Imagine, if you will, a time when English food was actually worse than it is today. Imagine Italian cuisine without tomatoes, or Mexican food that was literally grub–insect larvae, as well as eggs. Columbus, sailing West in search of Eastern spices and gold, brought about cultural revolutions that reached virtually every nation in the world. The changes in the global menu don't simply mean better eating—the new foods altered the fates of nations and strengthened a growing sense of national identity. “The French, Italian, and Spanish food ‘traditions’ we now think of as primeval all sprang up relatively recently,” writes Raymond Sokolov in his new book Why We Eat What We Eat, “and would be unrecognizable without the American foods sent across the water, mostly in Spanish boats.”

Europe was certainly ready for a change. The lower and merchant classes had put up with a dull menu for years. Peasants commonly ate dark bread made with rye and wheat; cabbage soup and cheeses (or cheese curds) filled out a typical meal. Wealthier families ate much of the same things, but they enjoyed more variety in flavors, thanks to the obsession with Asian spices that first set Columbus on his way. Spices also had a practical purpose for the pre-refrigerator era: they blanketed the smell and flavor of decay.

At the upper end of the social scale, meals approached the orgiastic. A noble meal might include whole roasted peacocks with skin and feathers reattached after cooking—or even four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie. “Presentation was enormously important,” says Bridget Henisch, a food historian at State College in Pennsylvania. Feasts, she explains, “went with the whole medieval enjoyment of heraldry and drama, the music and trumpets announcing the arrival of the main dish.” The thing they were hungriest for was novelty—and Columbus provided it.

Each new cargo transformed the European menu. The Americas may not have produced traditional spices and condiments such as clove, ginger, cardamom and almonds, but they produced potatoes, corn and other colorful crops that excited the 16th-century palate. Peanuts and vanilla, as well as green beans, pineapple and turkey all broadened the horizons of European chefs. Some of the exotic new crops had humble beginnings; before the tomato made its way into the cuisines of Spain, Italy and other European societies, it was a weed in the Aztec maize fields.

The Aztecs came to cultivate tomatoes in astonishing varieties. Food historian Sophie Coe found a description of markets in the writings of a 16th-century Aztec chronicler. (In reading the following passage, it is best to imagine it being narrated by John Cleese.) “The tomato seller sells large tomatoes, small tomatoes, leaf tomatoes, thin tomatoes, sweet tomatoes, nipple-shaped tomatoes, serpent tomatoes. He also sells coyote tomatoes, sand tomatoes, those which are yellow, very yellow, quite yellow, red, very red, quite ruddy, ruddy, bright red, reddish, rosy dawn colored.” Not all the tomatoes were easy on the palate, the Aztec noted: “The bad tomato seller sells spoiled tomatoes, bruised tomatoes, those which cause diarrhea; the sour, the very sour. Also he sells the green, the hard ones, those which scratch one’s throat, which disturb–trouble one; which make one’s saliva smack, make one’s saliva flow; the harsh ones, those which burn the throat.”

The first tomatoes to reach Europe were probably yellow, since the Italian word for it is pomodoro “golden apple.” While the tomato took root in every European culture, it truly conquered Italy, where the warm climate proved ideal for the source of rich red sauces. Still, Europeans were slow to accept it. Like many exotic foods—including the far less assertive potato—it was first thought to be either a poison or an aphrodisiac.
While Europe was coming to grips with the tomato, the Americas were being invaded by new foods as well. Before Columbus, many native cultures were relatively meatless. In the 16th century, writes food historian Reay Tannahill, Mexicans began their day "with a bowl of maize porridge, sweetened with honey or spiced with red pepper. The main meal of the day was at the hottest time, in the early afternoon. Then there would be tortillas to eat, a dish of beans—which were grown in Mexico in great variety—and a sauce made from tomatoes or peppers.” For a change of pace some dishes contained grubs, insect eggs and pond scum.

With Columbus came an explosion of new foods. To provide familiar table fare for Spanish colonists, the crown sent over crops and animals from home. Before Columbus, Peru's meat specialty had been the guinea pig; after the explorer's visits, Mexico and Peru suddenly had beef and pork, as well as milk and cheeses. Chickens, sheep and goats also provided new meats that quickly became staples. Columbus brought vegetable seeds, wheat, chickpeas and sugar cane to the Caribbean in his later voyages.

The novel foods not only broadened menus; some of them transformed whole cultures. The advent of crops like potatoes and corn, which could produce far more nutrition per acre than the grains that came before, allowed for population growth. Some even claim potatoes, through their influence, made the industrial rise of Germany possible—and, by extension, the first world war.

The spicy peppers of the capsicum genus have not had quite the public-relations triumph of the potato, but as their partisans know they have their own way of making an impression. Columbus, having failed to find the Indian spices he sought, brought back the capsicum peppers he found. The peppers flourished in southern climes and took hold in dishes like Italy's arrabbiata (angry) sauce. Eventually the capsicum peppers of the New World even made their way into the cuisine of India, where spices were much favored, and into the Sichuan and Hunan provinces of China, too. Food writer Sokolov cites scholars who suggest that Portuguese traders carried the Columbian Exchange into those two nations. Portuguese traders in the Middle East could have passed peppers along to the Turks, whose Ottoman Empire stretched all the way to the Balkans. Few Northern European peoples were interested in peppers, which were hard to grow in their climate. But the Magyars of present-day Hungary took to them lustily and gave them a name derived from their own word for pepper: paprika. Today, Hungarian paprikas run the gamut from sweet to fiery hot—and form a link in a chain that stretches all the way back to Mexico.

As the foods spread around the world and ingredients became shared, you might have expected to see a common "international cuisine"—a kind of culinary Esperanto—result. Mercifully, things didn't turn out that way. People took the same ingredients and did different things with them: beef, corn and chilies might become a taco in Mexico, a stir-fry in China or a spicy meatball beside a dish of Italian polenta. The food dispersion coincided with a period of evolving nationalism. Says food historian Tannahill: "The cuisines of individual countries began to take on consciously individual characteristics."

And so food came to be one of the pillars of national identity. [If you doubt this, try walking into a French restaurant and asking for pizza.] Once foods caught on, they quickly became traditions, and the fact that they were relatively recent arrivals was forgotten. One of the highest expressions of French culinary pride, for example, lies in artistic desserts often rich with chocolate. Chocolate, of course, came from tropical cacao plants in the New World. It didn't catch on with the French until the mid-17th century. Even then, the French saw chocolate only as a drink until the early 1800s, when it first came into mass production in block form.

Africa was also a major player in the food exchange. Thanks to Columbus, it got such crops as maize, sweet potatoes, manioc and green beans, which opened up new agricultural possibilities to a continent that
had previously been confined to a relatively narrow spectrum of foodstuffs. Then those foods made their way back to the New World in the misery of the slave ships. African culinary habits—from frying to the use of such ingredients as okra—have been nearly as profound an influence on the American table as African music has been on American entertainment. “When you see a hush puppy,” says Sokolov, “it’s not just a dish for good old boys: it’s something they picked up from the African migration to this country.”

Old and New World Plants and Animals

A lot of the food we take for granted wasn’t even known to the Europeans until after the Columbian Exchange. When contact was made with the new world, a whole Cornucopia of new foods was introduced to the explorers, who would bring back these foods, and distribute them all over the world.

**New World Plants**  **Old World Plants**

**Beans**
Bean is a common name for the legume family. Snap beans (also known as kidney beans) originally grew in Central America, but they were growing all over North and South America before European explorers came. Today, there are several varieties of beans including snap beans, green shell, kidney, stringless, wax, pinto, navy, Great Northern, and pink beans.

**Beets**
Beets are native to Europe, Africa, and the Near East. They were first grown for their leafy tops, and later they were harvested as a root crop. Beets are best grown in moderate summer temperatures.

**Cacao**
Cacao trees are believed to have originated in South America. The cacao bean was very important to the Aztec peoples. They called it xoco-latl. (Today, Americans call it chocolate.) The Aztec people used the cacao bean as a form of money. They also roasted and ground the cacao bean, added vanilla pods, water, pepper, and other spices to make a drink, but it wasn’t until after 1492 that sugar was added to the drink to make it sweet, and it wasn’t until more than 150 years later, that the English people began making the drink with milk instead of water!

**Broccoli**
Broccoli originally grew in Europe. It is related to cauliflower, cabbage, and brussels sprouts. It is harvested while it is in the bud stage.

**Corn**
Scientists think that the ancestry of corn in the Americas dates back to 10,000 years ago, and that it is closely related to a wild grass called teosinte.
Corn was introduced to Spain by Columbus. The Spanish called it Panizo, which means grain in Spanish. Varieties of corn include flint corn, popcorn, dent corn, flour corn, sweet corn, and pod corn.

**Carrots**
Carrots originated in central Asia and the Near East, and were first used as a medicine rather than as a vegetable. Originally, carrot roots were yellow or purple in color, but there are notes about orange carrot roots beginning in the mid 18th century.

**Gourds**
Gourds are native to the Americas. They are plants which are closely related to pumpkin and squash. They grow wild in America, Africa, and the Pacific Islands. The fruit of the gourd can be many different colors and shapes. Gourds are used as decorations, or they are dried and made into dippers, instruments, and other things.

**Eggplant**
Eggplant is native to India and China, and was introduced to Europe by Arabic traders. The plant grows a large oval, deep purple fruit, which is used as a vegetable in cooking. It is a member of the same family as potatoes, tomatoes, and peppers.

**Peanuts**
Peanuts were first grown in South America. It is thought that early Spanish and Portuguese explorers took peanuts with them back to their own countries. Peanuts were brought with traders to North Africa, and years later, slaves brought peanuts along on ships because they were nutritious, and they didn’t take up much storage space. Africans called them “goobers” which means “groundnut.”
However, peanuts are not nuts at all. They belong to the family of legumes (just like peas and beans).

**Lettuce**
Lettuce is a European plant which is most popularly used in salads. There are a few different kinds of lettuce: crisp heading lettuce (like iceberg), cos lettuce (like romaine), and butterhead lettuce (like Boston). Lettuce grows best in milder climates.

**Peppers**
Peppers are native to Mexico and Central America, and were a staple food for the Inca in Peru. Chili Peppers were brought to India in the 1500’s. They are part of the Nightshade family of plants. There are two varieties of peppers. The Grossum Group produces sweet peppers. Bell peppers and banana peppers fall into this category. The Longum Group produces hot peppers, chili and cayenne, for example. The hotness of peppers is produced by a substance called capsaicin. Hot peppers are usually grown in warmer regions. Paprika is made from a mild variety of a hot pepper. Hot peppers are one of the few spices that originally grew in the Americas. Most other spices came from the Old World.

**Okra**
Okra originally grew in Africa. It is also called gumbo.
It is the seed pod of the plant that is used to make stews and soups. It grows best in warm climates.

**Pineapples**
Pineapples originally grew in South America. The pineapple plant was spread over tropical areas by the Spanish and Portuguese, and it was also taken back to Europe to be grown there. Europeans developed pineapple plantations, improved the plant, and brought it to Hawaii and Australia.

**Onions**
Onions are thought to have originated in Asia. It is a bulb vegetable and can be eaten in its green stage as a scallion, or in its mature stage as a bulb.

**Potatoes**
Potatoes are tubers, which originally grew in the Andes Mountains of South America. In the 1500's Spanish explorers took potatoes back to Europe.
Because the potato is part of the Nightshade family, people would not eat it. It was considered peasant food for a long time. Soon it was discovered that the potato plant was easy to grow, and it grew well in cool, moist areas. It became a staple crop, particularly in Ireland.

**Peas**
Peas are native to Europe and Asia. Originally it grew in a wild form, but it was so long ago that it can no longer be found in that form. Most peas are raised for their seeds, but some peas can be eaten within their pods.

**Pumpkins**
Pumpkins originated in tropical America. Seeds from related plants of the pumpkin dating back from 7000 to 5500 BC have been found in Mexico.

**Radishes**
Radishes originally grew in cool regions of Asia. They spread to the Mediterranean region, and then were brought to the Americas in the 1500's. Radishes belong to the mustard family. It is the root of the radish plant that is eaten, and it is eaten both raw and cooked.

**Squash**
Squash is native to South America. The name “squash” comes from askutasquash, an Indian word meaning "eaten raw or uncooked". Squash is grown in home vegetable gardens, but it is not an important commercial crop. There are two kinds of squash: Summer Squash, which is grown on bushes, and Winter Squash, which can be grown on either vines or bushes. Squashes are highly nutritious in vitamins A and C.

**Wheat**
Wheat is thought to have been cultivated over 9,000 years ago! There are over 30 varieties of wheat grown today. Wheat is ground and made into flour for baking foods. Durum wheat is used to make pasta. Wheat can be puffed, flaked, or rolled to make breakfast cereals. Wheat can also be used to make wheat germ and bulgur.

**Strawberries**
Strawberries are native American plants. The strawberry plant is a low growing perennial, (plant which grows from year to year, without being re-seeded) which produces new plants by sending a "runner" from an already existing plant to a new location.

**Yams**
Yams are indigenous to Africa. They resemble sweet potatoes, but aren't even related. They are used like potatoes, but they grow in warm, tropical regions around the world. Yams are a root crop.
Sunflowers
Sunflowers originated in North America, and were used by the Natives of Central and North America to make oil. It was introduced to Europe in the 1500's. The seeds of the sunflower are rich in protein, and they produce a high quality oil which is often used to make margarine and cooking oil.

Tomatoes
Tomatoes originated in Central America. When they were taken to Europe in the 1500's, people were afraid to eat them because they belong to the Nightshade family of plants. Tomatoes did not become widely used until the early 1800's.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New World Domesticated animals</th>
<th>Old World Domesticated animals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dogs</td>
<td>Dogs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Llamas</td>
<td>Donkeys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alpaca</td>
<td>Horses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guinea pigs</td>
<td>Goats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>Sheep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muscovy Duck</td>
<td>Cattle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Barnyard fowl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chickens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guinea hens</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, both the old and new worlds had access to wild game (such as pheasant, goose, venison), fish, and seafood.

The Hunger for Spices

Columbus's discovery of the Americas was in large part a result of Europe's desire for spices. Before Columbus made his journey, cinnamon, cloves, ginger, black pepper, and other exotic spices came to Europe from Asia. Using overland caravans, a relay of merchants brought the spices to ports on the Mediterranean Sea which were controlled by Venetian merchants. Increasingly powerful monarchies in Spain, France, England, and Portugal wanted to cash in on the lucrative spice trade. To do so, however, they had to cut out the middlemen's profits and trade directly with Asia.

Consequently, they financed the voyages of Columbus and other explorers to find sea routes to Asia which they would control.

No one knows when herbs were first collected in the wild or planted in gardens, but Egyptian records dating back to 2800 BC show herbs were being prescribed as medicine, and being used for food, cosmetics, perfumes, and dyes. Some herbs were thought to contain magical powers! Herbs were brought from the Mediterranean to the Orient and then to Europe. These herbs were then brought to the Americas.

Basil
Basil is native to Africa and Asia. It has a warm, spicy flavor, and it is held in respect as a plant endowed with color and divine quality. Indians used it to swear their oaths in court. In rural Mexico, basil is sometimes carried in pockets to attract money! In cooking, it is used in salads, tomato sauces, and in many Mediterranean dishes. It is also used to flavor vinegars.
Coriander
Coriander has been used in cooking and in medicine for over 3,000 years. Coriander was brought to Europe by the Romans. They had used the herb to preserve their meat. Coriander seeds, leaves, and roots can be used to cook with.

Dill
Dill has been recorded being used during ancient Egyptian times as a soothing medicine. Greeks used it to "stayeth the hickets" (hiccups). In the Middle Ages, it was used for protection against witchcraft. When dill was brought to North America, it became known as the "meetin' seed" because children chewed on the seeds during long sermons! Leaves of dill can be added to soups and salads, flowering tops and seeds can be used to pickle cucumbers and cauliflower. Seeds can be chewed to sweeten breath.

Mint
Mint was used as symbol of hospitality by the Romans. In Greek mythology, Minthe was a nymph beloved by Pluto, who transformed her into this scented herb. There are more than 600 varieties of mint. Mint can be used in bouquets for decoration, and leaves can be used to flavor teas. Mint is also used to make sauces, vinegars, and syrups.

Oregano
Oregano was given the greek name, orosganos, or "joy of the mountain." Oregano is an ancient herb, which is also known as wild marjoram. In ancient times it was a symbol of happiness. Egyptians used oregano to heal, disinfect, and preserve. In the Middle Ages, oregano was used to put in ladies' nosegays (small bunches of flowers) and it was also used to rub over oak furniture and floors. It is added to chile dishes, pizza sauces, and egg and cheese dishes, and it can also be finely chopped with marjoram to be used in salads.

Parsley
Parsley was used by the Greeks as a medicine. The Romans used parsley to make garlands and get rid of strong odors. Today, it is used as a garnish for dishes, and as an ingredient in sandwiches, soups, and salads.

Sage
Sage comes from the Latin word "salvere" which means to be in good health, to cure, to save. Sage leaves can be used in cooking with meats, or they can be used in wreaths. Sage smoke can be used to deodorize a room!

Tarragon
Tarragon The name "tarragon" is derived from the French word "estragon" and the Latin word "dracunculus," meaning "a little dragon." "Dragon" herbs were used to cure bites from poisonous creatures. Today, tarragon is used mainly in cooking. It is often used to make herb butters and salad dressings. It can also be chewed to sweeten breath.

Thyme
Thyme was used by the Greeks to denote graceful elegance. Roman soldiers used to bathe in thyme water to give themselves vigor. Egyptians used thyme as an antiseptic and preservative, while Scottish people drank tea with wild thyme to prevent nightmares and to gain strength and courage. Thyme is used to add to marinades, stuffings, sauces, and soups. In strong doses it can be used as a household disinfectant. The thyme leaf can also be used in potpourri