



Where Does Your Favorite Food Come From?

(...Or The Benefits of Ecological Diversity)

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Throughout history, as people emigrated they also brought their cultural traditions with them, which included food and agriculture practices. Native peoples and immigrants shared practices, adapted them, and often created new traditions. Such new traditions were often embraced and incorporated into the fabric of life, often becoming synonymous with the native land. Several of the food items we identify with today, in the United States, have their roots in lands far away; and many food items associated with other cultures have their roots in the Americas. This can be demonstrated by briefly looking at a few items closely linked with American and other cultures.

Wheat, the ‘amber waves of grain’, seems to describe the landscape of Midwestern America. However, wheat was actually first cultivated in China around 10,000 BC and in the Fertile Crescent of the Near East around 8,000 BC. The Fertile Crescent had trade routes throughout China, Africa and Europe. When the Spaniards landed in Mexico in the 16th century, they brought wheat cultivation to the Americas. However, it was not until Mennonite Russian immigrants brought a variety of wheat, known as *Turkey Red*, to Kansas in 1873 that wheat production boomed in the United States. This particular variety of wheat grew better in the soil of the United States than anywhere else, and adapted to the varying amounts of moisture and soil types with ease. *Turkey Red* wheat quickly overtook the prairies and production has tripled since 1900.

The saying “American as Apple Pie” also implies that the apple is a true American staple. Apples also traveled through Central Asia, the Fertile Crescent, the Mediterranean, Europe, and then the United States. Apples need other apple varieties to prosper and the seeds brought by the immigrants from Europe mixed with the native crabapple trees to form new varieties of apples. There is archeological evidence that Etruscans were grafting apple trees around 750 BC. The Roman Empire also grafted fruit trees, but the custom fell out of favor with their fall. Grafting was revitalized in the 16th century, leading the way to changes in fruit size, color and flavor. More than 80% of the world’s apples grown today are American varieties.

The flow of ecological exchange was, of course, not one sided. Who could imagine Italy without tomatoes, potatoes (gnocchi), or corn (polenta)? Or Thailand without the fire of chilies? Vanilla and chocolate were also originally from the Americas. Even within the Americas, man’s migration west brought change in the identity of cuisine. The pineapple, which now seems to be synonymous with Hawaii, was brought west from the Caribbean.

Ecological diversity was a boon to mankind with greatly improved nutrition. Cultures that relied heavily on one crop were often met with disastrous famine and disease. It would behoove humans to look upon the vast benefits of ecological diversity over the past ten to twenty thousand years and take note.

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