

Potatoes have their origin in South America. Evidence of potatoes as an important staple in the Incan culture date back to the 5th century B.C. in the area now known as Peru and Chile. Potatoes were introduced to the North American colonies in the 17th century but were not widely grown until the 18th century, beginning in New Hampshire. It was not until the 19th century that potatoes were grown in the territory known as Idaho; which has become the state most associated with it.

Competing stories on the origin of using potatoes to make a dish called “Mashed Potatoes” credit either the English in the 1600s, or a French competition in the 1700s held to find new ways to serve potatoes. Recipes for Mashed Potatoes first appeared in cookery books in the 1700s (Wikipedia). The basic formula of boiled potatoes, butter, milk, salt and pepper has remained unchanged through present day.

Gravy stemmed from the 14th century French terms grane or grave which meant a meat served in its own sauce, or a sauce from grain or fruit used on meat. Gravy, as a predominantly British and American preparation, focused on the meat aspect and became a sauce made from meat for meat (Sauces, a global history). Early gravies were not thickened with a roux(flour and butter) but with bread or eggs, or any number of other vegetables that were on hand. Embracing the French way of cooking in the 18th century, cookbooks began advocating the use of flour rather than bread as the thickener. The roux method is used by most 20th and 21st century cooks.

Mashed Potatoes and Gravy is one of the most popular American Thanksgiving side dishes, if not the most popular. But where did this holiday feast icon come from?

So this Thanksgiving, when you’re about to spoon that first delicious bite of fluffy, buttery mashed potatoes dripping with steamy savory turkey gravy into your mouth, give a nod of thanks to those throughout history(as well as to the chief potato cooker, masher and gravy maker of your dinner) for making it possible.

Infographic by
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