

6.3 Columbian Exchange

As part of the 500th anniversary of 1492, the Smithsonian Institution, the National Council of Social Studies, and Addison-Wesley published *Seeds of Change, The Story of Cultural Exchange after 1492* (Hawke, S. and J. Davis. 1992. Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley). It focuses on the impact of five major exchanges on world history: disease, maize (corn), the potato, the horse, and sugar cane. “Old World” diseases decimated Native American populations, sugar cane production led to the introduction of slavery in the Americas, and potato cultivation contributed to skyrocketing population growth in Europe.

Pasta with red sauce is one example of what happened when an “Old World” crop (wheat) was combined with an American product (the tomato). Students can discuss their assumptions about the origins of different foods, ways that the post-Colombian encounter modified cultures and led to the creation of new dishes, and the broader concepts of cultural diffusion and blending.

Foods from the Americas: Avocados, Beans, Chile peppers, Coca, Maize (corn), Peanuts, Pineapples, Potatoes, Pumpkins, Squashes, Sweet potatoes, Tomatoes, Turkeys

Foods from Europe, Asia, and Africa: Bananas, Barley, Beets, Cabbage, Cattle, Grapes, Oats, Olives, Onions, Pigs, Rice, Sheep, Wheat

Try it yourself:

Name dishes made from these items that illustrate cultural diffusion and blending.

Instructions: We will complete the chart below as a class. Before we do, select which Columbian Exchange crop you believe had the great impact on World History. Be prepared to defend your claims in the course of class discussion.

Columbian Exchange Crop	Area of Origin	Original use and short-term impact	Current use and long-term impact
Maize (Corn)	Mexico	food for people and animals	corn syrup sweetener, animal feed, food for people, and bio-fuel
Cotton	Mexico, Andes, West Africa, India	clothing	clothing
Potatoes	Andes	food for people and animals	food for people and animals
Tobacco	Americas	hallucinogenic, stimulant, hunger suppressant, nasal desensitizer	stimulant, hunger suppressant, nasal desensitizer
Sugar Cane	Southeast Asia	sweetener, liquor	sweetener, liquor, bio-fuel

After reviewing the chart, students assign a value of importance to each product on a scale of 1 to 5, with five being the highest, for each century. Below is a sample chart that we then translated into a line graph.

Century	Cotton	Potato	Maize/Corn	Tobacco	Sugar Cane
1600-1700	1	2	3	4	5
1700-1800	3	4	2	1	5
1800-1900	5	3	4	1	2
1900-2000	3	2	5	1	4

Sugar cane started as the highest valued product according to students, declined in importance in 19th century, and then increased in importance in the late 20th century because of its use in the manufacture of ethanol. Maize also increased in importance during the 20th century because of its use as animal feed, a sweetener, and in the manufacture of ethanol.

