

“Native American Agriculture and Modern Italian Cuisine”

By Stephen J. Byrne

Three of the main food products consumed as a major part of modern Italian cuisine were imported from America as a result of the European exploration of America which began in the late fifteenth century. These three important elements of Italian cuisine are the tomato, the potato and corn. Corn was the first Native American crop to be widely used in Italy for making polenta in the sixteenth century. Corn was preferred by Italians over earlier grain versions of polenta because of its high crop yield and its superior flavor. The early versions of corn polenta were a primary food of the general population in Northern Italy. It did not take on its status as a gourmet creation until the twentieth century and of course on into the twenty-first century.

The tomato and the potato, also food crops that were originated by Native Americans did not become a staple of Italian cuisine so quickly. These food crops were brought to Europe at the same time as corn, but they were not adapted to common Italian cooking until the nineteenth century. Part of this was due to the general European belief that food crops produced by Native Americans could not possibly be as good or better than crops developed first in Europe or Asia. The fact is that these three crops are in many ways superior to other world food crops. The potato and corn, for example, have extremely high yields compared to other staple crops. All three crops rate high on the scale of general nutritional value.

Problems encountered by Europeans when growing these crops were often created by the Europeans themselves. Native Americans never encountered total crop failure with the potato because they grew over three hundred different varieties. Europeans ran into trouble when they grew only limited varieties that happened to have very high crop yields. This failure to vary cultivation practices was a major cause of the Irish potato famine. The fact is that all three of these food crops are highly nutritious and, thanks to their development by Native American peoples, provide important staples and nutrients for billions of people the world over.

Modern Italian cuisine is renowned throughout the world. Italian cuisine has had a major influence on modern cuisine, especially in Europe and the United States. It would hardly be the same without the wonderful tomato, potato and corn plants developed so many thousands of years ago by the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ixtlilxochitl, Fernando de Alva. Obras Historicas. Mexico: Oficina Tip. De la Secretaria de Fomento, 1891-1892.
- Mendieta, Geronimo de. “Historia Eclesiastica Indiana“. Biblioteca de Autores Espanoles. Madrid: Real Academia Espanola, 1973.
- Sahagun, Bernardino de. General History of the Things of New Spain. Translated by Arthur Anderson and Charles Dibble. Santa Fe, New Mexico: The School of American Research, 1950-1963.

