

STRANGE HISTORY

The King's Edict: Eat It

For at least 4,000 years, potatoes have been cultivated in the Peruvian Andes. Called *papas* by the Incas, they were so integral to local culture that the Incas buried their dead with potatoes (for food in the afterlife) and measured time based on how long it took a potato to cook.

But the potato was not so revered in the Old World. It arrived in Europe in 1565 via English and Spanish explorers. They called it the “edible stone” because it was dirty and tasted horrible when eaten raw. As a result, spuds weren’t popular, and most Europeans still hadn’t heard of them by the 1600s. If farmers grew them at all, it was for pig feed.

That’s why the Prussians refused to eat potatoes. But during a war against Austria in the 1740s, King Frederick the Great urged his subjects to grow potatoes for food. Why? Because the edible part—the tuber—grows underground and could survive if invading armies marched over or burned the fields. Even so, the Prussian people refused to eat what they considered animal fodder. So Frederick issued an edict that anyone who didn’t eat potatoes would have their ears cut off.

Potatoes caught on quickly after that.