

Food\222s Place in History
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We are now in a festive season when food plays a major part in family celebrations. As a history buff, I never pass up an opportunity to entertain with food and with history. This column will put food into its historic origins, showing how it influenced human development.

For thousands of years, our ancestors were hunter-gatherers, migrating to find foodstuffs good for eating and medicine. Women were the gatherers, and despite the bragging of men as hunters, the women provided the majority of the food they ate. The rhythm of life was predominantly surviving, finding enough food to sustain them, and animals to hunt for occasional food and essential skins and pelts. Ice ages made animal fur essential for survival.

Then a biological change occurred: some wild grasses began to develop large seeds, grain, that could be made into a porridge. The taming of fire, along with these grains, extended the life expectancy of the migratory tribes. Cooking grain made it palatable and cooking meat killed dangerous microbes.

Tribes followed the ripening grain, rushing to harvest before the heavy heads of grain fell to the ground. It did not take long before a new idea came: why not plant these seeds and take control of them rather than depend upon nature for the harvest? The agricultural revolution happened, and with it, living in fixed settlements replaced migratory hunting-gathering. Along with planting grain, some wild creatures, probably deserted young ones, were brought into the villages and domesticated. Sheep and goats were first; cattle and horses next; and fowl, pigs, and camels followed. Fishing in quantity arrived with the invention of boats and ocean-going craft.

With settled villages morphing into towns and cities, surrounded by farms, new needs arose: dependable sources of water, disposal of sewage waste, defense of the community from raiders preferring stealing to farming, and administration of justice. Civilization was born.

As much as we admire civilization, it came at a cost. The egalitarian migrating tribes established classes and castes: those who ruled (the defenders and priests), those who sold and traded (merchants), and those who did the back-breaking work of tilling fields, digging water systems, and milling and processing the food. An added problem was that dependence upon agriculture was not always dependable; there were droughts, floods, and famines; and so many people living in proximity suffered from plagues, many cross-overs from their animals (swine flu, bovine diseases, bird flu).

But over time, civilization has made life far better than any prior options. It formerly required the majority of human beings to raise enough food to feed themselves and the elites. Today, a relatively few people, aided by technology, feed the world better than it has ever enjoyed before. Our food growers are now educated and prosperous, certainly no longer peasants.

Let\222s celebrate the most exciting food revolution, when the Old World met the New World after 1492. In a flash, the food supply of the entire globe was doubled. It was an ugly revolution for the New World farmers, the Incas, Aztecs, and the many tribes of North America, being conquered by barbarians, but over time, the foods of both worlds intermingled, giving us amazing bounty.

Our family celebrates Thanksgiving, honoring the foods that the Western Hemisphere natives developed. We use corn, tomatoes, peppers (sweet or hot), turkey, potatoes, pumpkins and all squashes, all beans (except lentils), cranberries, pineapple, avocado, chocolate, vanilla, quinoa, and wild rice. In addition to food, they gave us willow bark (aspirin), quinine, and rubber. The foods represent 50 percent of the world\222s diet.

Europe and Asia had plenty of food before 1492, foods traded from China all the way to the Atlantic. But imagine Italy without tomatoes or corn (polenta); or India\222s curry without hot chili peppers, tomato, or potato; Mexico\222s Mole sauce without Europe\222s almonds, sugar, and far east spices?

At Christmas, we do a "feast of the seven fishes" menu, an Italian celebration, and try to use only those foods developed in Eurasia before 1492. It too is delicious, and a tribute to the great farmers of the Eurasian world. Cheers!

686 words

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