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washed ashore from wrecked galleons of the Spanish Armada (1588). Another story credits the introduction of the potato in Ireland to Sir Walter Raleigh, who did finance transatlantic expeditions, at least one of which made landfall at Smerwick, County Kerry in October, 1587. But no record survives of what botanical specimens it may have carried or whether they thrived in Ireland.

Some stories say that Sir Walter first planted the potato on his estate near Cork. A 1699 source (over one century after the event) says "The potato Was brought first out of Virginia by Sir Walter Raleigh, and he stopping at Ireland, some was planted there, where it thrived well and to good purpose, for in three succeeding wars, when all the corn above ground was destroyed, this supported them; for the soldiers, unless they had dug up all the ground where they grew, and almost sifted it, could not extirpate them."

Whatever the source, the potato became popular in Ireland both because of its high productivity and because of the advantages of both growth and storage hidden underground.

English landlords also encouraged potato-growing by Irish tenants because they wanted to produce more wheat — if the Irish could survive on a crop that took less land, that would free a greater area for wheat production.

A single devastating event however, looms large in the Irish history of potatoes — the Irish potato famine. In the 1840s a major outbreak of potato blight swept through Europe, wiping out the potato crop in many countries.

The Irish economy depended so heavily on a single variety of potatoes — the unpalatable but fertile 'lumper' — that the famine led to almost a million deaths, and the subsequent emigration of millions more Irish (see Irish diaspora).

Emigration of Germans also grew,

although the German states did not suffer the mass starvation that occurred in Ireland.

By the seventeenth century the potato had become firmly established as a staple of Europe's poor, leading richer people to spurn it, although this changed gradually, with Antoine-Augustin Parmentier's persuading King Louis XVI of France of the value of the crop. The soup potage Parmentier takes its name from the great horticulturalist.

In Russia, potatoes met with initial suspicion: the people called them "the Devil's apples" because of folklore surrounding things that grow underground or that have associations with dirt.

TERRIFIC TUBERS

Potato plants have a low-growing habit and bear white flowers with yellow stamens. They grow best in cool climates with good rainfall or irrigation. But they adapt readily, and producers grow them, at least on a small scale, in most temperate regions.

Buds called "eyes" appear on the surface of potato tubers. Since common varieties of potatoes do not produce seeds (they bear sterile flowers), propagation occurs by planting pieces of existing tubers, cut to include at least one eye. These pieces are called "seed potatoes."

The areas around Manhattan, Amsterdam and Churchill produce thousands of tons of seed potatoes each year. They are shipped to Washington and Idaho and other areas. In truth, Idaho's "famous potatoes" would be markedly less famous if not for the seed potatoes produced in the Manhattan area.

Area potato farmers plant their crops in May. They work in the fields through the summer, and in September or October, they harvest the spuds from the ground before the year's first frost.

They store the spuds over the winter and ship them to markets far and wide come spring.

It's a Manhattan tradition, just like the festival held each year in their honor.

—Andy Malby

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