

1.2 Food Travels: Spaghetti and Potato

Food offers many examples of long-distance cultural exchange. Traders and travellers introduced new crops to the lands they travelled. Even 'ready' foodstuff in distant parts of the world might share common origins. Take spaghetti and noodles. It is believed that noodles travelled west from China to become spaghetti. Or, perhaps Arab traders took pasta to fifth-century Sicily, an island now in Italy. Similar foods were also known in India and Japan, so the truth about their origins may never be known. Yet such guesswork suggests the possibilities of long-distance cultural contact even in the pre-modern world. Many of our common foods such as potatoes, soya, groundnuts, maize, tomatoes, chillies, sweet potatoes, and so on were not known to our ancestors until about five centuries ago. These foods were only introduced in Europe and Asia after Christopher Columbus accidentally discovered the vast continent that would later become known as the Americas. from Marco Polo, Book of Marvels, fifteenth century. Chinese cave painting, eighth century, Cave 217, Mogao Grottoes, Gansu, China. The Making of a Global World (Here we will use 'America' to describe North America, South America and the Caribbean.) In fact, many of our common foods came from America's original inhabitants – the American Indians. Sometimes the new crops could make the difference between life and death. Europe's poor began to eat better and live longer with the introduction of the humble potato. Ireland's poorest peasants became so dependent on potatoes that when disease destroyed the potato crop in the mid-1840s, hundreds of thousands died of starvation.