

HOW CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS CHANGED YOUR LIFE

In search of a new, quicker route to the lucrative Chinese trade markets, Columbus made four voyages to the New World. His voyages took him to the Caribbean islands, South America and Central America. In retrospect, it is somewhat surprising that the most important voyages in history were something of a failure at the time. When he returned to Spain his ships were not full of Chinese silks or gold and silver. However, his ships brought spices and plants - different kinds of riches.

In what is known as the Columbian Exchange, his expeditions set in motion the wide-spread transfer of people, plants, animals, diseases, and cultures between the Americas (New World) and Europe (Old World) that greatly affected nearly every society on the planet. The Columbian Exchange altered the kind of food Europeans and Americans eat, the kind of agricultural products produced in both hemispheres and the entire pattern of world economics. Foods from the New World such as potatoes, tomatoes and corn became staples of the Europeans diet. It allowed Europeans to overcome chronic food shortages, and helped increase their populations.

This article concentrates on the effects of the exchange of plants from the New World to the Old World.

Chili Peppers: Columbus stocked the holds of his ships with what he believed to be pepper and brought the spice all the way from the West Indies. Only back in Spain did he discover that his ships weren't full of priceless peppercorns but worthless chili peppers. The chili pepper seeds spread to other European, African and Asian countries. Introduced to India by the Portuguese, chili peppers are today an integral part of Indian cuisine, as are potatoes.

Tobacco: Columbus' men were the first to observe the smoking of tobacco, a habit which they promptly picked up. European settlers arrived and introduced the practice to Europe, where it became popular. Tobacco became increasingly popular as a trade item. It fostered the economy for the southern United States.

Tomatoes: Although Christopher Columbus may have taken them back to the Old World as early as 1493. it took three centuries after their introduction for tomatoes to become readily accepted. In fact, tomatoes were mainly grown as ornamentals early on after their arrival in Italy. The combination of pasta with tomato sauce only dates back to the late nineteenth century. Tomato sauce, made from New World tomatoes, has become an Italian trademark and tomatoes are widely used in France.

Potatoes: Before the 1500's the potato was not grown outside of the New World. Since the arrival of the potato in Europe, it is estimated that its introduction was responsible for a quarter of the growth of Old World population and urbanization between 1700 and 1900. By the 1840's Ireland was so dependent on the potato that a diseased crop led to the devastating Great Famine. The potato has become an integral part of much of the world's cuisine. It is the world's fourth-largest food crop.

Quinine: European exploration of tropical areas was aided by the New World discovery of quinine, the first effective treatment for malaria. It was first used to treat malaria in Rome in 1631.

Pineapples: Columbus encountered the pineapple in 1493 on the Leeward island of Guadeloupe. He called it *piña de Indes*, meaning "pine of the Indians and brought it back with him to Europe. In the Caribbean, Europe and North America, the pineapple became associated with the return of ships from extended voyages, and an emblem of welcome and hospitality that made its way into contemporary art.

In summary, when you think of Columbus remember that before the Columbian Exchange, there were no oranges in Florida, no bananas in Ecuador, no paprika in Hungary, no tomatoes in Italy, no potatoes in Ireland, no coffee in Colombia, no pineapples in Hawaii, no rubber trees in Africa, no cattle in Texas, no donkeys in Mexico, no chili peppers in Thailand or India, and no chocolate in Switzerland.

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Sources: www.history.com, www.about.com, www.biography.com, <http://en.wikipedia.org>, www.questia.com