

The Humble Potato

We explore its origin and modern-day use



Cover image:
Young girl with basket of newly picked potatoes 1924,
An Blascaod Mór, Co. Kerry
(image from dúchas.ie M001.18.00538)

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The
North Mayo
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THE HUMBLE POTATO

The potato has a long and storied history in Ireland, dating back to the late 16th century.

There is much speculation as to how the potato was introduced to Ireland...the English word "potato" comes from the Spanish word *patata*, indicating a possible Spanish connection. However, it is broadly believed that potatoes came from South America, where they were native and brought to Europe by the Spanish. The potato quickly became a staple crop in Ireland due to its high yield and nutritional value. By the 18th century, the potato had become a dietary mainstay for the Irish people, particularly the rural poor.

On 20th August 1845, David Moore, curator of the Royal Dublin Society's Botanic Gardens at Glasnevin in Dublin, noticed the first signs of a disease on the potatoes, thereby heralding the arrival of *Phytophthora infestans* (the potato blight) in Ireland. This proved to be catastrophic for the Irish population who relied heavily on the potato, with the Irish Lumper being the main variety of potato impacted.

The blight spread rapidly reaching all corners of the country. The period of famine, 1845-1848 (An Gorta Mór), was a period of unimaginable mass starvation and disease and was a defining time in Irish history. County Mayo was one of the hardest-hit areas during this time. The population of County Mayo fell by 29%, from 388,887 to 274,830, due to deaths and emigration.

Of the many pre-famine varieties of potato which existed, few have survived to the present day.

The most common varieties in the Irish potato market today are Rooster (1991), Kerr's Pink (1920s), Golden Wonder (in Scotland since 1906), Maris Piper (1963), Home-guard (1942), Premier (1979), British Queens (1894), Records (1925) and King Edward VII (1902). Despite the tragic history of the Great Famine, the potato remains a beloved and essential ingredient in Irish cuisine.

Many dishes showcase the versatility and deliciousness of the humble potato.

It is not uncommon to see a dish consisting of some form of potato for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

In Irish folklore potatoes reputedly had a cure for many ailments. It was believed that raw potatoes, when applied topically, cured ailments such as eye styes, burns, bites, scars, inflammation, cuts and frost bite. Many of our ancestors had potatoes in their pockets to ward off rheumatics. The humble potato is also the basic ingredient for *poitín* (poteen) and it too was noted for its medicinal benefits!!!

Such had been the dominance of the potato since the 19th century, that numerous images of potato harvesting appeared in various art forms, including Van Gogh's 1885 painting *The Potato Eaters*.

In Irish art, the humble potato on Achill Island is depicted in the paintings of Paul Henry, "The Potato Diggers" (1910) and "The Potato Pickers" (1912). Irish author James Joyce and the poets, Seamus Heaney and Patrick Kavanagh also referenced potatoes.

Above: Newly dug potatoes being placed in a pit. Newport, 1943. (Image by Helen Hooker O'Malley)

Undoubtedly the history of the potato in Ireland is a complex and multifaceted tale of resilience, tragedy and tradition.

From its humble beginnings to its enduring presence in modern Irish cuisine, the potato remains a beloved and essential part of the country's culinary heritage. The humble potato – food for thought when you next sit down to dine!!!

REFERENCES:
Potato Varieties of Historical Interest in Ireland (agriculture.gov.ie)
Irish Potato Federation
Teagasc.ie
"Potato – Definition", Merriam-Webster. 21 June 2023
The irishtimes.com
The Famine in Mayo

Did You Know?

In a reference amount of 100grams (3.5 oz), boiled potato with skin supplies 87 calories and is 77% water, 20% carbohydrates (including 2% dietary fibre in the skin and flesh), 2% protein and contains negligible fat (bordbia.ie)

The biggest potato ever grown weighed just under 5kg. Guinness Book of Records tells us it was grown in England in 2011 by Peter Glazebrook (theirishtimes.com)

In 2021, world production of potatoes was 376 million, led by China with 25% of the total. Other major producers were India and Ukraine (Wikipedia)

Right: Organic potatoes 'chitting' i.e. growing stalks, ready for planting in the organic garden at the North Mayo Heritage Centre

