



Potatoes and Tomatoes

From Poisonous to Popular



What would the world of food be like without the potato and the tomato? Dishes from all over the globe contain these two popular plants. But these two have a lot more in common than their popularity.

They both began in the **Andes** Mountains of South America, around what is now Peru. For thousands of years, farmers in this **region cultivated** these plants as food crops. People outside of Latin America knew nothing of the potato and the tomato. They grew nowhere else.

Then, in the 1500s, armies from Spain **invaded** Latin America to **conquer** the Incas, the people that ruled in these regions. The invaders were called the Conquistadors ("conquerors"). Along with the other treasures that they claimed, the Conquistadors brought tomato and potato plants back to Europe.



Spanish armies invaded the Andes region and brought potato and tomato plants back to Europe.

For Europeans, both plants were a novelty, something unknown to grow and display. They were not eaten, however, because most Europeans were convinced these plants would kill them. This is not so strange. Both belong to the Nightshade family of plants, many of which are poisonous. And so are parts of the potato and tomato plants.

The part of the potato plant that we eat is the vegetable that grows underground.



The leaves and stems that grow above-ground are the poisonous parts of the plant. The tomato is a fruit that grows above ground. The fruit is good to eat. It is the tomato plant's vines and leaves that are poisonous.



But two cultures helped change people's minds, turning tomatoes and potatoes into foods loved round the world.

Italy gets the credit for first making the tomato popular in Europe. The Italians began growing and eating tomatoes in the mid-1500s and on, making it a major part of their **diet**. (It still is!) By the 1700s, the tomato had spread around the world.

It took a bit longer for the potato. The people of Ireland, realizing how cheap and easy the potato was to grow, began to depend on it by the late 1700s. By the 1800s, the potato, too, had spread around the world.

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KEY VOCABULARY

- **Andes** (proper noun) *Andes* is the name of a mountain range.
- **region** (noun) A *region* is an area.
- **cultivated** (verb) To *cultivate* is to grow plants for a specific purpose.
- **invaded** (verb) To *invade* is to enter and try to take over a place.
- **conquer** (verb) To *conquer* is to take control of.
- **diet** (noun) *Diet* is the variety of foods that a group usually eats.

1. Describe how potatoes and tomatoes were introduced.
2. Think about the most important facts from this passage and summarize what you read.
3. If people in Italy and Ireland did not discover that potatoes and tomatoes were safe to eat, how might your life be different?
4. Do you think the Conquistadors should have brought tomatoes and potatoe plants back to Europe? Why or why not?
5. What is the most interesting fact that you learned from this article?