

# How the Columbian Exchange Changed the Diet of Europeans and Fueled the Industrial Revolution

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## Abstract

*This project is on how the Columbian exchange changed the diets of Europeans and fueled the Industrial Revolution. Many of the common foods eaten today in Europe were not available to Europeans living before the advent of the Columbian exchange in 1492. Crops such as potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, maize, tobacco, coco, and coffee are native to the Americas and were only introduced to Europeans after 1492. These are foods that most modern people view as staples of European diets. However, they did not exist in Europe until the 16th century. In fact, potatoes were actually welcomed with suspicion when they were first introduced to Europeans. It was not until the late 18th century that potatoes were enthusiastically included in European diets, and it was not until tomatoes became popular in the United States that they became a popular foodstuff in Europe. The adoption of crops from the Columbian exchange led to a more robust European population. Europeans were better nourished and experienced less incidences of starvation. This also significantly facilitated the start and continuation of the Industrial Revolution. In my paper, I will also talk about why I am incorporating this paper in my digital portfolio.*

After the New World was discovered in 1492, the Columbian exchange brought more than a diet change. Through these new crops, Europe and the world drastically changed. These crops finally provided Europe with a stable food source. Potatoes were by far the most profound crop introduced to Europe. Beforehand, periodic famine and subsequent starvation was common. Potatoes provided European countries the calories and nutrition needed to set the stage and the spark for the Industrial Revolution. In his book, Alfred Crosby makes the claim that the Industrial Revolution was partly possible due to the

new foods of the Columbian exchange. Crosby (2003) states:

The coming together of the continents was a prerequisite for the population explosion of the past two centuries, and certainly played an important role in the Industrial Revolution. The transfer across the ocean of the staple food crops of the Old and New Worlds made possible the former. (p.666)

As mentioned in *How the Potato Changed the World's History* by William H. McNeil (1999), the adaptation of potatoes made warfare less deadly for Europeans living in the countryside, which is where a large

portion of the population resided. Warfare was pretty much constant in early modern Europe and travelling armies would collect food for substance along the way. This meant that food was taken from peasants to feed armies and the peasants would often starve. This was exacerbated by low food production and the fact that famines were common even in times of peace. The potato, however, was a much hardier crop than the previous staple grains, and most importantly, could grow underground. Villagers would plant potato roots underground, and when an army came by and took all their stored grain, villagers would dig up the potatoes to eat. This led to an increase in population size across Europe.

As the article *The Columbian Exchange: A history of Disease, Food, and Ideas* by Nathan Nunn and Nancy Qian (2011) states, New World crops could also grow in climates that their previous stable crops could not. This increased the amount of arable land in Europe and thus increased crop output. New World crops also required different nutrients from the soil than Old World crops. Agriculture became more productive overall.

The Columbian exchange also overall increased the health of Europeans. The exchange marked a turning point in opinion regarding nutrition. As is stated in *A History of the Arrival of the Tomato in Europe: An Initial Overview* (n.d.), Europeans generally had a limited idea of what was healthy to consume for the human body, or as they called it, “sex res non naturales”. European

diets prior to the Columbian exchange were mostly cereal and animal-product based. Depending on location, rye, barley, wheat, oats, legumes, and meat (mostly swine, sheep, cattle, and goat) were the core foodstuffs of European diets. While a variety of vegetables were able to be grown, such as arugula, garden-ress, endive, cucumbers, chives, garlic, and squashes, a large variety of vegetables do not appear to have been eaten. Even royal gardens did not grow many vegetables; most vegetables grown and eaten were in the cabbage and onion family.

Europeans slowly changed this view and incorporated more vegetables into their diet, especially if they were cooked first to get rid of the harmful “humors” many believed vegetables contained. These changes led to a more nutritious diet and better nourished people. It also led to less disease.

A better nourished Europe increased the European population. Researchers have found an increase in population wherever potatoes are cultivated. As mentioned above, population growth was an essential precursor to industrialization. Due in large part to the Columbian exchange, the world population doubled from 1650 to 1850 (Crosby,2003). This steep increase in population was a very important precursor to the Industrial Revolution.

Digital Portfolio: I am including this paper in my digital portfolio as an example of my writing and researching skills.

### References

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