

# The True History of the Potato in Europe

*Published 15 November 2021, with Rebecca Earle.*

You probably know the official history of the potato in Europe. Ignorant peasants shunned this valuable gift from the new world because it isn't in the Bible or because it grows underground or because the tubers resemble the lumpy extremities of lepers or because it's a solanum-like deadly nightshade and therefore deadly. Then along comes an enlightened aristocrat who knows better — it could even be the king — and they declare that potatoes are delicious and nourishing.

They play tricks on the unsuspecting locals, like stationing guards around the valuable potatoes by day but removing them at night, so the locals can liberate the spuds and see for themselves what all the fuss is about. Once they've tasted the glorious potato, there's no stopping them and the potato takes off in a big way.

As I said, that's the official history and I'm guilty of retelling it myself but it ain't necessarily so.

**Rebecca Earle:** That story has been around for a long time and it really started to emerge in the 18th century. It has a certain pedigree and the story identifies something important that happened in the 18th century, which was that there was a huge interest in potatoes. What's missing from that story is to my mind a much more interesting, slower accretion of interest in the potato all across Europe, really from Poland to Portugal, which started in the late 16th century and which slowly spread the potato around the continent. Not because of the role of aristocrats and enlightened monarchs who were promoting it, but because actually potatoes were really good food. They're a very appealing food and ordinary peasant farmers recognise that.

**Jeremy:** How do you know that, because ordinary peasant farmers are not the people who are either having their histories written or who are writing their histories?

**Rebecca Earle:** Yes. It's a challenging thing to study. One of the things that I became quite interested in doing was looking for traces

of early modern potatoes and then seeing what those traces told us. Who did write about potatoes in the 16th and 17th century were botanists, for example. These botanists were interested in new plants, they were interested in the chilli peppers and the tomatoes and all of these new foods that were spreading into Europe.

What did they say about potatoes? What they had to say about potatoes were often, "These are becoming quite common in the gardens of peasants," or "Farmers in Northern Italy seem to cultivate these in large quantities". There's passing comments from botanists who locate these interesting new foods, not so much in the gardens of themselves and other botanists, but actually in the gardens of small farmers. There's a lovely story from the 1580s of a gentleman botanist who's visiting somebody in London and he sees that this fellow botanist in London has a botanical garden and is growing, among other things, potatoes.

He says, "Why, what do you grow these for?" The London botanist is startled. "I consider them to be a great rarity" and the person who's writing this report says. "But they're all over Northern Italy."

**Jeremy:** [laughs] They are being grown then but they're being grown by the peasants who you say have recognised them as good food, so that's one strand of evidence, yes?

**Rebecca Earle:** Exactly. So another strand of evidence ... You have to look for places where ordinary people enter the historical record, and often bad things happening to them are a place where they enter the historical records. Legal cases and court records are another good place to look, so what court record would a potato generate? A distinctive type of court record known as the tithe dispute. Tithes are these ecclesiastical taxes that people all across Western Christendom paid, and they were levied on all kinds of agricultural produce but in a very complicated way.

Things that you grew in open fields for sale in the market were usually subject to the tithe, things that were grown on a very small scale outside your front door for you to eat probably weren't subject to the tithe. Things that had no market value and that the church itself wasn't particularly interested in collecting in tax were usually not subject to the tithe because what was the church going to do with them? The position of the potato in tithe regulations is actually quite interesting in telling you where potatoes were being grown.

Potatoes start to appear in tithe disputes in the late 17th century but what's interesting about tithe disputes is the cases that locals tended to make about why they shouldn't be paying a tithe on potatoes if they're being hauled up before the ecclesiastical court for not handing over enough of their potato harvest.

They tend to say things like, "We've been growing these for generations and nobody ever took a tithe on them before, why are you starting now?"

**Jeremy:** You've got botanists noting that people are growing potatoes, that they're fairly common in certain areas. You've got peasants saying, "I don't want to pay a tithe on these, I've been growing them, you've never been interested in them before". What happened then to change the historical record? What happened that we know about these people who started promoting potatoes?

**Rebecca Earle:** I think what changed was a really significant transformation in the way in which states started thinking about what it meant to govern effectively.

In the 17th century, theories of statecraft didn't pay a lot of attention to what people were eating on a day-to-day basis. That really was not part of governance. If you look in Machiavelli or Thomas Hobbes or John Locke or the people who write, who start to theorise the early modern state, they didn't really have any interest in whether people were eating millet or wheat. They were of course interested in famine, states are always interested in famine.

Famine is an occasion where there could be trouble and the monarch could be in a perilous position in terms of his grasp on power. There's lots of writing in theories of statecraft about the need to avoid famine, there's lots of writing about how important it is to ensure that your personal troops are well fed.

**Jeremy:** The concern is with simply that the people should have enough to eat, not what they're eating.

**Rebecca Earle:** Exactly.

**Jeremy:** Then why does it become important to start worrying about what they're eating?

**Rebecca Earle:** That was really something that developed in the 18th century. Over the course of the 18th-century, statecraft started to pay more and more attention to the idea of building up a strong, hearty, well-nourished, robust, energetic population that would make your nation stronger than France, or that would make France stronger than Britain, or that would build up Lombardy to be glorious and happy. There was also recognition that doing that required healthy nourishing food.

**Jeremy:** Then why were potatoes ... why not bread, why not millet, why potatoes?

**Rebecca Earle:** I mean part of it is because the truth is that the grains on which Western Europe, European society, is based, are fairly unproductive and they're not great crops in some ways. I mean, they're wonderful crops in many ways and they've enabled the development of civilisations in all parts of the world, but they're not super productive as grains. Anyway, they're commercial crops that are in some ways, from some perspective, to the high vantage point of statecraft, what's the best thing you could do with a wheat harvest. You could export it to some other country, which doesn't have enough wheat, to the benefit of your exchequer and to make the balance of trade favourable.

In an ideal type state, you would export practically all of your wheat to somewhere else and then you would nourish your population on some cheaper, more productive, hearty foodstuff, creating an energetic workforce who were just as well fed as if they were eating wheat, but you've got all this balance of trade. That's where the potato comes in.

**Jeremy:** That's where the potato comes in. People could grow their own potatoes, feed themselves, work hard in the wheat fields and the wheat would be exported. Is that right?

**Rebecca Earle:** That would be an optimal situation. There's a wonderful comment from an agronomic writer who wrote extensively in Britain, someone called Arthur Young, who traveled around Ireland, which already by that stage had a substantial potato culture. He was very impressed by the potato because, he said, first, it's very productive to population. He said, Look at that, they've got 10 children. This is fantastic. That is what we need. We need a large population. On top of that, they're growing these potatoes

themselves. As he put it, he said, "They depend not on markets." They have nothing to do with markets. If prices go up or down in the market, it doesn't matter, the Irish cottier was well insulated against that. Arthur Young thought that was a splendid thing.

**Jeremy:** Was there then among the potato promoters, did they scientifically say, Well, how much yield you get out of an acre of potatoes versus an acre of wheat? Were they actually concerned with the potato's productivity?

**Rebecca Earle:** Yes. There was much calculating of the productivity, Adam Smith, who was a big fan of the potato, he wrote extensively about them, about why they were great. He calculated the yield, and he said, It's much more productive than wheat. He compared it to oats as well. He produced all sorts of evidence for why potatoes were nourishing, which was a complicated thing to demonstrate in this pre-calorie world, before you have an agreed-upon scientific language for talking about digestion and nutrition, and actually, how does the body extract nourishment from food substance.

It was actually very difficult to prove that one food was more nourishing than the other. There were all sorts of fascinating experiments that were conducted during this period about trying to identify the principle of nourishment and what it was that might make a food nourishing. At the end of the day, all they could really do was fall back on the bodies and apparent vigour of people who ate the foodstuff that they were trying to investigate. Adam Smith would say things like, he would say, Well, look at the soldiers from the Scottish Highlands who eat mostly oats. They're not as hardy and robust as the people who eat potatoes.

He said, Anyway, the final proof is, he said, the most ... the strongest men and the most beautiful women in Britain, subsist on potatoes. And those strong men were Irish porters and dockworkers in London. The most beautiful women in Britain were Irish prostitutes.

**Jeremy:** [laughs] One of the other things that you stress in the book is how concerned people were to say that eating potatoes would make people happy. Why would potatoes make people happy? Why was it important that they should be happy?

**Rebecca Earle:** There's several different reasons sort of all flowing together, I think, that connected to this. One is that there's a long-

standing and rather delightful dietetic idea dating back to Ancient Greece, that stresses that the foods that you most enjoy eating are the ones that will be most nourishing to you: that which pleases best nourishes.

**Jeremy:** That doesn't stand up to modern-day practices, but okay.

**Rebecca Earle:** The other reason, though, that I think that happiness became a really important way of talking about food in the late 18th [century], was that this was all happening at the same time that the basic ideas of liberalism, or capitalism we could more broadly say, were being theorised by people like Adam Smith, the very person who was saying potatoes are just a superfood,. People were also beginning to theorise how economies and societies should organise themselves.

Well, recall that Adam Smith's ideas stressed that the best way to allow an economy to organise itself was to allow each person to pursue their own interests, their own economic interests, rather than directing them or telling them what to do. If each person was allowed to pursue their own self-interest, this would magically organise itself into a smoothly functioning economic system where everybody, by pursuing their own interest, would actually be pursuing the interest of the commonality.

This wasn't just an idea that appeared in economics. It was in fact an idea that was widely explored in all kinds of different areas of science that people were interested in. What some scholars have called self-organisation. This idea was emerging that enlightenment figures like Emmanuel Kant and other great philosophers of the enlightenment were stressing, how making your own choices was a key feature of intellectual maturity. You shouldn't do what other people told you to do. You should think for yourself.

**Jeremy:** There's a tension way back in the beginning of the 19th century, there's a tension between the state wanting you to eat potatoes, but not telling you. They want you to decide for yourself to eat potatoes. Is that right?

**Rebecca Earle:** Exactly.

**Jeremy:** How does that manifest itself?

**Rebecca Earle:** Well, that's where the happiness potential of the potato came in. There was much promotion of the potato in the late 18th century. This was almost entirely framed within the language of individual choice. Very rarely did the state say, Everybody now must grow more potatoes. The way in which potatoes were being promoted was that they were beneficial to you personally: small farmer, small peasant, you would be happier and better off and more nourished and your children would be happier. It would just be delightful all around if you ate more potatoes at the end of the day. That potatoes were super tasty and that there was absolutely no reason not to eat them because you weren't sacrificing anything. In fact, they were delicious.

**Jeremy:** Can't really argue with that. You've got all these potato promoters saying potatoes are wonderful. Potatoes are a great thing. Everybody should be wanting to eat potatoes. Was there no opposition to that?

**Rebecca Earle:** By the end of the 18th century, potatoes had been embedded really powerfully within a particular free-market narrative of individual choice. We could pause to recall that the people who were being encouraged to eat potatoes out of their own free will might not have a great deal of free will at all. They might be extremely hungry. They might be people who are using the soup kitchens that were serving potato stews all across Europe during the hungry 1790s, and who the protagonists of these soup kitchens insisted were eating potato soup because it was so delicious.

Those patrons of those soup kitchens probably weren't in a position to exercise a great deal of culinary choice and discretion, much though the rhetoric insists that they did. The effect of all of this was that by the early 19th century, potatoes became recognised as a tool of propaganda, as a part of a capitalist model of the world, which not everybody was happy about. By the 1820s, 1830s in Britain, for example, being reduced to potatoes became a byword for poverty. "We will not live on potatoes" proclaimed [people] who marched around during the riots of the 1830s. These same people were eating potatoes. They just didn't want to be reduced to potatoes. They didn't want to be eating potatoes and nothing else.

**Jeremy:** William Cobbett — famously anti potato — almost the exact opposite of what the potato promoters are saying. Cobbett

thinks that if you eat potatoes, you're idle, you're sluggish, you don't do any work. Did that have any real impact? He's always brought up. I just brought him up.

**Rebecca Earle:** I don't think that he had any effect really on how people thought about potatoes, but I think he expressed very well a view that the potato was linked to a capitalist system that was reducing rural workers to an impoverished proletarian condition that he deplored. He expressed it very well, I think, that idea that potato eating is linked to an autonomous peasant world. It wasn't that they didn't want to eat potatoes. They just didn't want to eat nothing but potatoes, a view with which one can sympathise.

The old story, that ordinary people didn't like potatoes, that they had to be dragged backwards through a hedge in order to be prepared to eat them. That doesn't match reality at all. It's also true that ordinary people didn't regard potatoes as the ideal core for their diet. They wanted to eat potatoes alongside other things.

**Jeremy:** Final question. Given that the standard story of the potato is so intellectually appealing, at least to lazy people like me, what on earth got you thinking about digging into the real history of the potato?

**Rebecca Earle:** It seemed to me so implausible that ordinary people in Europe were refusing to eat potatoes because they weren't mentioned in the Bible and I thought, Wait a minute, lots of foods aren't mentioned in the Bible. Foods that were staple foods in Western Europe aren't mentioned in the Bible, why would people be worried about the potato not being mentioned? People would say, Oh, they were worried that it might give you leprosy because it looked funny. I was thinking are potatoes any more peculiar-looking than a carrot? If you get a carrot from a supermarket, it's completely uniform. If you grow a carrot yourself, it can grow, like, eight legs. Carrots can be incredibly knobbly and peculiar looking, so the idea that somehow potatoes would give you leprosy because they had these bulbous appendages didn't seem to match the other vegetables that people were growing.

People also said, Oh, they knew it was from the same family as the deadly nightshade. It's a Solanum and so they knew it was bad for you. I thought, This is the same period when the chilli pepper, which is also from the Solanum family, was spreading like wildfire all across Spain."

Everybody was saying, This is a much better form of pepper and we can grow it ourselves and it's really spicy and it's nice and it's a Solanum.

If it didn't bother them that it was a Solanum in the case of the chilli pepper, why would people ...

None of these explanations just seemed to make any sense to me. There were also other ones as well, which seemed to be equally unconvincing. It was partly the sense that this was dubious history. And also dubious to me seemed the idea that ordinary people would say, I'm not eating that 'cause it's not in the Bible, but then Frederick the Great would say "My people, please start eating potatoes." Then everybody would say, Oh, if Frederick the Great says we should eat them, I guess we'll eat them. That just didn't seem plausible to me.

**Jeremy:** Part of the story in France is that it was illegal to grow potatoes in France. That's certainly part of the myth that I heard. Was it ever illegal to grow potatoes in France?

**Rebecca Earle:** I will bow to any historian of France who can produce evidence of this being banned anywhere. I was unable to find any such evidence myself.

**Jeremy:** It's in Wikipedia, it must be true.

**Rebecca Earle:** This is connected also, I think, to the claim that they were alleged to produce leprosy, which the closest I could get to was a botanical text published in Basel by somebody else who said, I've been told that in France, they've banned potatoes. He then went on to say, "Anyway, here are some recipes for how to cook them."

Transcripts are possible thanks to the generosity of Eat This Podcast supporters. If you find the transcript useful, please [consider joining them](#).