

## EYE ON THE WORLD

Don Murray

# In praise of the humble, hearty potato

Don't overlook the remarkable history of the spuds on your festive plate

Last Updated: Monday, December 22, 2008 | 11:45 AM ET [Comments](#)[Recommend](#)[30](#)

By Don Murray, [CBC News](#)



*A farmer arranges potatoes from different varieties after a May 2007 harvest in Huancavelica, Peru. In Peru, there are about 300 varieties of potatoes, most of which grow only in the Andes Mountains at high altitudes. (Martin Mejia/Associated Press)*

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Banned by parliament, praised by kings, denounced by clergy, admired by Darwin, linked to the death of millions and the migration of millions more — we speak of the "solanum tuberosum," the humble tuber, the vegetable that changed the world, the potato.

As you perhaps prepare to mash or boil or bake your spuds for Christmas dinner, you may not know you are dealing with a military vegetable. "The potato is on the frontline in the fight against world hunger and poverty." This from the head of the Food and Agriculture Organization, Jacques Diouf.



*Vladimir Neupokoyev, a Russian agricultural expert, shows off potatoes grown at a test field outside Moscow in August 2007. (Ivan Sekretarev/Associated Press)*

This was well understood by the bold and blood-soaked general Napoléon Bonaparte and his principal potato adviser, Antoine-Augustin Parmentier. To feed his ravening armies during his long wars with most of the rest of Europe, Napoleon ordered that tubers be planted in great number. The potato harvest jumped 15-fold in France in that period. And this was well before the advent of french fries. But more of history later.

You may also not know that 2008 has been the United Nations International Year of the Potato. It's a singular honour not usually bestowed on a vegetable, and a contested one.

"A United Nations international year once actually meant something," began a 2006 article in a Canadian online daily. It went on to evoke the laughable possibility of "Declaration of the Rights of Potatoes and other Starchy Edible Tubulars."

We are aware of this article because the United Nations fought back with a [144-page book](#), available online. It called the attack "scathing" and ignorant. The author didn't even know that that the potato is not a tubular but a tuber. Above all, the author didn't know history.

## **New vegetable shakes up old Europe**

In the 1530s, the Spanish adventurer Francisco Pizarro marched to the heart of the Inca empire with a small band of men. Aided by a smallpox epidemic and civil strife at the heart of the Inca elite, he captured the Inca king, demanded a fortune in gold and silver as ransom, received the ransom and then killed the king.

The Spanish empire had tapped into El Dorado and its ships now began crossing the ocean with their plunder. Sometime in the coming two or three decades, a few tubers found their way, by accident or design, into the holds of some of these ships.

Thus the potato came to Europe.

The new vegetable on an old continent had a difficult beginning. It was fed to pigs. Scottish clergymen denounced it from the pulpit, warning the faithful not to eat it. There was no mention of potatoes in the Bible. The French parliament banned it, on the grounds that it caused leprosy.

It was, however, championed by Prussian kings, in the Prussian way. King Friedrich Wilhelm III issued an edict threatening to cut off the nose and ears of anyone who refused to plant potatoes.

It took war and a French pharmacist to change decisively the fate of the tuber.

### **Let them eat potatoes**

The war was the Seven Years War, the 1756-1763 conflict in which the British got their hands on Canada at the battle of the Plains of Abraham. The pharmacist was Antoine-Augustin Parmentier. He served with the French army in Europe and was captured by the Prussians.



*Napoléon Bonaparte, depicted in an undated portrait by painter Paul Delaroche, ordered that fields of potatoes be planted in France to feed his military. (Associated Press)*

In captivity, his unique food and source of survival was the potato. He became a convert and a proselytizer.

He convinced the king, Louis XVI, who took to wearing a potato flower in his lapel. He convinced the upper classes by serving elaborate potato dinners. At one all 20 dishes contained potatoes. He convinced the peasants by planting potatoes in unprotected fields offered by the king. The peasants, curious and greedy, stole the plants.

Louis XVI lost his head in the French revolution. Parmentier kept his and convinced the French National Assembly to promote the spud. Twenty thousand pamphlets crying 'Vive la pomme de terre!' were printed and distributed.

Then he convinced Napoléon, who rewarded him with the Légion d'Honneur.

### **The tuber's global embrace**

The young Charles Darwin, later to write *The Origin of Species*, marveled at the potato while on his trip

in 1835 aboard HMS Beagle. "It is remarkable that the same plant should be found on sterile mountains of central Chile, where a drop of rain does not fall for more than six months, and within the damp forests of the southern islands."



*A farmer tends to a potato field in North Tryon, P.E.I., in July 2000. Potatoes came to the island in the early 19th century. (Andrew Vaughan/Canadian Press)*

Peasants now consumed the vegetable in vast quantities. But in the 1840s, a potato blight and the rigid refusal of the British government to disturb the sanctity of free markets by offering food and help, led to mass starvation in Ireland and Scotland (as well as other parts of Europe) and mass migration to Canada and the United States. The potato had preceded the peasants, finding its way to Prince Edward Island around the turn of the 19th century.

In the 1920s, an American invented a mechanical potato peeler. In 1957, a small company called McCain Foods began making frozen french fries. It now supplies one-third of the french fries produced around the world.

The potato has ploughed its furrow in the fields of Asia and the countries of Africa. A third of the world crop is now harvested in China and India.

### **'Deep blue skin and velvet flesh'**

The tuber produces more energy per unit than any other crop. And still it excites intellectual and emotional enthusiasm. There is an International Potato Centre; one of its graduates boasts that he is a "potato detective." There was, for years, a Potato Museum.

And there are the loving, even erotic descriptions from the experts.

Consider: Yukon Gold ("with buttery yellow texture"), Lapin puikala ("grown in Finland, in fields bathed in the light of the midnight sun") and finally, the French Vitelotte ("prized for its deep blue skin and velvet flesh").

And so, as you sit down to a festive meal, forget leprosy and the Scottish clergymen searching angrily and vainly for traces of tubers in the Biblical Holy Land.

Think of Parmentier, father of "hachis parmentier" (a close cousin of Shepherd's Pie), and let his rallying cry swell the spud-filled gullets of millions: Vive la pomme de terre!

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