather marginally, since the widespread acceptance of the potato as a substance edible for humans. Granted, some of these potato dishes have been the results of happy mistakes. A chef for King Louis Phillipe, who ruled in the mid-1800s, hastily plopped already fried potatoes into hot oil to reheat them when his king was late for dinner, yet he needed to serve a warm meal for fear of being forced to exist solely off of snails or something of the like. But when his already done spuds hit the oil they puffed up, and sacré bleu! The soufflé was conceived. Recipe invention goes far beyond that, though. Italians use potatoes in pasta. In India, spuds are common in curries. They are stir-fried with green beans in Ethiopia. During the winter in Finland, potatoes are simmered with smoked haddock for soup. In Belarus, it’s popular to stuff a potato with liver.

It goes without saying that these dishes do not even begin to scratch the surface of all the sumptuous recipes attributed to the potato. In fact, a simple American recipe book such as the one produced by Better Homes and Gardens will provide at least 347 recipes dealing with potatoes. If Googled, the universe offers up no less than 9,960,000 hits in the pursuit of “potato recipes.” Simply put, the potato can give us a lot of great food.

Largely concerned with the appetizing draw of a steaming spud for most of my life, it took me a while to appreciate the many other delicate aspects of a potato. When I was in second grade, I lived in Idaho where potatoes lord over all. My teacher, bless her heart, decided a fieldtrip to a potato farm was crucial in her pupils’ quest for knowledge. We eagerly seized this opportunity of boarding a dusty bus to view rows and rows of dirty spuds. I’m certain now that the goal was for us to learn the importance of famers, the delicate process of growing food, and the enormous amount of work that went into living on a farm. However, at the time, we collectively decided that the highlights of the trip included milking a goat, seeing a dead rattlesnake on the road, and being allowed a party favor in the form of as many potatoes as we could each fit into a paper bag and carry home with us. It was at the last moment that I truly felt privileged, as my father was chaperoning and everyone else’s prepubescent arms could not compare to his in the task of carrying potatoes. While the farmer was yelling at us for digging up premature potatoes or sitting on the plant (really, he ought to have known better before inviting twenty-seven eight-year-olds to his precious fields) I began to marvel at the differences in the potatoes. Each one had different dirt-crusted bumps and its own unique, knobby shape. That afternoon I returned home with an armful of someone’s livelihood and a still ignorant understanding on the inner workings of a potato.

The potato is a very vulnerable plant. It needs humans to cultivate it if it ever hopes to move beyond the scraggily form it takes in the wild. Something that freaked early farmers out is that potatoes are not seeds, like some other proper crop. Instead, one needs to a bit of the tuber itself underground for it to grow. Once started, this herbaceous annual can grow up to forty inches tall, greeting the world with pink, blue, purple, or white flowers. Potatoes love nitrogen, but can grow in relatively thin soil where other crops would not fare well. They grow over such a wide variety of climates, and even up to 15,000 feet in elevation, that it explains the existence of astounding 4,000 species of the plant. They are so ubiquitous that species exist on every continent except Antarctica. More than 100 countries grow potatoes, producing more than 290 million tons of food annually and making potatoes the fourth most important crop in the world, after wheat, maize, and rice. Al-
though there are so many varieties of potatoes, only about six account for most of the commercial produce. While this is great for simplicity, it also leaves the potatoes susceptible to the possibility of widespread disease or nasty nematodes (worms). Nobody wants another Great Famine, so several concerned individuals took it upon themselves to create the International Potato Center in Lima, Peru, in 1972. These blessed individuals research different breeding methods and potato conservation (yes, potato and not panda, tiger, or dolphin conservation) and leave mundane tasks such as eating potatoes to us simpletons. The concern for the tuber has become more widespread in recent years, and in 2008 the United Nations declared it the “Year of the Potato.” And why not? The UN wished to raise awareness about the potato, its importance as a global food source, and its potential to alleviate world hunger.

With so many industrious uses, it’s amazing that the potato does not get more publicity. This miraculous vegetable went from being revered in the ancient South American civilizations, to hated by the Europeans. I suppose some of that disdain still carries over, because we use its name in vain. Couch potato. Potato head. These things are not something we call someone when we want a favor from them. However, in today’s society we generally disregard potatoes. No one saves up their money to buy a precious solitary potato and spends hours fawning over it. Several centuries ago in Europe, the potato only gained popularity when resources were scarce and people needed a friendly food to fill their stomachs. They took what they had for granted until they desperately needed such an ugly and lowly food. I say that now we are no better. We utilize the potato mostly in ways that will make our lives easier—“The potato: easy to grow, easy to fry,” that should be our motto. Yet what’s the point of a food that will only allow a society to move faster and faster? Or anything that facilitates that sort of mentality? Some may think it is terrible that potatoes were thought of with great disdain at one time. However, I think it is far worse now, when potatoes have been removed so far from our consciousness as a result of us taking something that is truly important and useful and placing it so far below any sense of value.

When I came to college, I knew no one would be able to make me eat a potato if I didn’t want to. I relished the idea that I could never allow a morsel of starchy spud to pass between my lips, or confront potatoes daily in greasy, salty, delicious fry form, all depending on my mood. But I suppose, like most people, my radical ideas of how I would change once I passed from my sheltered life into that of a college student weren’t quite as I envisioned them. Occasionally I ate a spud or two, intermingled in my diet as they normally would be. But all in all, they were mostly under my radar. Then, one autumn day, I found my attention called back to potatoes. I was walking back from class, savoring a few moments between having to convince myself that my homework needed doing. The two individuals in front of me were consumed by an extremely profound discussion, no doubt, based on the comments I heard concerning whose turn it was to buy the beer that weekend. One broke the seriousness of the moment.

“Dude, I just need to play football.”
“Yeah, I got you.”
“Naw, like right now. You got a football?” The two stopped, one plunging elbow-deep into his bag.
“Uh, will this work?”

Out from his backpack emerged a potato. I had so many questions.

The two started tossing the potato back and forth, moving off the sidewalk. I saw others looking at the pair as I was, with expressions that merged curiosity with concern. But there were a few who seemed to favor this development, and joined them. It was then that I may have wit-
Pressed the first ever pick-up game of potato football. At the instant I realized this, I wasn’t overcome by an urge to join this historic moment. I was hungry for potatoes.

Potato. Brambor. Aardappel. Kaprof. Pommes de terre. နံသာမှုသောကြက်. Kentang. 马铃薯. Πατάτες. Potet. Prátaí. Vazz. Kartupeš. Taw. Khoai tay. Over time, the potato has been offered to us under so many names, yet it doesn’t try to hide under a guise with any of them. Its unassuming agenda has remained the same no matter what culture used it at any given time.

I used to lob potatoes as make-believe bombs, I have scoffed at the strange forms they take in dishes, and I have ignored them in favor of a dead snake. But through it all, potatoes only wanted to nourish me. So while the Moche people may have taken it to the extreme when depicting the image of a potato on every stationary surface, they had a good, general idea: appreciate the little things, and don’t underestimate the small things. Don’t underestimate the humble spud.

Reference Works


