


"HERE, CORN IS GOD."



A Columbus Quincentenary Exhibit

When Christopher Columbus' crew first saw the golden kernels of *Zea Maize*, they dubbed it "corn," an Old World term for grain. (The terms maize and corn are now commonly used interchangeably.) Corn was a wild New World grass, probably Meso-American in origin, which was thoroughly domesticated by native Americans long before the first Europeans arrived. It can no longer grow and propagate without the cultivation and care of man.

Don Juan de Oñate's colonists arrived at San Juan Pueblo in August of 1598. Weary after their long journey from Mexico, they prepared for the coming winter by appropriating the homes, bedding, and food of the Pueblo Indians. Maize, the staple indigenous food of the country, had been in short supply at all the Indian villages on the trek. Recognizing that the lack of this nutritious grain would cause further hardship, and even famine, the Franciscan friar Father Escalona exclaimed, "Here, Corn Is God!" (It had not always been so . . .)

The earliest evidence of corn in the Southwest was found in Bat Cave, on the edge of the San Augustine plains in southwestern New Mexico. An archaic hunting and gathering people had camped and lived in the cave, which at the time was probably on the edge of a large lake. Tiny cobs of corn were found in Bat Cave during an archaeological excavation in the 1950s, and radiocarbon dating has determined that this corn was about 3000 years old — that is, it dated from about 1000 years before Christ.

Game animals such as mammoths and huge bison were already extinct in New Mexico

by that time. The climate had become much warmer and dryer, and the people hunted smaller game such as waterfowl, rabbits, and an occasional deer. The primary food, however, was vegetable, especially seeds, which are high in protein, complex carbohydrates, and edible oils. Stone mortars and pestles (precursors to the *mano* and *metate*) are among the most common food preparation tools found at the seed-gathering sites. They are large and heavy, and were left by the people to use year after year during the local harvest of wild grass and other seeds and roots. This was long before the indigenous people had pottery; grinding the food was a way of rendering it partially digestible before baking it on a hot rock or stewing it in a basket with hot rocks.

Beans (*frijoles*) and squash (*calabacitas*) appeared in the Southwest a few hundred years after corn. Corn, beans, and squash were all introduced from Mexico by nomadic tribes and traders. The seeds of these plants were probably planted at the mouths of broad *arroyos* (gulleys) during the harvest of some spring food.

Using the *coa* (digging stick), the same tool used to excavate roots and rodents, the Indians dug deep holes, dropped in several seeds, and filled and mounded the growing plants so that neither wind nor water was likely to destroy them.

Sometimes referred to as the "Sacred Triad," the combination of both growing and eating corn, beans, and squash together is a fortuitous one: corn requires large amounts of nitrogen, while bean plants grown nearby can use the corn stalk as a beanpole to climb on while supplying the corn roots with the extra nitrogen that legumes (beans, alfalfa) fix in the soil. The large leaves of sprawling squash plants grow between the hills of beans. Neither squash nor corn are complete proteins, but when corn or beans and squash are eaten together at the same meal, a complete protein is added to the menu.

The first Spanish colonists in New Mexico found the native peoples to be sedentary and living in houses in *pueblos* (villages). Fields were placed so that they could be flood-watered or irrigated by intermittent watercourses which were diverted to them. Small gardens were outlined by mud walls or cobbles, and were watered by hand. Digging sticks and grinding stones were still the main

farming and food preparation implements, and were adopted by the Spaniards until they could be improved upon.

Watermelons and other small melons (*melones*: African in origin) had been introduced into Mexico 50 years before by the Spaniards. These melons had so delighted the Indian peoples that their seeds had preceded these first Spanish colonists, and plants were growing in Indian gardens when the Spaniards arrived. Several species of edible wild greens (*quelites*) and miniature wild potatoes often volunteered in gardens, and were encouraged. But the staple crops were still corn, beans, and squash.

The Spanish-speaking folks who colonized New Mexico brought with them seeds from Mexican chiles and from fruit trees previously grown in Spain, such as apples, peaches, and apricots. Sorghum and wheat were also early introductions. Aside from the new plants, the Spaniards also brought new animals: sheep, goats, cattle, horses, burros, and pigs. New technology was applied in the villages, including irrigation, plows, some metal tools, gristmills, and the use of oxen and mules as draft animals.

Certainly there was much strife as a new people and culture colonized the indigenous peoples. A certain symbiotic reliance also developed as both Pueblo Indians and Spanish colonists intermarried and faced the mutual enemies of disease, famine, marauding nomadic tribes, and later the intrusion of culture and usurpation of common lands by the American immigrants.

This combination of Spanish, Indian, Mexican, and American peoples and their cultures and "know-how" over the past few hundred years has provided the world with wondrous new food plants. Most recently, a unique and now world-famous cuisine has emerged from this combination. Here corn may not be God, but on the evidence of the numerous corn products for sale in local markets, it certainly must be a major Saint.

— Gail D. Tierney

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