

# The Columbian Exchange

Side A

Imagine Italian food without tomatoes, Irish food without potatoes, and Indian food without chili peppers. You are imagining the pre-Columbian world. When people from the Old World (Asia, Africa, and Europe) interacted with people from the New World (the Americas), there was an exchange of diseases, plants, animals, and humans. This is called the **Columbian Exchange**. The effects of this exchange, from modern food to a decrease in biodiversity, are still felt today.



## Diseases

Perhaps the most devastating exchange was the spread of diseases. This transfer went mostly one way—from the Old World to the New World. Diseases like smallpox, measles, and mumps did not exist in the Americas, so many Native Americans died when they were infected. How devastating was it? Historians estimate that more than 80% of indigenous peoples died. This population loss led to famine because there were not enough strong, healthy people to tend to the crops. Famine led to starvation and even more death.

## Plants

On a brighter note, the transfer of plants led to a worldwide population boom. Calorie-dense New World crops like corn, potatoes, and cassava dramatically changed the way people farmed and ate around the world. Potatoes, for example, are now associated with Ireland. Corn is used worldwide as animal feed. Other New World foods like tomatoes, chili peppers, and beans were added to European and Asian dishes. Tobacco, which was native to the Americas, became an international industry. Old World crops like wheat, coffee, and sugar cane were planted in the Americas. These crops were eventually farmed on large, profitable plantations, often worked by slaves.

## Animals

Old World animals revolutionized farming, transportation, and eating in the Americas. Native Americans had never seen a cow or horse before 1492. These beasts of burden were able to pull plows and cultivate dramatically more crops than natives could alone. These animals also hastened transportation. Suddenly, what used to take a day's walk could be traveled in a few hours by horse. Mounted messengers could deliver letters faster than even the Incas' quickest runners. Lastly, Old World livestock like pigs and chickens created new eating opportunities in the Americas. Pigs, who reproduced quickly, became a stable source of protein.

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## Humans

In the beginning, the transfer of humans was mostly one way as Europeans and African slaves colonized the Americas. Additionally, people from the New World traveled to the Old World, and still continue to do so. This transfer of people involves a transfer of ideas, religions, and languages. Christianity and the Spanish language were spread throughout Central and South America. Later, Pilgrims and Puritans would bring new languages, religions, and ideas about government to North America. A further result of all this moving around is a more interconnected world gene pool. The world's population is now more genetically connected than before Columbus.

## Effects

The Columbian Exchange has led to less biodiversity on the globe. When things are planted where they do not belong, local ecosystems are upset. For instance, when a fungus called Dutch elm disease was accidentally spread to North America, it killed thousands of American elms.

Another considerable effect of this exchange is the devastation of Native American populations and cultures. The Columbian Exchange resulted in less cultural variety, especially in the Americas. Many native languages, traditions, and even entire cultures have been lost.

On the other hand, the exchange of crops led to a worldwide population increase. New World crops, which are high in calories, have fed millions of people across the world. In addition, foreign ingredients have enhanced and even remade local cuisines. For instance, it is difficult to imagine Indian food without spicy chili peppers.

## What do you think?

Do you think we are better off because of the Columbian Exchange? Explain why below. Back up your claim with reasons.

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